Recommended Movies

(Updated March 19th, 2011)

My top movie night picks (alphabetically, not in order of preference). Remember, these are just suggestions: preview these movies first to see if they'll work for you. Also, after you find movies you like, check out other movies from the same director or screenwriter (I'll sometimes list the screenwriter, but I will always list the director, along with the year the movie was made). Finding a good director or writer is a fairly decent way of finding consistently excellent movies: it's a better indicator than by paying attention to stars or whatever. A great resource for this sort of information is [1] (the Internet Movie Database). It's been a lifesaver for me many a time. Also, give [1] a try. It's a good source for getting a general feeling of whether people feel that a particular movie is worth watching or not. Another resource that might be helpful is [1]. It's got some very interesting reviews and some helps about thinking through the "spiritual connections" that can be made in these films. But consult the reviews (at either site) after you watch the movie for the first time, since online reviews often contain spoilers (plot summaries, etc.). I've tried to avoid spoilers in my capsule reviews below). Enjoy the movies listed here.

13 Conversations About One Thing. (2001) Director Jill Sprecher co-wrote the screenplay with her sister Karen. It's a tale of how five people's lives intersect and influence each other. It's got a great ensemble cast including Alan Arkin, John Turturro and Amy Irving. One of the better movie night movies we've done because, if you have five stories running at once, if you can't find something to discuss in one, you've got plenty of others to choose from. Themes include guilt and personal responsibility, commitment (versus having an affair just to shake up the routine), which outlook on life is more wise: optimism or cynicism.

21 Grams. (2003) A very interesting movie, but also emotionally devastating. Director Alejandro González Inárritu really makes you pay attention by dischronologizing the story. A scene that would conventionally appear at the end of the movie is cut into the beginning, and vica-versa. The film becomes like a puzzle that you have to put together. But it also serves to soften the blow of the tragedy that takes place, because you already sort of know it's coming. The title refers to a doctor who weighed dying people and said that the average human body loses 21 grams at death (ergo, the human soul weighs 21 grams). The film explores: "What does a life, a soul truly weigh?" by looking at the impact of a tragic accident on a mathematician, a wife and mother, and a born-again ex-con. The leads (Sean Penn, Naomi Watts, and Benicio Del Toro) are all magnificent. It is a superbly done movie (I?m trying to get ahold of Amores Perros, Inárritu's earlier movie which I've heard is also brilliant). Do be warned: there is some nudity and sex (more than I felt comfortable with), but interestingly, very little on-screen violence. But you will find plenty in this movie to talk about. There is a church full of scary evangelical Christians led by a very intense pastor (who, I would argue, doesn't have a clue what grace really is, though he says the right words). You can also talk about the impact of death, the meaning of life, how people deal with pain and guilt (by escaping through drugs or sex, by trying to somehow pay it back, etc.). Be forewarned: this movie is very emotionally intense, though different people react differently to it. Some found it hard to discuss afterwards, and one girl left in tears before the discussion began. Others had an easier time of it. It is by far the most difficult (but potentially very rewarding) film I've shown.

25th Hour. (2002). Spike Lee does a great job telling a very personal story in the shadow of post-9/11 New York. Edward Norton plays Montgomery Brogan, a drug-dealer who's been convicted and looking at seven years in prison. The film follows his final 24 hours before he is due to report to prison. The film is wonderfully written (though if you're offended by strong language, you might want to pass on this one), including two extended soliloquies that demonstrate how good script-writing can be. The film raises issues such as: our choices can have heavy consequences, how people deal

with good and evil (two of Montgomery's closest friends are like inverted images of each other, one consumed by guilt, the other aggressive and self-righteous). My students really liked this one, and we spent a looooong time discussing issues raised by the film.

About Schmidt. (2002). Written and directed by Alexander Payne. Jack Nicholson gives a tour-de-force performance that?s comic and serious by turns in this character study of a retired insurance man on the road to discover who he is and why he's alive. The thing that makes this film so discussion-worthy is that the story methodically strips Schmidt of every aspect of life that we usually use to define ourselves, to tell ourselves who we are (job, wife, children, etc.). So what's left? Who are we without all these things? That can be an interesting discussion.

Adam's Apples. (2005). Original title: Adams Abler. Directed and written by Anders Thomas Jensen. This Danish film didn't get much of release, but it is well worth seeing. The film lives somewhere between the realms of black comedy and existential drama. It tells the story of a Neo-Nazi skinhead named Adam, who is paroled into the care of a small church community led by a pastor, Ivan. The characters that make up the community are as engaging as they are dysfunctional. The themes to look out for are the nature of faith versus reason and facts. The film takes an existentialist approach (very similar to that of Danish philosopher/theologian Soren Kierkegaard) that the nature of faith is to be opposed to reason. I cannot say much more than that without giving away too much. I immensely enjoyed the film. Do be aware, however, that the film contains some swearing and a couple of scenes of fairly intense violence, so it is not for children.

Adaptation. (2002). Directed by Spike Jonze. Truly one of the strangest movies I?ve seen in a long time. Nicholas Cage plays a real-life Hollywood screenwriter (Charlie Kaufman of Being John Malkovitch fame) and his (fictional) twin brother, struggling against writer's block to adapt a book about orchids to the screen. A very postmodern movie in that there is a screenwriters' conference in the middle of the movie where we learn what makes a truly good story, and then the movie ironically employs those very techniques towards the end of the film (which puts the viewer in a place where he is also vicariously the screenwriter). But even through the irony and self-reference, the movie has a heart: about the struggle of the writer to break free from himself and his own obsessive concern with what others think of him. The answer (given by the twin) is that one chooses to love, and no one can take that away from you. Your life is defined by your love, your passion, not by what that object of affection thinks of you. A great place to start a discussion. Is that true? (Well, from a Christian perspective, yes and no).

Almost Famous. (2000). Written and directed by Cameron Crowe (he also directed Vanilla Sky and Jerry Maguire). Another one of those road/coming of age movies. Charming in its own way. A tale of a young writer trying to write a story for the Rolling Stone. Issues to discuss include the corruption of fame, hero worship and the reality of rock-n-roll heroes, and where your true home is.

Amelie. (2001). An odd gem of a movie. Directed and co-written by Jean-Pierre Jeunet. Also known as Le Fabuleau Destin d?Amélie Poulain. Starring the almost-too-cute Audrey Tautou. It's sort of a love story, and a journey of self-discovery (for Amelie, for her father, for a garden gnome lawn decoration). What I love about this movie is the playful way it finds beauty in the small details of life. We talked a bit about waking up to the world around you (instead of just letting it lie there, inert). That sensibility is, I believe, very Christian (even though Amelie is hardly a Christian movie). We also talked about what love means, how Amelie thinks that she will be saved by love (it is her destiny). A strange film, and we had a strange discussion, but well worth seeing.

American Beauty. (1999). It does have some sex and drug content, but among the right audience, it could raise some great discussion about the nature of truth, beauty, the good (you know, the big ones). Sam Mendes' first (first!) major motion picture, for which he won best picture at the Oscars. A really fine ensemble performance led by Kevin Spacey. When we did this one, we looked at issues of duplicity and integrity. Nearly all of the major characters live some sort of double life, and I asked which they character they liked best. The students liked none of them, really (which surprised me). So we explored whether that's how we'd like to live our lives, and where does real integrity come from.

American Splendor. (2003). This is another odd little gem of a movie, very hard to categorize.

Shari Springer Berman and Robert Pulcini (both documentarians) directed this biopic about Harvey Pekar, a file clerk at a hospital in Cleveland (they co-wrote the script too, with help from Pekar and his wife, Joyce Brabner). Paul Giamatti (one of the busiest character actors in Hollywood) does a splendid job of inhabiting the role of Harvey Pekar. Harvey deals with life and alleviates the boredom by writing stories for a comic book about his life (called American Splendor) that he got his cartoonist friend, R. Crumb, to illustrate. What I liked most about this film were the characters: they were so real (because they are real in this postmodern movie, the real people show up in the film from time to time). Pekar and his friends are, for all appearances, real losers that nobody we would notice. And yet out of this nobody comes these darkly funny, absurd, and wonderfully vivid ruminations about ordinary life. It made me hesitate when folks that looked like losers pass me by on the street. I wonder what their inner life is like. In other words, this movie lends dignity and grace (without sentimentality) to a whole category of people that we tend to dismiss. And that, my friends, is something Jesus was in the business of doing, too. For Jesus, there were no little, unimportant people. In that sense, this story shines with grace and redemption (without having an explicitly Christian message). It's just a very human movie; disarmingly so. Plus, I loved the films jazz soundtrack. I can't get enough of Miles in the movies.

An Education. (2009). Nick Hornsby (*High Fidelity*) adapted and directed this autobiographical account of the corruption of a young girl by Lynn Barber. Carrey Mulligan does a beautiful job portraying Jenny, a 17-year-old who has her whole future ahead of her, and thinks that it looks tedious. She wants more, and con-man David (played with just the right amound of vulnerability by Peter Sarsgaard). We found that this movie gave us all sorts of opportunities to talk about some pretty deep issues. At one point in the movie, Jenny bursts out to her school's headmistress about how boring and pointless it all is, begging the school headmistress to give her some clue as to why she should go through the motions like a good girl. The headmistress cannot, showing that the adults don't have a clue as to what it's all about either. We ended up talking long into the night about whether life has meaning, and whether we can know its meaning, and if we can, what we should do about it. This is a film worth watching just to get to some of those issues. Other things you can talk about: integrity and being real (having a con man and a corrupted girl with a double life, the film lends itself to such a theme), the purpose of fun, ethics, etc. There is no nudity or violence, but because of language and sexual themes, it's not for kids.

La Antena. (2006). Written and directed by Esteban Sapir. This film from Argentina is a little gem, and most unusual for this time: a modern silent movie. The story has to do with a city where a greedy captain of industry has stolen all of the voices, and he wants to steal even more. I cannot say more without spoiling too much of the movie. Suffice it to say the plot follows the exploits of a brave man and woman and their child as they strive to give the city back its voice. Because it was made in 2006, Sapir does all sorts of imaginative things with the titles. Nonetheless, watching a silent film is a completely different experience, because you get all the information from seeing, and you have to concentrate more. But it's worth it. There's definitely a political message here: characters chained to swastikas by the greedy capitalist villain, the heros dressed like Soviet pilots. Nevertheless, what we the most time talking about was the importance of having a voice, and how central it is to being human. We also talked about the film's assumption: that humans *deserve* voices, that they deserve to be heard. The question we pondered was why this is so. What is it about human beings that make them worthy of having voices? What is it about humans that voice-lessness is so intolerable? You cannot answer such questions from an atheist/communist perspective. You can from a Christian perspective. It's an interesting movie, and it led to interesting discussions afterward. Highly recommended. There is some brief nudity, so be advised.

The Apostle. (1997). Robert Duvall wrote, directed, produced and starred (AND put up five million dollars of his own money). Duvall's character study of a Southern Holiness preacher (Sonny Dewey) is a tour de force. He also wrote a very strong script that treats believers with dignity, while still showing their weaknesses. A good film for discussing what makes a good person, or a bad person, and what does grace mean. The scene where Billy Bob Thornton comes riding in on a bulldozer to knock down Sonny's church is worth the whole film.

Babette's Feast. (1987). The original title, in Danish, is Babettes gaestebud. Written and directed by Gabriel Axel, adapted from a novel by Isak Dinesen. This is perhaps one of the best suited movies

for a movie night. The story involves two spinster sisters who have devoted their life to God, carrying on the work of a very severe Christian religious sect started by their father. A refugee from the French Revolution comes to their door asking for refuge, and she becomes their cook. It's not giving anything away to say that the climax of the movie involves (can you guess?) a feast prepared by Babette for the members of this dour religious community. But the exquisite food of that banquet acts in a spiritual way. It is meant to represent God's grace. There are so many parallels with the Christian gospel that it is truly hard to miss (for example, there are 12 guests at the feast that Babette has prepared). Watching this film might take some patience for American audiences, though patience pays off. It is a beautiful story that needs time to unfold properly. One final note: there is nothing offensive in this story, but if you have any animal loving children, they might want to skip portions of the banquet preparation (there was no "No animals were harmed in the making of this film" disclaimer at the end).

Big Fish. (2003). Directed by Tim Burton, who normally does very dark films such as Edward Scissorhands and the second Batman film. This film stays true to his fascination with grotesque visual images, but in a much lighter, more colorful, almost comforting way. It tells the story of a Will Bloom, a young man who only knew his father, Edward Bloom, through the tall tales he grew up with. His father is dying now, and Will wants to know the "truth" behind the tales. Ewan McGregor does a fine job portraying the young Edward Bloom, and Albert Finney is at his irrepressible best as the bombastic, magnetic older Edward Bloom (you can understand how this actor made his name as the lead in Tom Jones). It's a movie about finding meaning in the stories we tell, pass on, and live out. At the core, the movie tells us that myth is the stuff of life, what makes life livable (and Will Bloom admits as much at the end of the film). I found it very fun to watch (even the kids enjoyed it), and very touching. The only beef I have with the film is that for a man dying of cancer, Albert Finney looks way too well fed (my own Dad died of cancer, and he too was a larger-than-life type of character, so the film hit awfully close to home for me). Themes for discussion: What makes myths work? What makes us want to live? What makes life worth the living? And most importantly, what if a "myth" that held all your heart?s desires were literally true? (I've heard many Czechs say that the gospel simply sounds "too good to be true").

Bringing Out the Dead. (1999). Directed by one of America's best living directors, Martin Scorsese. Written by one of Hollywood's better screenwriters, Paul Schrader, who has worked with Scorsese on some of his best films including Taxi Driver and Raging Bull. Starring Nicholas Cage. A very energetic mix of black comedy and existential drama. Cage plays a restless paramedic who is having a hard time coping with the ever-present reality of death (he hasn't saved anyone's life in a long time). And it has a GREAT soundtrack (Van Morrison figures prominently in it). The film has a feel very like Scorsese's earlier work, *Taxi Driver* (in both films, driving around the streets of NYC are a symbol for a deeper rootlessness in the main character). A good film for discussing death, the search for salvation, and how the movie answers that quest (finding the right woman is the way to get saved). Well written and filmed. It does have some nasty language, violence and drug abuse scenes, so not for the kids.

Butterfly Effect. (2004). Co-written and co-directed by Eric Bress and J. Mackye Gruber. I can't say too much without spoiling the movie, but I'll tell you that teen-comedy heart-throb Ashton Kutcher (who actually does a credible job acting) plays a young man plagued by black-outs that happen at traumatic points in his childhood. I can't say much more than that, except that the movie has to do with how changing the past has unintended consequences in the future (like a butterfly flapping on one side of the world causing a hurricane on the other, as the title suggests). We're going to watch this one tonight (May 19th, 2005) for a movie night, and it should raise some good questions over the nature of evil (some of the traumatic events are just pure evil), the nature of destiny (if x happens in the past, must y happen in the future) versus God's control over history (even the details, like butterfly flaps), and the gravity of choices we make. Sorry. Can't say anything more. Except to warn you that there is some pretty vile swearing, and some sexual content (not too bad in that regard; the language is worse), so view at your own risk. Oh, and on the DVD there's a director's cut with a different, darker (and I've heard, more thought provoking) ending.

Capote. (2005). Philip Seymour Hoffman completely deserved his Oscar for best actor. He didn't just play Truman Capote. He became Capote. And I thought that Bennett Miller should have gotten more recognition for his direction. Capote is an adaptation Gerald Clarke's book about the writing of

Capote's masterpiece, In Cold Blood (and it is an excellent screenplay that Daniel Futterman produces). In that work, Capote created a new genre of literature: the "true crime" novel (which is commonplace now). You get to follow Capote from his reading of a murder in Kansas through his research and writing, and the picture you get is stark. It is the portrait of man who will do anything to get the story, including lying, and you see it take its toll. You see the slow and painful process of moral disintegration. There is lots of opportunity to talk about integrity, what is the truth, what price is too high for success, things like that. An excellent movie, if somewhat harrowing at times. It does have some violent and disturbing images, so it's not for the kids.

Catch Me If You Can. (2002). One of the better movies Spielberg has made. Leonardo DiCapprio plays Frank Abignale, Jr. (whose autobiography was adapted for this film), a clever con-man; Tom Hanks plays his FBI pursuer/father figure. Themes include issues of belonging and family, identity (if you're a con man, who are you really? Who are any of us?), and the importance of finally resting in the truth. It's another one of those road journeys of self-discovery.

Contact. (1997). Directed by Robert Zemeckis (of Forrest Gump fame). Starring Jodie Foster. Good for discussing religion versus science (or better, science as religion). Other possible themes: why do we want to find extra-terrestrial life? Why do we long for something beyond us? A little preachy, but still interesting. This was Carl Sagan's swan-song ? it was adapted from his novel, though rumor has it that he didn?t care much for the script.

Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon. (2000). This film put Ang Lee in the world's spotlight. A beautifully shot film, with a very moving score performed by cellist Yoyo Ma. Stunning fight choreography, too. A chop-saki film with a deep story and a grand sense of style. Issues include what true freedom is (vs. rebellion), the consequences of rebelling against society, letting others teach you vs. being your own master, and the power of love. It's especially interested in how society constrains the freedom of women (unusual for a martial arts film).

The Decalogue. (1987). Decalogue, as in "Ten Commandments." No, not the Cecil B. DeMille production with Charlton Heston as Moses. I don't think that would work well for a movie night. No, I'm talking about the series of films late writer/director Krzysztof Kieslowski made for Polish television in the 80s (with co-writer Krzysztof Piesiewicz), each based on one of Ten Commandments. I've only seen the first three (they're a little hard to find, but they are newly available on DVD), and all three were close to perfect. (On imdb.com, the rating for this film is 9.3 out of 10, an unheard of score). In my opinion, he is the role-model for Christian filmmakers who want to say something without falling into cliché or hitting people over the head with their message. He delves deeply into the ambiguity and anguish of modern life. Any of these would be well worth discussing. Also, check out the article on Kieslowski in the March/April 2004 issue of *Books and Culture* (I think you can check it out online at [1]). We've just recently seen the fifth and sixth movie, which were also release independently as *A Short Film About Killing*, and *A Short Film About Love.* The film on killing was absolutely brutal, so be aware. The film about love, however, was unexpectedly tender and I loved it. We used it for a discussion on "Love, Sex and Relationship," and it really helped us get into this difficult subject. One of the things I like best about Kieslowski movies is that the characters you meet at the beginning of the movie are almost always very different than your expectations of them: they are always multi-layered and complex. So far the sixth film is my favorite of the series.

A follow-up note on my follow-upnote: I have since seen *A Short Film About Love,* and found that it is not simply a re-release of *Dekalog 6,* but rather is an extended treatment of it, and includes an extended ending. I found it to be a more satisfying movie. So if you're working your way through *Dekalog,* definitely track down and watch *A Short Film About Love.*

(Note on the follow-up follow-up note: I've since shown A Short Film About Love *to my class on* "*Popular Culture and Christian Worldview*" *as* the *exemplar of a Christian film done well.* That's *how highly I regard the film. Kieslowski was an absolute genius and my favorite European film director by far.)*

District 9. (2009). Directed and written by Neill Blomkamp (co-written by Teri Tatchell). The film was produced and marketed heavily by *LOTR* movie-industry god Peter Jackson. And you can see why he'd be so excited about it. Just as a pure sci-fi film, it boasts some of the more convincing cg

effects I've seen, and at a fraction of the cost of more cg-bloat-fests such as *Star Wars: Episode I -- The Phantom Menace* (I *still* haven't forgiven that movie for giving us Jar-Jar). And it is well-written characters (both human and non-human), a good plot, and, like the best science-fiction (heck, like the best movies, period), it is about much more than just its own story. The film's title gives it away: a thinly-veiled reference to a mixed race neighborhood in Cape Town (District 6) which the South African apartheid government emptied of its black residents to make room for whites. The film is thus an exploration of race and otherness, of distancing yourself from those you feel inferior, and then having that gap closed forcibly (I won't say how for fear of spoiling the film). Sharlto Copley, a non-actor who stumbled into the role by being a friend of the director, does a masterful job at portraying the hapless Wikus, an official in charge of clearing the slum/holding camp District 9 of its alien inhabitants. Along the way, he learns more than he wants to about the aliens (derisively referred to as "Prawns"), and about himself. The film is a good entree into discussing what it is about people that deserves respect despite their differences from us (racial, ethnic, class or otherwise). My only reservations about the movie are: 1) Blomkamp is quite heavy-handed at times, so eager is he to get his message across; 2) the second half of the film descends into a shoot 'em up, very much like a first-person-shooter video game. Don't get me wrong: it's awesome when it does. But it does mark a shift away from themes of the first act of the film. A couple of more warnings: 1) the pace of the film is frenetic and tense throughout. A lot of hand-held faux documentary style camera work. A lot of "embedded in combat" type scenes. If you're not one for tense movies, you might want to skip this one. 2) There are scenes of *graphic* violence. This is not one for the kids, and even one of my movie-holic ex-students found it quite disturbing. So be warned. Still, on balance, I'd say it's one of the most original science-fiction movies in years (the other was *Moon;* see below). In my opinion, despite its faults, it's a film worth seeing and talking about.

The Diving Bell and the Butterfly. (2007). Original title: *Le Scaphandre et le Papillon.* Directed by Julian Schnabel, and adapted by Ronald Harwood from the autobiographical book by Jean-Dominique Bauby (who is the main character in the film). This is a disturbing, touching, and beautifully filmed work. The story centers on Jean-Do who awakens to find himself paralyzed from a stroke, only able to move his eye. Part of the reason the film is so good is that it is filled with his inner-voice that cannot speak aloud, a voice that is witty, cynical, lyrical, and humane. We come to identify with him in his imprisonment in his own body (his "diving bell"). He finds respite in flights of imagination (his "butterfly") as he struggles to learn again how to communicate. I'm not going to spoil anything, but when we did this for a movie night, we talked about the imagination, and what that meant about the human being. How are we to explain the imagination in terms of a secular understanding of a human being? There seems to be something more, something spiritual going on with Jean-Do, and with all of us. This is a deeply moving film and deserves to be seen. A word of caution: There is some nudity and disturbing images, so this movie is not for children.

Dogtown and Z Boys. (2001). Directed by Stacey Peralta (one of the skateboarders featured in the movie), and co-written by Peralta and Craig Stecyk, the writer for Skateboard magazine who brought the Dogtown aesthetic to the attention of the skateboarding youth in the U.S. The best documentary on a popular subculture that I've ever seen. This movie about the birth of the skater (in today's parlance, sk8r) subculture runs a bit long, but it's engrossing nonetheless. A very good diagnosis of youth culture as a subtle mix of inspiration (the attitudes of the skateboarders towards skating the perfect carve is almost religious), rebellion, community, technology, accident, and commerce. Plus, the soundtrack rocks.

Donny Darko. (2001). Richard Kelly wrote and directed what may be one of the strangest movies that we've ever done for a movie night (that may be why I waited five years and only showed it after a student of mine insisted). The story centers on a very bright but troubled young man from an affluent family (played to creepy perfection by Jake Gyllenhaal) and a strange figure in a demonic bunny mask named "Frank." The hardest task you'll face in this film is trying to figure out what in the world just happened, and to do that, you'll just have to watch the movie multiple times. Kelly has created a movie that is confusing in the extreme so that it can be read in many different ways, but he gives enough clues (or almost enough clues) to help you put together a fairly coherent story-line if you watch repeatedly and attentively enough. But that shouldn't scare you away, because the film really does reward your work with some fascinating and suggestive ideas about God, destiny, free will, evil; you know, light themes like those. Most of these themes surface during Donnie's frequent visits to his therapist (and indeed, Dr. Lillian Thurman seems to be the wisest and most sympathetic

character in the movie). The real key to the movie, in my opinion, is when Donnie and Dr. Thurman discuss the existence of God. Donnie says he's stopped trying to figure it out because there isn't enough evidence either way. Then he says, "I just don't want to die alone." Dr. Thurman asks him if he believes in God, and Donnie responds, "Not if we all die alone." The central question that the movie answers, then, is this: Do we, in fact, all die alone? Or not? And that question is big enough and interesting enough to warrant a mess-with-your-mind type movie like this. This movie is an incredibly popular cult film just because it is challenging and it addresses a felt need of youth culture: loneliness. And I believe that the movie finally gives a fairly strong affirmation that we indeed do not die alone. In other words, for all its twisted imagery, violence, profanity, etc., it is at its core a strong affirmation of a God who really does care for us (even as he is menacingly different as well). A couple of recommendations: I've heard it said that the theatrical release is better than the director's cut, because in the director's cut, Kelly tries to provide too many answers (and so makes things too black and white, diminishing these deep themes that make the movie so interesting to begin with). Second, if, after your fifth viewing, you still can't make heads or tails out of the movie, then go to donniedarko.com and play their online game, which is loaded with more information that clarifies the storyline. But don't do this until you've seen the movie multiple times. Once you go to the website, it will definitely color your interpretation of the movie. Maybe the most difficult movie you'll do, but we had an incredible discussion using this movie.

The Double Life of Veronique. (1991). Originally entitled *La Double Vie de Veronique.* Written and directed by the late, great Krzysztof Kieslowski, and co-written by Krzysztof Piesiewicz (the same incredible team that produced *Dekalog*, and the Tri-Color trilogy, *Blue, White,* and *Red*). It also features the haunting music of long-time Kieslowski collaborator Zbigniew Preisner; indeed, the music is almost a character in itself. But the real focus of the film is the expressive and beautiful actress, Irene Jacob, who won several awards for her portrayal of two women in two different countries whose lives are bound together and reflect each other's in subtle, almost imperceptible ways. This is considered by many to be Kieslowski's greatest movie, and it is as elegiac as it is difficult to comprehend. A few helpful hints for understanding this movie (as far as it can be understood) are: accept that it works according to a sort of dream-logic (so be on the lookout for symbolic connections), and watch it multiple times. Kieslowski packs so much meaning into this film, every detail, every nuance means something, and it is impossible to pick it all up on the first viewing. So far, I've seen it twice, and I saw far more the second time than the first (and I'm planning to watch it again and again, for I'm sure there's more there).

A couple more clues. **Warning:** there are a few spoilers here. But in a movie this complex and difficult, I'm guessing that most won't mind a few spoilers. If you want to try to figure it out all by yourself, be my guest. Just skip the rest of this paragraph. The film looks at the parallel lives of two women. One is Polish, and one is French, and both are played by Jacob, so pay attention to what language she is speaking. The delicate interplay of similarities and differences between the two women's lives implicitly raises the question of, "Who is arranging things this way?" Which leads to another clue: Pay special attention to the character of Alexandre, the puppeteer. The puppet performance comes almost exactly in the middle of the film, and I think it is a metaphor for understanding the significance of the whole film. The puppeteer, in my view, is a metaphor for God, the one who controls all. Kieslowski was a Christian, and he often raises implicitly theological themes in his movies. Many dislike the metaphor of God as puppet-master because they believe it degrades humans and it makes God distant, cold, and unloving. But watch the puppet performance in the film. Consider the grace and elegance and passionate involvement of Alexandre with his puppets during the puppet show. Here is a master-performer who is lovingly engaged with his creations as he is making them move, giving them life. And consider, too, that for much of the rest of the film, Alexandre pursues Veronique and overcomes her aching loneliness. At the end of the film, he even tells her a story that explains the mystery of her life to her and helps her understand her sorrow. He gives her meaning. So I think that he film is, ultimately, a poem about this God who controls all, arranges things according to his mysterious purposes, but loves and pursues his creatures with passion. In the end, the film unveils a deeply Christian way of looking at God and the world.

There are other themes in the film: the mystery of human connection (including sexual connection), how we enter into another's world, isolation, how our passions can undo us. Each one is worth exploring in more depth. This is truly a masterpiece of the cinematic art.

However, be advised that this film does have nudity and some fairly strong sexual content. I don't think it's exploitative. As in all of Kieslowski?s movies, sex usually points to a deeper meaning. But if you (or your movie night guests) have problems with nudity or sexual content, you might want to skip it. On the other hand, if you don't, then this is a truly, truly worthwhile movie.

Drunken Master. (1978). An early Jackie Chan movie directed by Woo-Ping Yuen (who would later go on to do the fight choreography for Tarantino's *Kill Bill* movies and for Matrix Reloaded). Not particularly deep, bad dubbing, clumsy cinematography, a laughable story, but stunning fight scenes. All the things that make chop-saki movies so endearing. Issues to discuss include the father/son relationship (for the Chinese, being a good son is something you have to earn or be rejected by your father, vs. adoption based on grace in Christianity), honor, teachableness, revenge (and why we find revenge so darn satisfying to watch).

East of Eden. (1955). Elia Kazan's masterful adaptation of John Steinbeck's book. James Dean gives his strongest performance of his tragically short career with his portrayal of Cal Trask, the screw-up son of upright, gody citizen Adam Trask. Always outshone by his brother Aron, Cal does what he feels he must to win his father's love. He also is obsessed with who he is, and tries to track down the whereabouts of his vanished mother. Add in a love triangle between Cal, Aron and Aron's finance, Abra, and you've got all the elements of a poweder-keg. Dean pulls out all the stops to show Cal as vulnerable, passionate, sneering, hurt, and deeply human. But it is the ending of the film that is really worthy of discussion. I can't give details here, but the last scene is where you really could talk about what grace means, what being godly and good really means. Kazan's and Dean's strongest film, and a breathtaking achievement.

ENRON: Smartest Guys in the Room. (2005). Written and directed by Alex Gibney, and co-written by Peter Elkind and Bethany McClean. How does a company that was supposedly worth $80 billion go bankrupt in a matter of weeks. Answer: It was actually worth negative 30 billion. This documentary about the biggest single financial scandal in the history of the U.S. is fascinating to watch. It can be a little heavy-handed at times: Bush and deregulation are the root of all evil. Or almost. The film is well put together: It begins with a dramatization of a suicide of an ENRON exec, and it just doesn't let up the pace. But what made this film fascinating for me was how it explored the question of collective evil by citing an experiment done in the 1950s which sought to answer the question: Are some people simply more evil than the rest of us, or will a normal person commit evil given the right circumstances. Guess what the answer is. It is chilling footage, but it gives the film a wider moral application than simply "It's all the fault of those corporate greedheads." Another surprise from the film: ENRON's demise wasn't necessarily brought about by greed, but by hubris, arrogance, and a willingness to bend the truth to maintain an image. The conclusion: Anyone in the room could be Jeff Skilling. Not that Bush and deregulation didn't contribute, but anyone potentially could be "the smartest guy in the room." Well worth watching.

Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind. (2004). Another truly strange offering from Hollywood's oddest screenwriter, Charlie Kaufman (though he co-wrote the story with the director Michel Gondry and Pierre Bismuth: a "French connection"?). Anyway, this was one of our most popular movie night movie: we had 33 students show up. People were sitting everywhere (floor, window sills, etc.). And most stayed for the discussion, which was one of the more interesting that we've had. This is Charlie Kaufman's take on the romantic comedy, but it has far more significance than your usual Nora Ephron (When Harry Met Sally, Sleepless in Seattle, etc.) fluff. It's really a movie about love, memory and forgiveness. I don?t think it will give too much away to say that the premise includes a procedure to erase painful memories of failed relationships from your mind (that much is plain from the trailer). The movie has a wonderfully disjointed quality, mimicking the way memories form a seemingly random chain. The things we discussed were how Kaufman explodes the "ideology of romance" (that is, find true love and life will have meaning, things will be good, etc.) by showing that real people are pretty messed up. We also talked about how having things erased from your brain has striking parallels with the Christian understanding of forgiveness (with some differences to be sure). Anyway, if you?re not too offended by the language or the sexual stuff (no nudity, but some sex scenes), I would highly recommend this movie. It is, in the end, about accepting one another, sins and all (a redemption of sorts).

The Fantastic Mr. Fox. (2009). Directed by the ever-weird Wes Anderson and adapted from the Roald Dahl book by Anderson and Noah Baumbach (who has made a career out of scripts displaying emotionally awkward characters). The plot has to do with Mr. Fox, by nature a chicken-stealing predator, but who promises his wife that he'll find a new line of work. Without giving too much away, let's say that he falls of the wagon (but he does it with elegance and panache). Meanwhile, his son Ash is dealing with insecurities stemming from adolescence and a visit from his uber-skilled cousin, Kristofferson. Through Fox's predations, the animals find themselves in an all-out war with three nasty farmers, Boggus, Bunce and Bean. Hilarity ensues. Well, not hilarity, but much bemusement. Wes Anderson has a way of laying out ridiculous situations and making you take them seriously (or, vice-versa, of taking serious moments and making you take them lightly). It's a very postmodern approach to cinema: call it the absurdly humorous gravity perspective. And the themes he investigates in this way are primal. Fox asks his animal friends (dressed in suits and ties, a la any good English children's story), "Who are we? We are animals." It is in their animal natures that they find their genius, and the thing that gets them into trouble (at least for Fox). As for us humans, who are we? The farmers are more animalistic in their hatred than the animals. Are we civilized beings, or animals? What should we try to emulate. Anderson gives no straightforward answers. Another theme he explores has to do with self-image. Ash is unsure of himself, feels unpopular and unaccepted. And it takes him a long while, and the encouragement of his parents, before he accepts that he is . . . different. And it is precisely in our differences that we find our strength as a community. Being open to difference, rather than trying to force others (or ourselves) into preconceived molds, is as close to a moral as you get in the film. And it's a good one: we ought to be open to each other in just that way, to value each other. But based upon what? And what differences are good ones? That's area you can explore in an after-movie discussion. The movie itself is a lot of fun, not least of which is because it isn't computer-generated. It is about little furry puppet stop-action animation (you can actually see the fur move where they had to be touched to move them). It gives the film a warm, tactile nature that I love. And the voice talent is top-notch (George Clooney, Meryl Streep, Jason Schwartzman, Willem Dafoe, Bill Murray, and plenty others. Highly recommended, even for kids. The violence is very cartoon, and instead of actually swearing, the characters say "cuss" a lot (as in "What the cuss is going here?" -- it's a great device).

Frost/Nixon. (2008). Directed by Ron Howard (yes, Richie Cunningham from *Happy Days*). Screenplay by Peter Morgan, adapting his own stage play. The story involves how David Frost landed and conducted a most riveting and revealing interview with the recently resigned Richard Nixon. The movie is well scripted, and the performances are powerful. Michael Sheen (who played Tony Blair in *The Queen*) turns in a shrew and heartfelt performance as British talk-show host Frost, and Frank Langella is absolutely magnetic as Nixon. The supporting cast, especially Sam Rockwell, is just as fine. When we discussed it, we circled around two topics. First, both Frost and Nixon are portrayed as driven men, driven by their own insecurities, their own feelings of inadequacy. Is that a good way to live? What do we need to tell us that we are OK? (You can be as explicit with the gospel as you feel is appropriate here). Second, the most interesting character development was the way Nixon changed from a political machine, adept at spin and subterfuge, into a truly sympathetic human being. And the catalyst was *confession,* when he dropped pretenses and said, "Yes, I've done wrong. It's my fault." That is the moment the whole movie is driving for, and it is stunning when it happens (sorry for the spoiler, but since it happened in the historical interviews, it's not too much of a give away). We discussed what it is about confession that makes us more human, about vulnerability, about forgiveness. A really great movie to watch and discuss. Be warned that the language can become pretty vulgar at times, but otherwise, it's not offensive.

Galaxy Quest. (1999). Directed by Dean Parisot. My kids lassoed me into watching this as a dumb movie that's safe for the kids (and, having seen the trailer, I dismissed it as a dumb spoof). A spoof it is, but a very smart (and funny) one at that: one of the most underrated films of recent years. It's about the washed up cast of a cancelled TV sci-fi show (like, say *STAR TREK*?) who make ends meet by doing fan conventions for completely devoted fans (like, say, the fans of *STAR TREK*?). The show pokes fun at the fans, the cast, the whole scene (without being mean-spirited). And then the egocentric star of the show (played very well by Tim Allen) gets swept into a real inter-galactic drama, taking his crew with him. Somewhere in the middle of the film, it stops being spoof and does a good job turning into serious sci-fi action film (better than most of the Star Trek movies, in my opinion). But what makes this a good movie night movie is the way the film explores what makes popular culture work as projections of meaning and desire for its fans; that is, what makes popular

culture worth taking seriously. The film does an excellent job showing why Trekkers are so engaged with the show: because they want that sense of being part of something larger, an adventure in which their lives mean something, where they can make a difference, etc. (and isn't that what Christ invites us to in living for his Kingdom?). Update: I'm now teaching a course on "Understanding Media Fandom," and the more I learn about the dynamics of fandom, the more I appreciate this movie. Fandom at its heart is about a wish for redemption (from the mundane, more than anything else). In this sense, fandom is religion, and this movie touches upon that.

Garden State. (2004). Directed, written and starring Zach Braff (who you might know from the TV show *Scrubs*). Every so often, a movie comes along that really captures the Zeitgeist for a generation (see also *Donny Darko*, above). For the college crowd, at least in America, this is it. Braff plays Andrew Largeman, the sedate (and sedated) son of a prominent psychiatrist, who returns home from the West Coast to his hometown in New Jersey for his mother's funeral. In so doing, he deliberately leaves his meds in California. And really, the whole film is about his awakening from numbness, with the help of Sam (played by Natalie Portman) who becomes his girlfriend and draws him out of himself. It's not a perfect movie by any stretch of the imagination: Sam's character development stops about halfway through the film (because the story is focused on Andrew); and there is almost a criminal underutilization of Sir Ian Holm as Andrew?s father (honestly, Ian Holm could have sleepwalked through his part: he wasn't given that much material to work with). But there are interesting themes to talk about, such as father-son relationships. And, most interestingly from a Christian standpoint, the contrast between the Largeman family (where everything is controlled and sedate) and Sam's family (which is scruffy, disorderly, inclusive, everyone who walks in is embraced). We talked about which the Church should be, and has been. Plus, the soundtrack rocks. A good movie night movie.

Ghost Dog: The Way of the Samurai. (1999). Written and directed by maverick filmmaker Jim Jaramusch. I didn't care for the other Jaramusch film I saw, *Dead Man*, just because it seemed that it took nothing seriously -- not even death. Not the case here. Forest Whitaker plays the title character, a black assassin working for the Mob who fashions his life as a latter day samurai. This movie is great for discussing Zen philosophy, because the film is interrupted by quotations of samurai philosophy which embody the spirit of Zen (the unity and emptiness of all things, living in the moment, prepared for action, resolution, etc.). One of the themes we discussed was how the film shows both the power and the problem with Zen -- that is, if all is one, then murder is not evil (since good and evil are one). Despite its power (and Forest displays a real peace and self-possessed coolness throughout the film), Zen cannot guide us into what is good or right, but only into a sort of bankrupt pragmatism: how to achieve our aims with elegance and directness.

Gladiator. (2000). Very violent, stunning cinematography and fight choreography. One of Ridley Scott's strongest pieces to date. It's not really about fighting as much as it is about life after death. It also raises some interesting questions about mass entertainment as mob manipulation (that's what the gladiatorial arena was all about). Strong performance by Russel Crowe as the outcast gladiator, Maximus. But beware -- it's a long movie. When we showed it, I didn't leave enough time for discussion because we started the film too late (and everyone had to catch a tram, etc.).

Good Bye Lenin. (2003). Directed and co-written by Wolfgang Becker. I really liked this movie. It had nice cinematography, well acted, well-scripted, and raised some interesting, substantive questions about reality. In short, all the ingredients for a movie-night movie. It deal with an East German young man named Alex whose mother lapses into a coma just before the fall of the Berlin wall in 1989. After she awakens, the doctor advises that another shock could kill her, so Alex tries his best to keep everything the same, to sustain the illusion of the old East German world around her. When we saw this movie, we talked about lying and truth-telling. Are there times when it's better to lie? Is all of reality simply something we make up (the movie hints strongly in that direction). Perhaps the best thing this movie did for me was help me understand people who are nostalgic for the communist past of their countries (we have plenty of them here in the Czech Republic). It was a time of oppression, but also a time of security and community that is rapidly being eroded by global capitalism and the drive to earn and spend as fast as you can. Anyway, a good movie well worth checking out. And I loved the haunting piano score by Yann Tiersen.

Good Night, and Good Luck. (2005) Directed and co-written by George Clooney (with Grant

Heslov). Clooney's proving to be one of the most versatile people in Hollywood (along with Clint Eastwood). This movie, shot entirely in black and white, follows the career of acclaimed journalist Edward R. Murrow during the McCarthy hearings. Murrow was the first to take on McCarthy?s tactics of intimidation and black-listing in the name of patriotism. The movie is erudite, sophisticated, and completely engrossing. And David Strathairn really does inhabit the character of Murrow. It is a portrait of journalistic integrity, and we talked quite a while about the state of journalism in the Czech Republic (where we live) and in America. At the beginning of the film, Murrow also makes dire predictions about how television will affect society unless those in charge of the medium take care to use it wisely. So there is also material to talk about what does it mean to make good television (rather than assuming that television is bad just because it is television)? Interestingly, there is no soundtrack, except for segue pieces using the great jazz singer Diane Reeves, who appears in the film in one of CBS? sound recording booths. If you listen, the songs serve as wry commentary on the plot-line. An all-around excellent film.

Gosford Park. (2001). Acclaimed American director Robert Altman's take on the murder mystery genre features a fine ensemble cast and explores such themes as class differences (with a very decided leaning towards the servants over the rich aristocracy), revenge, the parent-child relationship (again -- it seems to come up a lot in movies, doesn't it?), and it raises the question: Is there healing for life-long bitterness? (there's an absolutely heart-breaking scene towards the end of the movie).

Gran Torino. (2008). Clint Eastwood of late has been producing his best work as both an actor and director. And this gem certainly qualifies as one of his best, maybe even the best so far. Eastwood stars as Walt Kowalski, a gruff, foul-mouthed WWII vet descended from Polish immigrants and retired from his blue-collar auto-industry job. Walt's neighborhood is changing, being taken over by Asian immigrants who to him are outsiders (It's amazing how quickly Americans forget their own immigrant roots, isn't it). But worlds collide and Walt finds himself enmeshed in their lives and problems. I won't tell you how. Suffice it to say they become human to him, and he becomes more fully human himself. There's plenty to talk about in this film: overcoming difference, forgiveness, sacrifice, what's really worth living for (stuff or relationships). There's also a rare appearance of a grounded Christian character, a young priest who tries to reach out to the lapsed Catholic Walt. But perhaps the most intersting aspect to the movie is how Eastwood builds up the expectation of violence and then subverts it. In essence, he's subverting his own brand, much as he did in *Unforgiven.* Because of the harsh language, I'd say not for the kids.

Grizzly Man. (2005). A documentary written and directed by Werner Herzog about Timothy Treadwell. Treadwell styled himself a wildlife conservationist and lived for thirteen summers on the Alaskan peninsula with grizzly bears until he was attacked and killed by one. His girlfriend died in the attack as well. For the last five seasons, Treadwell took a video camera with him and took 100+ hours of video of his dealings with the grizzlies and other wildlife of the area. This is a completely fascinating film which has both sobering and funny moments. And more importantly for a movie night, it raised a host of interesting issues: Was Treadwell a hero/martyr, or a fool? How should we relate to nature, anyhow? What makes a life worth living? What?s worth dying for? But Herzog also examines Timothy Treadwell the filmmaker to raise such issues as how cinema can be used to create identity. What made this film so memorable for me was the way Herzog slowly unveils Treadwell's life: as the movie progresses, the portrait becomes more and more complex. I also found fascinating the difference in worldview between Herzog and his subject. Treadwell is an optimist, sure that the world is about harmony. Herzog is a realist/nihilist, who believes that the cosmos is shaped by chaos and cruelty. I think the Christian worldview can agree with them both, in some respect: there is harmony, but it has been disrupted (for the time being) by chaos and cruelty. I won?t say more, because I don't want to spoil the film for you. But I would heartily recommend this movie. If you can't find something to talk about, you're not trying! By the way, there is no violence in this movie, but there is quite a bit of swearing, so be aware that this is not a movie for young and tender ears.

Heaven. (2002). Recently deceased Polish filmmaker Krzysztof Kieslowski (my favorite European director) and his longtime collaborator Krzysztof Pisiewicz wrote the screenplay, but Kieslowski died before he could make the film. Tom Tykwer (who won fame for Run, Lola, Run) stays true to Kieslowski's vision and makes a truly beautiful film about a woman who strikes out at the corruption of the world with devastating results (played brilliantly -- as ever -- by Cate Blanchett). You get a real

sense of the fallenness of the world, and a desire for a better country (see Heb. 11:13-16). Topics to discuss might be the corruption that is not only in the world, but also in us, that longing for a place in which to be free, the nature of trust, etc. It's no accident that one of the pivotal moments in the movie takes place in a church -- a tremendously moving scene. This movie also has what I believe is the best final shot I've ever seen in a movie. Powerful stuff.

Henry V. (1989). Writer/director Kenneth Branagh's adaptation of Shakespeare started a spate of latter-day film version of the Bard's plays. Great acting, very well made movie. This movie started the trend (which lasted throughout the 1990s) of Shakespeare for the big-screen. Good for discussing themes of kingship, God's acting in history, etc. Not for non-native English speakers, though, as the language is kind of rich (it's Shakespeare, right?) -- perhaps if you have advanced level English speakers and you use a DVD where you have English-language subtitles . . . I just checked, and there is no DVD version that has English subtitles. The region 1 has only French and Spanish subtitles. Bummer.

High Fidelity. (2000). Directed by Stephen Frears (who has several other character-driven movies to his credit, such as My Beautiful Laundrette and Dirty Pretty Things) and started out in British TV. You can tell. He has a very intimate way of dealing with characters. It started out as a book by Nick Hornby, and adapted for the screen by D.V. DeVencitus, Steven Pink, Scott Rosenberg, and John Cusack (who also starred). Cusack plays a college dropout who owns a used record store named Rob. Rob has had woman troubles, and after his latest girlfriend leaves, he begins to wonder why he has been rejected so many times. He visits some of his past girlfriends to try to put the pieces together. Cusack is also the narrator, often talking directly to the camera, musing aloud about what's wrong with him. What I loved about this movie is that it captured an essential condition of "guy-dom": an exquisite combination of self-absorption and cluelessness. Rob agonizes over his own psyche, but can?t see the obvious. I also loved the bizarre "family" of the record store, Rob and his two employees, who are constantly squabbling over various "Top 5" lists of songs. Jack Black was outstanding as Barry (but that was because he was really playing . . . Jack Black. Does he ever play anyone else? I guess he sort of did in King Kong.) Anyway, the film gave us a chance to talk about what real commitment looks like, how sex can be used and abused, and the power of forgiveness and living for another (rather than living as a self-focused blob). It is a very funny movie. Plus (as you would expect), the soundtrack rocks. Apart from some language and talk about sex, there is very little objectionable material here.

House of Sand and Fog. (2003). A very impressive debut by Ukrainian writer/director Vadim Perelman. He directed and wrote the screenplay (along with Shawn Lawrence Oto), adapting the Andre Dubus novel. The film also boasts an outstanding cast. Jennifer Connelly plays Kathy, a young woman who seems constantly out of her depth (the character, not the actress). Iranian actress Shoreh Aghdashloo also gives a fine performance as the dutiful, if sometimes contentious wife. But the real stand-out performances are given by Ben Kingsley as the controlling, but deeply human Colonel Behrani. The story concerns the wrongful seizure and auctioning off of Kathy's house. The house is rightfully purchased by Behrani, who sees it as a necessary investment for his family. But Kathy wants back the house that is rightfully hers. And that's the real tragedy: both sides are right, and both sides are wrong in doggedly pursuing their rights. This is a very fine film, but it was also very hard to watch as you see all of the parties spiral down to what you know cannot be a happy conclusion. It wasn't as difficult to watch as 21 Grams (see above), but it's still an intense movie (not for the young 'uns). We talked about how an alternative worldview (say the Christian worldview) that lays the emphasis less on one's own rights and more on forgiveness and love, would have spared both sides of this tragedy. Sometimes, it's just better to walk away, even if you're in the right. We also talked about how bad decisions (such as a romantic liason Kathy makes) can come back to haunt you. Someone even posted a message on imdb.com about how one main theme that I missed (but I think it's there): that the film explores how each of the seven deadly sins (pride, lust, anger, gluttony, covetousness, sloth and wrath) lead to tragedy. The film contains some violence and one fairly explicit sex scene, so again, not for the young or for people who have problems with violence or sex in the movies.

The Hulk. (2003). It's no art-house film, but the latest offering from director Ang Lee (Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon) raises enough interesting questions to make it worth watching (plus I really liked how Lee used split screen imagery to mimic a comic book). Themes include abandonment and

resentment, what happens when technology falls into the wrong hands (in this case, greedy commercial interests), the myth of the hero who cleanses all things through violence (vs. the reality of what violence does to a community and to individuals), and the notion of freedom as complete lack of restraint (here's where the movie cheats since it wants to portray the Hulk as absolutely unconstrained in his violence, but he's also careful to protect lives like a good superhero and only get the bad-guys). The low point of the film for me -- the father/son confrontation near the end of the film -- was too much like an actor's workshop ("OK, now you're the estranged son, and you're the bitter father. Go!"). Overall, a really fun summer blockbuster -- good to show in the middle of winter. *I wrote this before we screened The Hulk. It wasn't one of our better movie nights. Europeans just have a problem with American block-busters. Maybe an American crowd, or a high-school crowd, would like it better. Post-note note: Actually,* The Hulk *became one of the most criticized comic book hero movies of the decade. Don't know why. I think it was treated unfairly. Not Ang Lee's best, but not a bad film overall.*

The Human Stain. (2003) Directed by Robert Benton, adapted from a novel by Philip Roth. It is mainly a love story between Coleman Silk, a widower and a retired professor of classical literature (played by Anthony Hopkins) and the much younger, less educated Faunia Farley (played by Nicole Kidman). There are also themes about racism and political correctness (Coleman is forced to retire because he said a word that some of his students interpreted as a racial slur), but this is really a story about secrets and damaged lives. What I loved about the film is how Coleman and Faunia progressively open up to each other. There are painful secrets, especially in Faunia's past, that she allows him to see and then expects Coleman to abandon her. In one powerful scene, in fact, she pleads with him to leave. But Coleman doesn't -- he moves closer and embraces her. If that's not a picture of how God deals with us as we progressively open our hurts and sin to him, I don't know what is. And as Faunia becomes more vulnerable, Coleman feels able to share some of his dark secrets (a picture of how the Church is supposed to work). In other words, this loves story transcends the boy-meets-girl story and becomes more about human healing. There's also a narrator (played by Gary Sinese), the one who tells the story as a way of making sure justice is done (that is, part of justice is telling the stories of the dead in the land of the living). It made me think of God as the ultimate Storyteller, the one who makes sure that the truth gets told. Do be aware that this story contains more than its fair share of sex scenes and nudity. But it's well worth watching, especially for the powerful performances by the principal and supporting actors.

I Heart Huckabees. (2004). Directed and co-written by David O. Russel, who might just be vying for the "Most Bizarre Screenwriter in Hollywood" award (he'll have fierce competition from Charlie Kaufman and Wes Anderson). This is a quirky philosophical comedy about an ecological activist named Albert Markovski (played well by one of the more atypical leading men in Hollywood, Jason Schwartzman) who wants some coincidences he?s been having to be investigated by an existential detective agency. If that isn't an offbeat enough premise for you, you may want to seek therapy. Oh, and the film also has an evil French nihilist trying to thwart the plans of the existentialists. It's an odd mixture of philosophical discourse and early 60s style screw-ball comedy. Really it's about a contest between two philosophical positions: one a kind of watered down Eastern mysticism (everything is connected and beautiful and makes sense), and the other, a watered down version of Nietzsche (nothing is connected, life is cruel and makes no sense). The job of the viewers, then, is to assess the film's answer to that big question, and whether the film's final answer makes any sense. So be alert: You need to be willing to dip into some deep philosophical waters. If you have any philosophical training (a couple of classes in college, even), you may need to act as an interpreter for others more untouched by philosophical discourse. But it really is a fun movie. At least it was for me. Oh, and there is some swearing and one sex scene (no nudity), so be aware of that.

The Incredibles. (2004). Written and directed by Brad Bird, and brought to you by Pixar Animation Studios. I hear you asking: Can anything worth discussing come from Pixar? Well, actually, yes! This is, I believe, Pixar's strongest showing (at a time when the other animation studios seem to be stumbling a bit -- think *Robots* and *Shark Tale*). (*Note: This was written before* Kung-Fu Panda.) I loved this movie's look and sound -- the design elements and the music are constantly referencing James Bond movies from the early to mid-sixties. Very retro, very cool. I also liked how superheroes are shown dealing with everyday problems (for example, squabbling over which exit to take off the freeway, kids arguing, etc.). It is very funny, and has some very touching moments as well. But the movie has a strangely elitist message as well. Without giving too much away, the evil nemesis is a

superhero wannabe, someone without powers, but who uses technology to compensate. The movie is very clear as to who the audience is to love (the naturally gifted "supers") and who the audience is to hate (the pretend superhero). Superheroes, in this worldview, form sort of a crime-fighting aristocracy. We talked about how this view is kind of like the way our society tends to value those who are naturally gifted (think of singers and American Idol, or sports stars) while undervaluing those who have fewer abilities. And we contrasted that with a biblical understanding of a person as having an intrinsic worth based upon being created in God's image. We could have also talked about why people are so drawn to superheroes, why we like stories about superhuman savior figures. We ran out of time, but that could have been a good entré into talking about God entering history as a man in Christ. Overall, a very good, very fun film. See? Not all films that are worth discussing are heavy and depressing.

In My Country. (2004). Original title: Country of My Skull, (which I think is the stronger title -- the American title is a lot blander). Directed by John Boorman, and adapted by Ann Peacock from the South African novel by Antjie Krog. It is the story of two reporters, one Afrikaans and black American, who cover the South African Truth and Reconciliation hearings in 1995. The film is a compelling way of learning about the horrors of apartheid, but it also presents powerful moments of forgiveness, South African style (a concept known as ubuntu). The film is not a masterpiece, but it is a good film. It's a case where the film didn't have to be that good because the subject is so compelling. This film drew a record number of students to movie night (45! I didn't know our living room could fit that many), because Europeans are very much interested in apartheid and racial justice. But many of them shook their heads and said, "It's just so naive and unrealistic." But there were a couple of South Africans who said, "No, this is real, this is the way it happened." It's a great film for discussing issues of forgiveness (What does it mean? What does it do? Why forgive?), and truth (what price do you put on the truth? Is it worth it to get to the truth, even if you have to give up a claim on punishing the guilty?) We also talked some about the relationship between the two reporters. The angry black American, Langston Whitfield (played by Samuel L. Jackson) is an especially interesting character, as we see his opinion of South African justice change, and along with it, we see a softening of his self-righteousness. There are some things I would have changed, but overall, it's worth seeing if only for the powerful topic it addresses. These are stories that must be told.

Intacto. (2001). Spanish director Juan Carlos Fresnaldillo (who also co-wrote the script) made this film to explore the nature of luck. The film creates a truly strange world where luck is a palpable energy that one can steal from others through touch, taking their picture, etc. (sort of like animist religion). Max Von Sydow is mesmerizing as Samuel Berg, a concentration camp survivor who is the reigning King of Luck. It?s not a great, great film, but it is a good one. And the film posits a very curious connection between acquiring luck (good fortune) and self-sacrificial love (a shadow of the gospel?).

King of Masks. (1996). Chinese director Tian-Ming Wu's film about an old man whose craft is acting with masks (and changing them very rapidly). The story is about his relationship with a young child he takes to be his apprentice. Great story, very moving. And very good for discussing themes of Mahayana Buddhism, Confucianism, as well as themes of sonship, grace and adoption. In these Eastern religions, sonship must be earned, versus Christianity where sonship is freely given.

Kitchen Stories. (2003). Original title, Salmer fra kjokkenet (literal translation: *Psalms from the Kitchen*). Written and directed by Bent Hamer, and co-written by Jörgen Bergmark. This is simply a wonderful movie by a very talented Norwegian director. The story revolves a (fictitious) Swedish "Institute for Domestic Research" which has embarked on a study to observe the behavior of Norwegian bachelors in their kitchen (yes, *Prairie Home Companion* buffs, these are real Norwegian bachelor farmers). The researchers are to observe without talking to or helping their research subject. Without giving too much away, the movie explores themes of observing and relationship. In other words, humans being what they are, is it reasonable to put two humans in such close proximity and expect them not to react? According to the positivistic research methods of the Swedes, it's a necessity. And therein lies the tension and delight of the film: watching humans being humans. And that gives you a lot to talk about, for in raising that issue, the film implicitly raises the issue of what it means to be human. But besides that, Hamer has a great eye for subtle details of visual humor that I found irresistible. It's a slower paced film than what you may be used to, and there's not a lot of action or dialogue (I mean, c'mon, we're dealing with Scandinavians for cryin' out loud). But in its

quiet way, I found the film to be very engaging, thought-provoking, and very, very funny. Plus, the jazz-inspired sound-track was the best I'd heard in a long time. Unfortunately, it hasn?t been released as a soundtrack, and isn't likely to be anytime soon. Details about how to get some of the music from the movie is available on a chat thread at imdb.com at [2]. You may have to register with the site to access it however (but it's free, and worth every penny). As a plus, this is a movie that has no objectionable content, apart from some swearing (I learned a swear word in Swedish, but I forgot it afterwards). I let my kids watch it, and they loved it. This is going into my top 10 for sure.

La Vie en Rose. (2007). Also known as *The Passionate Life of Edith Piaf,* or its original French title, *La Mome.* Writer/director Olivier Dahan gives an intimate and creative portrait of the quintessential French *chanteuse.* In fact, some of the episodes and characters (little Edith's prostitute surrogate mother) are wholly fictional. Still, the overall effect is that you come to know this little woman with the big voice and titanic personality. And Marion Cotillard, one of my favorite French actresses, gives an amazing performance. Cotillard can chew scenery with the best of them, if she's given the right material. The movie also shows what it looks like for a great person to fall apart slowly, piece by piece; how to ruin oneself. One of the lietmotifs of the movie is Piaf's defiant song, "Non, Je Regrette Rien" (No, I regret nothing). But looking at the road of her life, you wonder if she really *should* regret, whether regret is a gift of God to help us evaluate foolishness and tragedy with clear eyes (if you need convincing, see Jason Robard's stunning monologue in the middle of *Magnolia*, or Edward Norton's soliloquy in the mirror during *25th Hour*). If you have a group that's willing to engage in some self-reflection, this movie provides an entree for considering the positive uses of regret. Not for children, though (sex, language, etc.).

Levity. (2003). Writer/director Ed Solomon, who usually works in action/comedy genres (*Charlie's Angels, Men in Black, Bill and Ted's Bogus Journey*) takes his craft in a very different direction. *Levity* is a nicely shot, nicely scripted tale of guilt and forgiveness. Billy Bob Thornton plays a murderer released from prison trying to come to terms with his past and his conscience. A very quiet, evenly-paced movie full of interesting characters struggling with everything from living a lie, partying to cover an inner-emptiness, repentance, grief and a desire for revenge. It's an unusual movie in that it deals with these themes in more directly religious language than most movies would (after all, the main character is named "Manuel Jordan"?). A good movie for discussion.

The Life Aquatic with Steve Zissou. (2004). Written and directed by one of the weirder talents in Hollywood, Wes Anderson (Noah Baumbach co-wrote the script). Wes Anderson is known for his offbeat comedies *Rushmore* and *The Royal Tenenbaums.* If you liked those two films, you're going to enjoy *The Life Aquatic.* But it's not for everyone (my wife, Carolyn, for one, didn't like it). For one, it is a very postmodern film, ironically pointing out the artifice of the film itself, while at the same time asking the audience to take the emotions expressed seriously (or at least semi-seriously). Think Dogma 99 lite (if you don't know what that means, skip it -- it's not important). And the sense of humor was very quirky. Carolyn didn't get appreciate the humor, while I was dying laughing. So, a word to the wise: tread carefully in using this one as a movie night (but, what the heck, I'm definitely going to use it!). The story revolves around a past-his-prime maker of oceanographic movies (clearly based on Jacques Cousteau) who meets someone who might be his son while on a quest to capture the "jaguar shark" that ate his best friend (a shark, moreover, that may or may not actually exist). A lot of the movie circulates around themes of fatherhood and sonship and abandonment (in other words, themes that are very suggestive within a Christian worldview context). I personally think (for reasons that must remain obscure until you actually see the film) that the shark is a symbol for God (who may or may not exist). If I say more, it will definitely count as a spoiler. Furthermore, there are lots of scenes where the viewer sees impossibly exotic ocean life (perhaps a way of getting us to see the wonders of creation anew?). Anyway, the film boasts an all-star cast: Bill Murray, Owen Wilson, Cate Blanchett, Anjelica Huston, Willem Dafoe and Jeff Goldblum (in his first non-nerd-scientist role in a great while). Definitely not your typical movie. Go see it (but if you don't like it, don't blame me -- you were warned).

Look at Me. (2004) Original title, Comme une Image. Directed by Agnes Jaoui. This is a wonderful little French comedy/drama that centers on a young woman who is not pretty (an unpretty woman as the lead in a movie? *Gasp!*) and her relationship with her famous novelist father. The film circulates around themes of appearances and reality, especially how we are driven by what we see, rather than being guided by what?s under the surface. I feel that I would spoil it by talking about the

characters too much, since it's all about character, and how it changes under the gaze of others (either changing to enter the spotlight, or withering under other's judgmental gaze and the insecurity that brings). We had a great time talking about what is a human being, anyway (if not simply physical features). And why are we so obsessed with what's on the outside? And most importantly, how do we know who we are, how do we escape the insecurity that comes from depending on others to tell us who we are? You can get really deep with questions like that.

Lord of the Rings. (2001-2003). Directed by Peter Jackson. Let's face it -- great movies, but any one of them is way too long for a movie discussion night. You don't want to wear folks out (plus everybody's seen every movie multiple times). But you could have great discussion around clips. This movie is chock full of Christ figures, raises questions about the nature of evil as addiction, about divine sovereignty ("in which case, you were meant to have the ring, Frodo," says Gandalf in the mines of Moria). There are also shadows of the Second Coming in Return of the King, fellowship and the role of the church, good versus evil, the question of what lies beyond this world. A bunch of stuff treated more seriously than in a standard fairy tale. You could discuss why these themes seem important, even in our modern secular age -- why do people flock to films such as this (and it's not just because of the awesome special effects)?

Lost in Translation. (2003). Sophia Coppola (yep, Francis Ford's baby girl) wrote and directed this tale of Bob and Charlotte, two lost souls in a Japan (played by Bill Murray and Charlotte Johansson) who develop a relationship to stave off their own isolation. This is not a movie that everyone will like. Americans in particular will find it slow-developing. It feels more like a French film by Jean Luc Goddard or one of those guys. Me, I liked it because it took its time in exploring the relational dynamics, and revealing how much human beings crave real contact with each other. The real tragedy of the film is that neither character finds such a deep connection with their spouses (which only intensifies their feeling of isolation, their need for contact with each other). I'm not going to say much more for fear of spoiling the movie for you, but suffice it to say that you could have a fruitful discussion about friendship, love and marriage using this film as a springboard. Another avenue we explored was the bigger message of the film, namely that what's true of Bob and Charlotte is true also of us (according to the movie). Just as they are lost and isolated in an absurd world where little makes sense, so too are we. And we, like they, simply need to enjoy chance relationships we stumble upon -- that's the only meaning there is to life. In that sense, the film has a very existentialist ring to it. It was well worth watching and discussing.

A Love Song for Bobby Long. (2004). Directed and scripted by Shainee Gabel from a novel by Ronald Everett Capps. A young woman named Pursy (played by Scarlett Johansson) returns to New Orleans after the death of her mother to claim a house which she finds inhabited by a couple of her mother's old friends, ex-college English professor Bobby Long (played by John Travolta, who really can act when he wants to), and his ex-student Lawson Pines (played well by Gabriel Macht). This movie is, ultimately, about family, even how dysfunctional or artificial ones, can provide warmth and community. But it is also about language and identity. Who are we, really. One of the hallmarks about Bobby Long is that he is always quoting passages from books, as if he has no identity apart from other people's words. It is also about how destructive certain lifestyles can be (both Lawson and Bobby are nearly constantly drunk, and Bobby's past sexual escapades ruined his life and the lives of those he loved). That is, the "Big Easy" has a tendency to turn into something pretty nasty. When we did this movie, we had a very intense discussion about whether unrestrained sexual freedom was a good idea. You may not want to take a route that confrontational. It was an interesting discussion, though. Anyway, the film has a super soundtrack (hey, it's New Orleans -- how could it not have a killer soundtrack). The scripting and performances were all very strong. It does pull some heart-strings towards the end, but that's a forgivable fault. A really good movie for discussing relationships.

Magnolia. (1999). One of my all-time favorites. Writer/director Paul Thomas Anderson succeeded in weaving together six or seven stories about lives that are intertwined (around a TV game-show called "What Do Kids Know?"). The story is ultimately about the ravages of the past and the hope for redemption. A wonderful ensemble cast with Tom Cruise acting as well as I?ve ever seen him, plus Jason Robard's last role before he died (he gives the most powerful performance of the cast). Issues include dealing with the past, forgiveness, unconditional love vs. fear of opening up the truth of yourself to others (the restaurant scene between two characters, Jim and Claudia, illustrates that last

theme very powerfully). All of these interconnected stories spiral downwards towards despair until something happens (it's an image of God's intervention, but I don't want to spoil the movie for you). A brilliant, intense movie. Be forewarned: it's long (about 3 hours), and Tom Cruise's character uses some incredibly offensive language (but then again, watching the development of his character is one of the most satisfying performances in the film).

Man on the Moon. (1999). Czech immigrant director Milos Forman made this biopic about the famous (and infamous) American comedian Andy Kaufman. It was fascinating in that Kaufman was the quintessential postmodern man: no stable identity, constantly changing who he was, which resulted in there not being any "real him" left. Plus, Jim Carrey was just outstanding. There is some nudity and some foul language, but still a good movie.

The Man Who Wasn't There. (2001). Joel and Ethan Cohen brothers do film noir. Billy Bob Thornton plays an everyman character who feels trapped by life (symbolized by his boring job as a barber). He calls it being trapped in "the maze," and the film explores different ways he attempts to get out of the maze (money, art, death). I then asked my students, "Are we indeed trapped by existence, and which answer do you have to escape from the maze?" A great movie for starting a really deep discussion. It also looks at how small sins snowball and take on a life of their own. A beautifully shot, wonderfully acted tale.

Matchstick Men. (2003). A nice character study of a con-man from director Ridley Scott. Nicholas Cage is absolutely convincing as an obsessive-compulsive con-man who yearns for his estranged family. A father/daughter relationship looms large here and could provide interesting conversation, as well as the meaning of truth vs. deception, or crippling fear/regret over the past vs. freedom and love and opening yourself to relationship.

Matrix. (1999). Directed and written by Andy and Larry Wachowski. A great film -- very, very stylish, somewhat violent, but raises good questions about the nature of reality, Neo as Christ figure, etc. I don't do this one anymore just because people are tired of it-- too many people have seen it too many times. Plus, I have become completely disenchanted by the way Hollywood co-opted the Wachowski brothers in *Reloaded.* I didn't even bother to see Matrix *Revolutions*. *Actually, I have since seen* Revolutions*, and frankly, I wasn't too impressed by it either.*

Million Dollar Hotel. (2000). Director Wim Wender's treatment of a script written by U2's Bono (with help from Nicholas Klein); even so, Bono's a better writer than most). It's a very quirky combination of love-story and murder mystery set amongst the down-and-out crowd in L.A. Plus, Mel Gibson plays a detective who's a cross between James Bond and Joe Friday on drugs (or at least on painkillers): very weird. Some themes we discussed were this sense of community between all of these screwed-up people (sort of like the Church), the transforming power of love, and the crushing burden of guilt.

Million Dollar Baby. (2004). Clint Eastwood has arrived as one of Hollywood?s most respected directors. His treatment of Paul Haggis' screenplay (an adaptation of a couple of short stories from a book by ex-boxing trainer, F. X. Toole) was brilliant. And you certainly can't complain about the acting talent: Clint Eastwood plays the gruff trainer/manager Frankie Dunn; Morgan Freeman plays his assistant, ex-boxer Eddie "Scrap-Iron" Dupris; and Hillary Swank plays the determined wanna-be boxer from white trash roots, Maggie Fitzgerald. This film is really about relationship (all the best ones are, it seems): the way Scrap looks out for the underdogs, the developing father-daughter relationship between Frankie and Maggie; the community at Frankie's gym. It is this fragile web of relationships that makes the story work, that gives the story its devastating impact. A good topic for discussion would be this web or relationships, how we are made for relationship, despite the individualistic bent of our consumer culture. One character who is definitely not within this relational web is the sole religious character, Father Horvak. Not only does he miss (or ignore) the spiritual turmoil and pain in Frankie's character, but he constantly rebuffs Frankie's attempts to find healing in religion. Father Horvak is a good example of how not to be an effective pastor (I wanted to give him a good kick in the rear). You can discuss how different Christianity truly is. Finally, I would be amiss if I didn't mention that this is an "issue" movie. I don't think I'm spoiling too much by saying that the film deals with euthanasia. But I don't think it deals with it in an honest way (that's to say, it's a boxing film that, in this area, pulls its punches). Maggie wants to die, and she is given no

counseling, she develops horrendous bed-sores from improper nursing care (given to her at "the finest facility" according to the movie). In short, the movie stacks the deck to make the mercy killing seem truly merciful and the only option. We talked a lot about that, too. I don't want to say too much more for fear of spoiling the movie. But I will say that the fight choreography is first-rate and some of the best boxing footage I've seen in years. Also, if you notice a sudden shift in mood in the narrative, it's because the screenplay is actually a sandwich made from two separate stories by F. X. Toole. I think it works really well, though.

The Miracle Maker. (2000). Derek Hayes and Stanislav Sokolov have directed the best adaptation of the life of Jesus I've ever seen on film, and it's all claymation (or at least puppet-animation)! This movie is remarkable for the quality of the animation (you soon forget that it?s animated), for the intelligent use of the biblical materials, for its faithfulness to the text (except for the last 10 seconds of the movie which tries to explain Christ's Second Coming solely in terms of the present Christian Church). First class voice talent (including Ralph Fiennes, Sir Ian Holm, and William Hurt). A very entertaining way to present the person of Jesus (but you need to have your guests aware that they are going to be watching an explicitly Christian film). Unfortunately, I believe that this is only available in PAL format or in Zone 2 DVD, so unless you have a multi-system videocassette player or a multi-zone DVD-player (with a PAL to NTSC translator), you're going to have trouble showing this. *Later note: After seeing this film umpteen times and showing it to my "Comparative Religions" class (as an alternative to me lecturing on the life of Jesus), I've come to see some of the film's shortcomings. The biggest of which comes at the end: the film implies that because we have the Church, we need not expect the return of Jesus, because he's with us already (in the Church). That's a patently absurd reading of the biblical material in a film that otherwise generally respects it. Also Jesus is perhaps more ambiguous about his own role as divine Messiah than in the gospels, but I'm willing to let that one slide, since it's aim to to emphasize Jesus' humanity. Just be aware -- it's not a perfect film.*

Moon. (2009). Duncan Jones wrote and directed this low-budget sci-fi gem. This is the most original piece of science fiction to come out in a decade at least. Sam Rockwell plays Sam Bell, the lone worker on a moon mining operation who has been by himself just a little too long. As a portrait of loneliness and psychological desolation, it is compelling; and Rockwell gives the performance of his career (even better than "Confessions of a Dangerous Mind," in my opinion). But the film takes a turn that makes us question the very nature of identity. I can't tell you what happens without giving too much away, but rest assured you could have a great conversation about what makes us . . . us. Because of some disturbing imagery and language, I would not recommend this for children.

***Moonlight Mile*.** (2002). Written and directed by Brad Silberling, based on his own experience after the tragic murder of his girlfriend, actress Rebecca Schaeffer in 1989 by a stalker. Beautiful cinematography, great 70s soundtrack, and wonderful acting. This story of a young man who has recently lost his fiancée focuses on themes of the fear of rejection (and therefore conforming to others' expectations of you and living a double life) vs. the truth and opening yourself to the possibility of unconditional love. You also get a good look at what grieving looks like without God. It tackles a hard subject without cliché.

My Life Without Me (2003). Directed by Isabel Coixet. This is a very spare movie. It looks like it was shot on video, which gives the movie a more immediate, less polished feel. The show really belongs to Sarah Polley, who plays Ann, a young mother of two. She and her husband live in a trailer in the back of her mom's house in Vancouver (the mom is played -- and played well -- by Blondie's Debra Harry of all people). When Ann finds that she has terminal cancer, it causes her to reevaluate her life, and make a list of what she wants to do with the time left. Some of the items on her list are good (telling her kids she loves them), others not so good (she wants to sleep with a man who is not her husband). I think this film will be very helpful for getting at deep issues of meaning in human life (and death). What sort of things would you put on your list, and why? If death was not the end, would you change your list? This should be a good one. And it was -- we had a great discussion.

Mystic River (2003). Directed by Clint Eastwood, and adapted by Brian Helgeland from the novel by Dennis Lehane. Clint Eastwood, famous for his role as Dirty Harry in a number of films in the 70s and 80s, directed an elegant, very emotionally powerful movie that earned a couple of Oscars for the actors involved. I found the writing, the ensemble acting, and the camerawork all very very fine. It's

essentially a murder mystery, so I'll try not to spoil too much here. Suffice it to say that three boyhood friends who grew up in an Irish neighborhood in Boston, (Jimmy, Dave and Sean) find their lives intertwined by tragedy: one of them was abducted as a child, and another is missing one of his children. Their lives have taken very different paths (one's a cop, another is a criminal). But what I liked about this film is how very nuanced it was in its treatment of evil and the consequences of evil. Evil scars and leaves victims, but each victim is also a victimizer to some degree. There are no innocents, only relatively innocent. Religion plays a visible role in this film, since for Jimmy the Catholic church is important, despite his own shady activities. The central question for the film, then, is: How do we escape our past? How do we not let it become a cage? The answer comes late in the film in a subplot involving Sean and his estranged wife: we must forgive. Another scene that was absolutely magnetic was between Jimmy and his wife, Annabeth. I can't say too much without giving away the movie, but suffice it to say that Annabeth does a wonderful Lady Macbeth redux, but without the eventual repentance of Shakespeare's character, without the sorrow over her own sin. Annabeth opts for power over forgiveness, or goodness. Anyway, watch it and see for yourself.

Napoleon Dynamite. (2004). Once upon a time, two Mormon brothers named Jared and Jarusha Hess bet that they could write a commercially successful comedy that didn?t have any sex, violence, or swearing. And they did, by creating the wonderfully bizarre world of Napoleon Dynamite, an incredibly idiosyncratic high-school student. It might just be the dumbest movie we?ve ever done for a movie night. Just to give you a taste: The first line of the movie is spoken by a younger boy to Napoleon: "Hey Napoleon, what're you gonna do today?" Napoleon responds, "Whatever I feel like I wanna do. Gosh!" and then demonstrates by throwing a male action figure doll tied with a length of string out the bus window and watching it bounce around behind the bus. If you find that funny and absurd (and for some reason, I found it hilarious), then you're going to like this movie. If you think it's just stupid, then this movie is not for you. Either way, you're not going to find too much deep content to talk about, though there are suggestive themes: the painful self-awareness of adolescence, the allure of not being the cool kid (it could be argued that Napoleon Dynamite has invented a whole new fashion category: loser chic), the power of cool and the triumph of style over substance (there's a crucial scene near the end of the film where Napoleon redeems himself, but I can't tell you what it is without spoiling the movie). What I found surprising is that the film is virtually unknown in Europe, and yet my European students loved it and found it incredibly funny (though a German student said that in their high schools, they don't have such a strict social stratification as we do in the U.S.; cool, popular kids vs. the uncool dweebs, etc.). So, a good movie night movie when you don't want to think too hard.

O Brother, Where Art Thou? (2000). Another wonderfully bizarre Cohen brothers' production. It's worth seeing just for the soundtrack (this movie single-handedly revitalized the popularity of Depression-era American folk music and other "roots music"). It's a road movie, loosely based upon The Odyssey. Themes we discussed included rationalism/empiricism (George Clooney's character has a "scientific" mindset that will not believe in religious mumbo-jumbo, even in the face of startling evidence towards the end of the movie). The film also deals with scenes of baptism and forgiveness, and with popular culture as a manipulator of the masses.

Oscar and Lucinda. (1997). Directed by Gillian Armstrong. Cate Blanchett and Ralph Fiennes shine in this story about a two obsessive gamblers in 19th century Australia. Fiennes' character is also a parson, so Christian themes are right there out in the open: love, grace, damnation, true spirituality vs. institutionalized religion (at the end of the movie, the church is literally a trap for Oscar), the meaning of death (as reaching peace after a fitful life), chasing foolish dreams as a grand ambition, love, innocence. An absolutely shattering tale and well worth watching.

Paris, Texas. (1984). Directed by Wim Wenders, and screenplay by Sam Shepard and L. M. "Kit" Carson. This is a beautifully shot, slow-moving tale that begins with a man in a red cap wandering aimlessly through the Mojave Desert. Harry Dean Stanton plays Travis, and it is really Travis' story. I can't tell you too much, without giving away the plot. It is enough to say that the story is about discovering the depths of his character. It is also about broken relationships, the damage we are capable of doing, and fumbling towards reconciliation with those you have hurt. This movie has a very deliberate pace that will require some patience (especially for American audiences who are used to plots moving at the speed of car chases). But your patience will be rewarded, as a lot surfaces in the last 15-20 minutes of the movie. Pay special attention to the scene in the "men's

club" and especially the way Wenders uses mirrors and glass to make a deeper point. That scene alone (in the context of the rest of the movie) can give you plenty to talk about: desire to reconnect, fear, evil, all sorts of things. OK, enough said. As part of the movie does take place in an adult club, there is some nudity, but not much and not for long. There is also some language, but again, it's not very racy. The themes dealt with are not for children, however. It?s a beautiful movie, well worth the time.

Pi. (1998). Written a directed by Darren Aronofsky. A fascinating indy production filmed entirely in black and white about a brilliant mathematician (Max) who is convinced that all of the patterns in the world (the stock market, for instance) can be explained by a single mathematical formula. He gets mixed up with cabalistic Jews searching for the number that would represent God's divine name and bring in a golden age. It is both arresting and difficult to watch because it is filmed in 16 mm which gives it a grainy, claustrophobic feel. The camera puts you inside Max's head (which is often pounding with intense migraines) as he slowly loses his grip on reality, even as he zeros in on its core.

Pleasantville. (1998). Written and directed by Gary Ross (who also wrote the screenplay for *Big*, and directed Seabiscuit). Some sexual themes (though no nudity). An interesting look at America's idealization of the 50's from a metaphysical angle (what if all of life were like the 50's TV shows with their rigid authority structure, naiveté, etc.). It gives basically a Romantic/Existentialist response (you've got to rebel against the system to be alive and real). Good for discussing foundational issues such as: Are rules always bad? Must you break the rules to know you're alive? Does passion save you?

The Princess and the Warrior. (2000). Originally entitled *Der Krieger und die Kaiserin*. From German writer/director Tom Tykwer, who is better known for Run Lola Run, and starring the same actress (Franka Potente), but I think this is a much more interesting movie. Potente plays a nurse trapped at a mental hospital whose life is saved by an alienated young man, whom she pursues believing that he is her destiny. Themes include destiny (does it exist? Is there a pattern to life, or is it simply chaotic coincidences?), unconditional love, escaping from a past which cripples you, whether love truly heals all wounds.

***The Princess Bride*.** (1987). A classic, and wonderfully written. Directed by Rob Reiner, and with a sparkling script written by William Goldman (who adapted his own book into a screenplay). Themes to discuss: What makes fairy tales work? What is "True Love," anyway? Beware: there are plenty of rabid fans of this movie. When we showed it, we had a lot of Americans there (including a group of girls that I couldn?t get to stop cooing over Wesley and "twue-wuv"). Hard to have a discussion with all that cooing. All that is to say, people who have grown up with this film (it came out while I was in college) may have seen this film too many times to make it do-able for a movie night. It might work better with non-Americans (although I've found that non-native English speakers miss a lot of the brilliant word-play in Goldman's script).

Princess Mononoke. (1997). Original title: *Mononoke-Hime.* Written and directed by the incomparable Hayao Miyazaki. In my opinion, he is the greatest animator on the planet, and this may be his strongest work. Set in ancient Japan when animal-gods still roamed the land, it tells the story of Prince Ashitaka, who is forced to leave his village to go seek the source of a great evil. I can't tell you more than that without giving too much away. Really. All I *can* tell you is that the story circulates around themes of man versus nature (is it impossible for us to live in harmony with our environment), good versus evil (but even the villains are morally complex and do good), and awakening love (a favorite Miyazaki theme). The artwork is brilliant, the story fast-paced and richly layered. You will want to watch the movie more than once to really catch all that's going on. One other thing I'll tell you: Much of the story concerns the "Deer God" who rules a great forest of the land and to whom the other lesser animal-gods feel a deep allegiance. Pay attention to how the Deer God is portrayed, for there are interesting parallels drawn between him and Christ, even within the movies animistic and pantheistic worldview. Be advised, this is also the most violent of Miyazaki's movies, so it's not for young ones. We made the mistake of letting my daughter watch it at 10 years old, and it completely freaked her out. She recently saw it again for her 14th birthday, and it's her favorite film. Go figure.

The Proposition. (2005). Directed by John Hillcoat, and written by rock laureate Nick Cave. This is a fascinating Western, a tale of conflicted loyalties set in the Australian Outback during the late 19th century. After the police capture Mike Burns, the youngest of three brothers in the notoriously brutal Burns gang, the police captain gives the middle brother, Charley, a proposition: bring in the leader of the gang (the magnetic but criminally insane Arthur Burns), or watch his innocent, childlike younger brother hang. But so, we will find, is the police captain, Captain Stanley, who tries to navigate between the dictates of mercy and "civilization." Without giving too much away, the viewer is placed in a position of conflicting loyalties as well, forced to choose between the forces of civilization and law and order, and a criminal gang who truly love each other as family. While it would have been easy for Cave to romanticize the criminals (it's been done so much its nearly cliché), Cave gives the viewer no easy out. The forces of civilization are brutal in their repression of those who defy it (epitomized by the sadistic mayor of the town, Eden Fletcher); but the poetic, nature-loving Arthur Burns can be as sadistic and brutal to those outside his own gang. I believe that Nick Cave is showing that both options run short, and he makes the viewer long for a perspective in which human beings are treated as human beings, no matter which group they belong to (something like the Christian love ethic). I can't say more without giving out spoilers. But I will offer this warning: This is by far the most violent movie we have ever screened for a movie night. And when I invited people to it, I made sure they understood that this film had some scenes of grisly, brutal violence. If you are sensitive to film violence, find another film. It's not for you. And if you decide to show it, do your friends a favor and give them fair warning. Some of my friends stayed away from movie night that evening, and I'm glad they did. Perhaps Cave could have told his story without quite so much violence, but as the film is in part a meditation on how inhuman man can be to those who aren't in his group, I personally think most of the violence was justified. A fascinating movie if you have the stomach for it.

Punch-Drunk Love. (2002). Writer/director Paul Thomas Anderson?s latest offering (see Magnolia above). A very off-beat love story. Adam Sandler has been given the role of his career, and he acts as if he knows it. It?s the story of a loser (e.g. he's passive, lets others roll over him) who falls in love and it changes him (in other words, it's a character study). The weakness of the film is that the object of his affection is rather poorly drawn; more a projection of his desire than a three-dimensional human being. But the attention to Sandler's character makes up for it. The moral of the tale and the issue to discuss: You need to live for something outside of yourself for your life to come together, to have passion. We haven't done this one yet. Let us know how it works for you.

Raising Arizona. (1987). The Cohen brothers? wonderfully surreal comedy from the 80's about the search for a baby. I love the cinematography in this movie ? the Cohen brothers have a knack for getting arresting images on screen. Plus the cast is wonderful ? Nicholas Cage, Holly Hunter, John Goodman. What?s not to like? Discussion topic: Nathan Jr. as a symbol of unconditional acceptance (the baby just smiles and loves whoever he?s with) ? and how much everyone craves that sort of acceptance. I?ve found that the world can be divided into two types of people: those who, having seen Raising Arizona, love it, and those who just don?t (they typically say it?s ?not realistic? ? um, yeah, so what?s yer point?). A word to the wise: If someone doesn?t like this movie, treat their movie recommendations with a dose of caution and a grain of salt.

The Return. (2003). Originally entitled Vozvrashcheniye. Directed by Andrei Zvagintsev. This slowly unfolding, spare film tells the story of Andrei and Ivan, two brothers (15 and 12 respectively) whose father had deserted them 12 years before. Suddenly, the father returns and decides to take the boys on a fishing trip. I can?t tell you much more without giving away key plot points. Suffice it to say that their relationship is strained, especially the relationship between the father and the young Ivan. The movie is interesting enough as an examination of the dynamics of the relationship (the father asserting his authority and tough love, thinking he is teaching the boys a valuable lesson on manhood, Ivan chafing at what he sees as abusive authority). But the film takes on a whole other level of interest when you see the father as a sort of symbol for God as modern and postmodern Europeans see him: distant, having abandoned them, arbitrary authority, etc. (and this aspect of the film is even more interesting, given the ending of the film). We had an amazing discussion watching this film. On top of that, it?s got a cool soundtrack and pretty amazing cinematography. Zvagintsev?s director of photography really knows how to compose a shot. A very impressive first film from this director. He?s worth keeping an eye on.

Ride with the Devil. (1999). Director Ang Lee (of Crouching Tiger fame) did this historical drama about one of the most savage aspects of Civil War history. Set in Missouri where most of the fighting was done by irregulars (i.e. gangs of men with guns ? where we?d later get our romantic outlaws like Billy the Kid), it focuses on the career of one of these Southern ?Bushwackers? named Jake Roedel (played by Tobey McGuire) as he and his band roam around killing any and every male Northern sympathizer that gets in their way, even non-combatants (as the Northern army was doing in that area as well). My students found it a fascinating movie, just because this is a period of American history they don?t hear about. We talked about the nature of commitment (Jake refuses to kill a restaurant owner in a town they are Bushwacking, and he?s charged with being uncommitted). We talked about the nature of mercy (there are several points where Jake chooses to be merciful, with profound results). Anyway, not a great movie, but a very interesting document reflecting a pretty ugly period of American history (this sort of stuff doesn?t just happen in Bosnia). It also shows that the singer Jewel can actually act ? they don?t all have to be like Brittany or Mariah!

The Road. (2009). Directed by John Hillcoat from a Cormac McCarthy novel (he's the same novelist who wrote *No Country for Old Men*). Let me state it up front: this is a bleak, bleak movie. Not without all hope, but it comes in slivers as thin as a single strand of a spider's web. If you don't like dark films, pass this one up. But for those of you who can deal with it, this is an excellent film with a strong script, beautiful (if spare and mono-chrome) cinematography, and exceptionally strong performances from all involved, especially the principals: Viggo Mortensen (looking very much less heroic than he did as Aragorn), Charlize Theron, and Kodi Smit-McPhee (a child actor whose career I'll be watching - he was pretty amazing for one so young). The story revolves around the relationship between a father and son in a post-apocalyptic wasteland. Death is all around. The world itself is dying. The pair set off to find the coast and head south where there might be some food. And they try to avoid "bad guys" who would harm them. What made the film so compelling for me was the strength of the father-son relationship. The father has put all his hope in the survival of his son. He says at one point, quite plainly, "To me, he is a god." And because his god is so weak and fragile, the father often finds himself doing things that he couldn't otherwise justify, even though he wants to be a "good guy" and a good model for his son. Dystopias, when they are well-conceived, always serve as thought experiments, ways to explore a question. In this case, the question was: in a dying world without hope, what is left to live for? We discussed that for a bit, and especially about the choice of the mother of the boy. Why did she choose as she did? Would we choose differently, and why? (I'm not going to tell you what choice she made: you'll have to see the film. But it's crucial). It all boils down to: "Where is your hope?" For Christians, who have a God who is definitely not fragile, they have a hope even when all the hope in the world is gone. That's what made this film worth watching for me. That, and the beauty and intensity of the father-son relationship. Being a man who has raised a son and one who has watched his father die, there were a couple of times this film touched me deeply. Let me issue one more warning: there are scenes of gore and violence, some horror elements in this movie. Proceed with caution. But for those of you who can handle those sorts of things, this is a good movie to see (even twice).

Road to Perdition. (2002). Director Sam Mendes? second (!) theatrical release, and the last movie shot by legendary cinematographer Conrad L. Hall (who won, what, five Oscars over his lifetime?) before he died. It?s worth seeing just to observe how Hall sculpts with light and sets up his shots. Tom Hanks is brilliant as the hit-man/father who tries to keep a bond with his son even as he?s fleeing the mob. Themes include the security of the father/son relationship and violence and revenge (the movie is finally very anti-violence). Sam Mendes is, in my book, two for two. He?s one that?s worth watching in the future.

Rok D?abla. (2002). This is a quirky little mockumentary in the line of This is Spinal Tap (which, if you haven?t seen, you really really should) from writer/director Petr Zelenka. It?s the story of the Czech Bob Dylan (a musician named Jaromir Nohavica) who tours with a Czech folk band called Czechomor. A documentary filmmaker accompanies them, and spooky, spiritual things begin to happen. A good film for discussing what real spirituality is, why it draws secular people (Czechs are known as one of the most secular people in the world), the search for God, the significance of silence (some of the characters practice a sort of meditation). A very funny, very winsome movie.

Unfortunately, like Miracle Maker, it?s only available in PAL (though the DVD is multi-zone, you?d still need a PAL-NTSC converter for your American DVD player).

Science of Sleep. (2006.) Original title: La science des r?ves. Written and directed by French filmmaker Michel Gondry, who is better known to American audiences for his collaboration with Hollywood screenwriter Charlie Kaufman. This is a wonderful film to look at, filled with quirky, stop-action animation. It tells the story of a young Mexican man who returns to Paris (where he was raised) and falls in love. But he has a problem: he habitually falls into dreaming, and has a hard time separating dream from reality. The central character, Stephane (played with a wonderful instinct for comic absurdity by Gael García Bernal) is, I believe, a study in what happens when someone is driven by pure artistic creativity. Stephane is very much a child trapped in a man?s body. And as such, he?s very good at demanding love, not very good at giving. And hence, he?s not very good at sustaining a long-term relationship. To do that, one needs steadfastness and faithfulness, an even keel. If you?re all steadfast and no creativity, you?re simply boring. So how do you find a balance between creativity and steadfastness? To answer that question, you need to see creativity as not absolute (it?s just me and my creation), but as creativity that is performed in the context of God?s creativity, and therefore bounded by his rules. In other words, contrary to the popular conception, creativity can?t and shouldn?t stand by itself. It needs to express itself in other-centered love. Otherwise, it becomes self-absorbed. If this isn?t making much sense to you, go and watch the film, and then come back and read these words again, and you?ll see what I mean. That is the central issue that the film deals with, I believe. And be warned: though Stephane is very much like a child, the other characters in the film use language that is not suitable for children.

The School of Rock. (2003). Directed by Richard Linklater (who also did the brilliant Waking Life ? see below). I will never use this movie for my movie discussion nights. Why? Because I work with college students and young adults. But if I had a high-school/middle-school youth group, this would be a very interesting movie to watch. The hyperactive Jack Black (one of my friends suggested that he needs to go on Ritalin) plays Dewey Finn, a frustrated rock ?n? roll guitarist. In order to pay the rent, he poses as a substitute teacher at a prestigious private elementary school and discovers there the makings of an awesome rock band. I can?t say much more without spoilers galore, but suffice it to say that Dewey shows the kids and conservative parents a thing or two, and learns something about himself (though this part of the character arc is left somewhat underdeveloped). You know: standard Hollywood comedy material. But what makes this movie of interest as possible movie discussion night material is its take on what makes rock ?n? roll worthwhile. Believe it or not, Dewey does a decent job articulating a coherent philosophy of rock (for example, how rock expresses rebellion against ?The Man,? i.e. oppressive authority, and the freedom and power that comes from such artistic expression). There?s even a scene before the all-important premier of his new band when Dewey leads the kids in a prayer to the ?God of Rock.? The prayer raises some interesting theological questions: Is the God of the Bible also the ?God of Rock?? Before you answer ?Of course not, don?t be silly!? consider: Wasn?t Jesus in some senses also a rebel against oppressive authority (whether it was the scribes and Pharisees, or against Satan?s kingdom)? Don?t the minor prophets express God?s heart when they rage against unjust kings? The real question, then, is this: In what ways does School of Rock understand something good in rock ?n? roll (something that reveals God himself) and in what ways do they just get it wrong (and so reveal something of the sinful heart of rock). That could be a really good conversation.

Shipping News. (2001). Directed by Lasse Hallström (who also directed Cider House Rules, What?s Eating Gilbert Grape, and more recently Chocolat). Kevin Spacey, Cate Blanchett and Julianne Moore all give stellar performances in this tale of finding your place in the world by coming home (in this case, home is a barren, cold place in Nova Scotia). I found Blanchett particularly striking as an evil, sexual temptress who entangles the hero early in the film ? This is the same woman who was Galadriel!?!). But it?s really Kevin Spacey?s film, a coming of age film for a lost, wounded adult. It?s somewhat slowly paced, and feels very barren at times (but, come on, the director?s Swedish ? what do you expect from the land of Bergman?). Themes include facing your past and getting free from it, finding your place in the world, there?s a kind of acceptance of the supernatural (albeit a New Agey one), how to find hope in a barren world, etc.

Shrek. (2001). Directed by Andrew Adamson and Vicky Janson, adapted from the book by William Steig (the iconoclastic children?s book author). A very funny, very acerbic animated feature that

turns fairy tale conventions on their head while still retaining the heart of a fairy tale. Eddie Murphy?s voice for the Donkey constitutes the best work he?s done in years. Themes to discuss include telling the truth, forgiveness (?friends forgive each other? Donkey reminds Shrek), and unconditional acceptance of others who are different. In fact, that?s one of the most interesting oppositions in the movie: the diminutive prince?s desire for perfection is a sort of fascism vs. this motley fairy-tale group of freaks who support each other (and which one is the Church more like ? a group of perfection-obsessed fascists, or a group of messed up freaks who need and support each other? Not an easy question to answer).

Shrek 2. (2004). Directed by Andrew Adamson (who also co-wrote the script), Kelly Asbury and Conrad Vernon. The other scriptwriters were Joe Stillman, J. David Stem and David Weiss. I think this might be the first true sequel that gets a mention in the ?Movie Night Kit.? Yes, there?s plenty of juvenile, gross humor. And yes, there are plenty of clever references to other movies. But in addition to all the regulars, they have Puss in Boots, played to the hilt by Antonio Bandaras (who knew he could do comedy?). What I really liked about this bizarre fairy-tale was that the happily-ever-after often includes marital problems, problems with in-laws, etc. In other words, it gave a realistic picture of what marriage can be like, especially for newly-weds: they can be ogres. The film is really about change ? how can we change for the ones we love? I don?t think it?s any accident that fairy-tales (this one included) look to some outside source for change (a wave of a magic wand, a magic potion, a kiss from a princess, etc.). That?s actually a very Christian understanding of change: it doesn?t happen because we try hard, but because there?s some power outside of us that causes us to change. And when you consider that a lot of that change is linked with another theme ? that of unconditional acceptance ? well, you can see that there?s a lot to talk about. Another thing I really liked about Shrek 2 is that it took aim at the image-obsessed Disney mythology (see, for example, Fairy Godmother?s Beauty and the Beast-esque song about half-way through the film). It?s no accident that the Kingdom of Far, Far Away is modeled on Hollywood. For all its rudeness, there?s a lot of gospel in Shrek 2.

Sideways. (2004). Directed and co-written by Alexander Payne (who also directed About Schmidt) from the Rex Pickett novel. Paul Giamatti is getting some killer roles lately, and this is, after American Splendor, his best role yet. But really, this is an ensemble piece, and all four leads are outstanding. It?s the story of two middle-aged friends, Miles and Jack, who spend a week together in the California wine country before Jack?s wedding. Miles, played by Giamatti, is a wine connoisseur (read: wine snob), and he wants to explore vineyards and have a fairly quiet week. Jack has other plans. He wants to have a wild sexual experience before he gets married. And I won?t tell you anymore, because that would spoil it. What makes this a great movie night movie is that you have two clear examples of idolatry, of how people use creation in place of God to worship and give their lives meaning. For Miles, it?s wine (there?s a beautiful scene where he waxes poetic on the virtues of pinot noir). For Jack, it?s women and sex. And you get an idea of how destructive these idols can be (you always pay a price for worshipping the creature instead of the Creator). And, of course, true love comes to save the day at the end (another idol, what I call the ideology of romance). Anyway, I hope I haven?t given too much away. But it?s a very funny, very moving film, well written, and well worth seeing. Be forewarned: There are some sex scenes and some nudity (not surprising if one of the main characters idolizes sex). There is one scene with full frontal male nudity, not in a sexual context, but if you?re queasy about that, be prepared with the fast-forward button or skip this one altogether. But I?d think twice about skipping it altogether. This one?s a keeper.

Sixth Sense. (1999). An earlier movie from writer/director M. Night Shyamalan about a kid (played by the really spooky Haley Joel Osment) who sees dead people, and who gets help from a therapist played by Bruce Willis. It may not be possible to show because so many people have already seen the surprise ending, but it?s still a powerful movie. Themes include the unseen world around us (spirituality in general), grief and loss, the need for resolution and reconciliation, trust, lots of good stuff.

Sling Blade. (1996). This is a wonderful film (I know, I know. I'm starting to sound like Gene Shallit, but I only show really good films). Billy Bob Thornton wrote, directed and starred in this film about Karl Childers, a mentally handicapped man who committed murder in his childhood and is released from a mental hospital after 25 years. Karl wanders back to his hometown and becomes involved in

a very troubled family. Thornton is compelling as Karl, with good performances all around (even from Dwight Yoakam as the abusive redneck boyfriend of the mom of the boy Karl befriends). The cinematography is splendid, and the soundtrack (by Daniel Lanois, one of my favorite guitar players) is perfect, atmospheric, understated. A great movie for discussing ethical themes (Carl has a big ethical choice to make at the end of the film), and themes of fatherhood (that keeps coming up in these movies, doesn't it?). My students had a really hard time understanding the English because of the deep Southern accents, but native speakers should have no problem. It has no screen violence, despite the subject matter.

Spanglish. (2004). Written and directed by James L. Brooks (closely associated with The Simpsons and he directed Jerry Maguire). This is just a sweet movie, with a surprisingly good performance from Adam Sandler as John Clasky, a chef who leads (sort of) a family of rich, white people who take on a Hispanic maid named Flor, played by the lovely Paz Vega. Tea Leone is wonderful as John?s über-neurotic wife. When we did this movie, we talked about language and translation problems (something my non-native English-speaking students could relate to ? though they all agreed that Flor learns English way too quickly). We talked about mother-daughter relationships (Flor?s daughter figures prominently in the script), as well as child-rearing strategies. We talked about marriage and betrayal. There?s a lot you can talk about in this film. And it?s a fun, and good film. Not great, but good.

Spirited Away. (2001). Originally entitled Sen to Chihiro no kamikakushi. Written and directed by the master of Japanese animation, Hayao Miyazaki. The animation alone makes this worth seeing. It has some disturbing images, so perhaps not for very small children, but it is a movie that?s safe for children (my youngest watched it, and she was five at the time). It?s about a ten-year-old girl named Chihiro, how she must rescue her parents from the spirit world, and how she matures in the process. There are many themes worthy of discussion. Identity plays a big part in the story ? Chihiro forgets her own name, and finds power in remembering who she really is (close to the Christian theme of remembering your true identity in Christ). Greed and the spiritual and ecological consequences of a consumer-oriented society are also examined (and how to free oneself from that through selflessness). There?s a wonderful character in the movie who has no identity, and can only gain one through other people?s greed. Selflessness ultimately defeats him, and redeems him. So there?s lots of connections with the Christian worldview, though lots of differences, too. Dualism runs through the film (as they do through other Miyazaki films, and Asian religions and cultures in general) ? there is a set of twins, sets of twos throughout the film. Even the bad guys have a dual nature. That would be worth discussing ? does everything have a dual nature (for example, is evil just another face of good? Or is there a real difference?). Anyway, it?s a delightful film. And I really liked the musical score as well.

The Station Agent. (2003). Written and directed by Thomas McCarthy. This is an off-beat little movie about a dwarf named Fin (played with a surprising intensity by Peter Dinklage) who simply wants to be left alone. He moves to what seems to be a remote location in rural NJ (yes, there is such a place), only to find that he, well, not too give too much away, but he isn?t exactly left alone. Rather, he finds himself getting intertwined with some of the people living there. I liked a lot of things about this movie. From the first shot to the last, the filmmaker wants to give you Fin?s perspective, his take on life. You see how everyday is a series of little humiliations he must endure. You understand him. I also liked the way relationships complicate things for him. This is a great movie for talking about friendship, what it means. It means sharing interests (Fin is really into trains, so his friend starts getting into trains). It means pursuing others for their good, sometimes when they don?t want to be pursued. It means becoming vulnerable, opening yourself up to being hurt. You don?t have to think too hard to see the parallels with Christ, who came down to where we were, pursued us, became vulnerable, open to being hurt, etc. Puts a whole new spin on ?What a Friend We Have in Jesus,? doesn?t it. I also liked how this group of friends is each so odd, the types that don?t fit in, and so they surround and protect each other (and don?t we all feel like we don?t fit in, that we?d like others to accept us simply for who we are? ? That?s what the Church should be). Watching these relationships form is what makes this movie worth watching. Plus, it?s pretty funny at times. Plus, it has a really nice, bluesy soundtrack.

Stranger Than Fiction. (2006). Directed by Marc Forster, but the real find here is the screenwriter Zach Helm (his first major film script!). This is the story of Harold Crick (played very well by Will

Farrell), an IRS auditor addicted to routine and counting, who finds that he is a character in someone else?s novel. I can?t say more without spoiling the movie, but even saying that much should tell you that there are themes to be discussed. As far as films that lend themselves to discussing themes that lead to the Christian worldview, I consider this movie to be low-hanging fruit. Why? Because it has to do with a character in a story in search of the story?s author, trying to decide whether this author is writing his story wisely, at what price is he willing to follow the author?s script ? things that raise the possibility about talking about our Author and his wisdom. Plus, the final words of the author at the end of the movie are worth discussing (but I can?t tell you what they are without giving it away). For those of you who are concerned about language, there is some profanity, and there is one mild sex scene and some mild nudity. Other than that, it?s pretty unoffensive. And it?s a very funny and touching movie. And Emma Thompson is simply fantastic as the neurotic novelist, as is Dustin Hoffman as the brilliant and eccentric English prof. It?s become one of my faves.

A Streetcar Named Desire. (1951). Directed by the legendary director, Elia Kazan, as an adaptation of Tennessee William?s classic play. What can I say? It?s a classic, a must-see. Brando and Leigh?s performance (as Stanley and Blanche) are magnetic. Kim Hunter was pretty darn good, too, as was Karl Malden. Just a magnificent production, and great for a movie night. And it?s given American culture some of its most enduring lines: ?I?ve always depended on the kindness of strangers.? ?You?re not the gentleman I was expecting.? And of course, ?STELLAAAAAA!!!!? The story (for those who *gasp* haven?t yet seen it) centers on a couple living in a New Orleans slum. The wife (Stella, played by Kim Hunter) has a sister (named Blanche) who, for unknown reasons, has come to live with them for a time. Stella?s husband, the brutish Stanley, has an animal magnetism which both attracts and repels the refined Blanche. Stanley, for his part, wants to bring Blanche down to earth, violently, if necessary. And Stella is caught in the middle. Tensions build in the hot Louisiana summer, until things come to a breaking point.

What to talk about in a movie night? Everything: the setting, a cramped apartment in the New Orleans slums, is for Tennessee Williams a metaphor for the decadence of the soul, trapped by its own desires. Characters: Stanley is a man driven by appetite and the wish to be master of his own domain. Blanche is a woman with dirty secrets, trapped by desires she can?t fully control, for whom refinement and culture are a way of hypocritically asserting her own superiority. Stella is a woman who is sometimes beaten by Stanley, but always returns because she, too, is trapped by desire. These are characters worth discussing, not as a way of seeing them as wretched and lost. Rather, isn?t it true that there is a bit of Stanely or Blanche or Stella in us? We also talked about the plot, and how there is for Blanche a chance for redemption. But to obtain that redemption, her boyfriend (Mitch, played by Malden) would have to love her sacrificially, overlooking her dirty past. In other words, Mitch has to be Christ for her if she is to be ?saved.? I can?t say much more without spoiling the movie, but it?s a powerful moment, and a great way to talk about what real, Christ-like love looks like. See the movie, and don?t be put off by the age ? this one is timeless. One word of caution: See the director?s cut. This movie was made at the height of the Hays Code and the Catholic Legion of Decency, and the original theatrical release censored the movie in ways that make it far less effective as a film. Get the original director?s cut. There is a 2-disc DVD set that is just wonderful which has the director?s cut and a lot of interesting documentaries as well.

There Will Be Blood. (2007). Directed and written by one of my favorites: Paul Thomas Anderson. The best way to describe this film is "unrelenting." It is a character study of Daniel Plainview, a prospector turned oil-man at the turn-of-the-century, the infancy of the oil industry (Daniel Day Lewis won an Oscar for his performance, and it really is his movie). Plainview is uncompromising in his pursuit of wealth and power. As he says mid-way through the film, "I have a competition in me. I want no one else to succeed." And he will run over any that he perceives as opposing him. One figure who does is the leader of a the Church of the Third Revelation, Eli Sunday. Both are compelling figures as they butt heads; both are merciless, in their own ways. In this way, Anderson is asking his audience to choose: the powerful mysteries of religion or the rational and practical power of industry. Neither seems all that inviting, because both are ultimately about one thing: money. And the pursuit of it, and what it represents (power, achievement, ego) drains the humanity and mercy out of life. You can see this especially in the relationship that Plainview has with his adopted son, H.W. But I won't go into detail. See it. It is brilliant as it is brutal (so not for the kids). And be prepared for the very unusual, unrelenting score by Johnny Greenwood. It gives you a doorway into the emptiness and hunger that is Daniel's soul. Emotionally exhausting, but well worth it, and worth discussing.

Three Colors Trilogy. (1993-94). Original title: Trois Coleurs: Blue, Blanc et Rouge. Directed by the great Krzysztof Kieslowski, and written by him and his equally great collaborator, Krzysztof Piesiewicz. This is a series of three films named after the three colors of the French flag, Blue, White and Red. Each of the colors stands for a virtue prized by the French Revolution, liberté, égalité, and fraternité (or freedom, equality, and brotherhood). And Kieslowski, as he so often does, poses a question that drives each film: Is this a virtue that we truly want?

In Blue, Juliette Binoche plays a woman who has the chance to be truly free. She loses her husband and daughter, and because she finds the emotional pain unbearable, she simply walks away from her old life, and from all significant human connection. But the point of the film is that human connections start finding her. Kieslowski?s point is that we are not made to have absolute freedom. We were made for connection, for each other. It is a spare and emotionally raw film, but visually stunning (Kieslowski had a knack for finding great cinematographers). It is a strong, strong film.

I?m not going to say too much about White because I don?t believe it represents Kieslowski?s best work. The theme is equality, and it is a black comedy about a man who is unjustly treated by his ex-wife, and he gets the chance to turn the tables and treat her with ?equality.? And again, Kieslowski is asking the question whether we really desire that kind of equality. But comedy is not Kieslowski?s forte. Comedy tends towards exteriority, and Kieslowski is at his best when he is scrutinizing the interior life of his characters. We didn?t do this one for a movie night.

In Red, Kieslowski examines community. The story centers around a Swiss model named Valentine, played by Irene Jacob, and her relationship with a retired judge. I can?t say more than that, or I?ll give away too much of the plot. What I can say is that they have an . . . unusual relationship, but one that reveals much about what relationship means. You?ll have to trust me on that one. By the end of the film, the question that drove this film (Do we really want community?) is answered affirmatively (unlike the other two films). And you can tell from the film how important he feels community and relationship really is. The emptiness and coldness that he explored in Blue is replaced by the warmth and light of human connection. You can even see it in the way he uses light ? lots of warm reds and browns. It?s a beautifully shot, beautifully written, and beautifully acted film.

Both Blue and Red made excellent movie nights. There may be a little nudity and sensuality, but there is little offensive material here. However, the themes are disturbing, and these are not films made for children or adolescents.

Three-Iron. (2004). Original title: Bin-jip. This fascinating Korean film was written and directed by Ki-Duk Kim, who is a talent worth keeping an eye out for. It is a beautifully shot film, and very quiet. The main character doesn?t utter a line for the entire time, and the female lead only utters three words. It is a story about a man who breaks into people?s homes while they are on vacation and so inhabits their lives their lives (wears their clothes, eats their food, cleans up and takes care of house plants, fixes broken things in their apartments, etc.). The story really takes off when he breaks into a home where he discovers a battered woman trapped in a loveless marriage. And I?m not saying any more, because that would spoil the film. But you should see it. One of the things we talked about was the longing for community and the twisted way this man went about getting it by living in other people?s homes ? it?s sort of getting close to them, but in a way that invades their space, but invades it to make things there better. That led us to the question of whether we live lives that are too separate from each other, and where can we find community? (One of the things I didn?t say is that is why we have movie nights: to defeat the distance between us, to create community in an otherwise individualistic culture). Another interesting thing to talk about is the role of golfing in the movie (both the main character and the abusive husband are excellent golfers, and golfing becomes a tool of violence in the movie). All in all, a brilliant and thought-provoking film.

Three Seasons. (1999). Directed by Tony Bui and written by him and his brother Timothy Bui. A wonderful joint US-Vietnamese production about four different stories about people searching for something in and around Hanoi, and how their lives intersect. Some of the most beautiful cinematography I've ever seen. Carolyn and I saw it as a date night in Vietnamese with Czech subtitles and a little English. We didn't catch much dialogue, but we didn't care -- it was just so gorgeous to look at. Rumor has it that Harvey Keitel (who plays an ex-GI who returns to make his

peace with Vietnam) rescued this film (he is the patron saint of obscure filmmakers). I think it?s a crime this movie has never been released on DVD. This film is great for talking about themes of searching and sacrificial love (there is an exquisitely beautiful love story that reflects the gospel better than anything I?ve seen in the movies). One of my absolute favorites. As of February 2005, the movie is available on DVD, but beware ? it?s only available in a ?full screen version? (so it doesn?t keep the theatrical release?s aspect ratio). More troubling is the fact that the DVD is manufactured only in Japan and Korea. I?ve got a copy of the Japanese DVD, and the English subtitles are occasionally weird and sometimes disappears altogether. I?m not sure about the Korean release.

To End All Wars. (2001). Directed by David L. Cunningham. This movie got a very limited release, but it?s still worth watching. It?s adapted from Ernest Gordon?s autobiographical account of Scottish POWs and their experiences in a Japanese prison camp. The script was written by Brian Godawa (yes, the same one who wrote the book on how to watch movies from a Christian perspective that I recommended a few pages ago). The story does a good job of comparing and contrasting two different worldviews ? the Christian (with its values of mercy for the weak, sacrifice for the undeserving) versus Bushido, the Japanese code of honor (with its values of shame and ostracization or punishment of the weak). Be warned, however: the film is extremely violent, and there are a couple scenes of torture that are very intense (not for the kids); and the film gets very close to evangelism, as the Christian values are proclaimed very clearly. That?s not always a bad thing, but it can also cause resentment if your guests think that you?ve invited them to a sermon and not an open discussion. For that reason, I?m going to hold off on showing this one until I can show it as an example of Christianity in conjunction with my ?Comparative Religions? class. If you choose this one, you ought at least to tell your guests that this story is told from a Christian perspective.

True Grit. (2010). Directed by and adapted for the screen by Joel and Ethan Cohen (these two have, in the past few years, been making the best movies of their careers - they are at the height of their powers right now. It's a beautiful thing to see: good movies coming out of Hollywood). It's a remake of the famous 1969 John Wayne film, which itself was an adaptation of Charles Portis' novel. The plot concerns Mattie, a 14-year-old girl who takes it upon herself to avenge her father's murder by hiring the meanest U.S. Marshall she can get: the irrascible Rooster Coghburn. Even though I've not seen the 1969 version, I can confidently say that the Cohen Brothers' version is more brutal and surreal (at least at points), and less sentimental. And I very much doubt that the cinematography can match the brilliance of Roger Deakins' work in this film (still makes me mad that the film at least didn't win the Cinematography Oscar). This is a wonderful film to look at - composition, lighting, everything is gorgeous. When you watch it, pay attention also to the score. The film keeps referencing the Christian hymn, "Leaning On the Everlasting Arms." And as the adventure unfolds, complete with danger (Mattie does have a way of putting herself in harm's way), the score touches upon that theme. It made me wonder: What are these arms that the characters are leaning on in the midst of brutal and seemingly random events? In a way, the Cohen brothers are making us reflect upon Providence within a world where God's hand is exceedingly hard to recognize. There is a really good essay written by the literary theorist Stanley Fish in the *New York Times* that explores these themes in the movie. You can find it here:
http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2010/12/27/narrative-and-the-grace-of-god-the-new-true-grit/
[3] I don't agree with everything he says (he rather makes Mattie out to be someone who believes in the course of divine providence despite the evidence, wheras I think there are subtle hints that God is watching out for Mattie in the film, not least of which by providing her with Rooster and the other Marshall, LaBoeuf). But it's still an excellent article and well worth a read. When this comes out on DVD, we are definitely going to have this - there is a lot to discuss, and it's my vote for the best-crafted movie in 2010 (*The King's Speech* didn't come close, in my opinion). The script alone should have gotten an Oscar (the Cohen Brothers have a wonderful ear for period and regional dialects). But, as I said, this is not a movie for everyone. It is brutal. But a great classic Western and a great homage to Westerns (look at the way they edit, using those long, graceful dissolves), while all the while remaining intrinsically a Cohen Brothers' film. I came away smiling and moved.

Truman Show. (1998). Directed by Peter Weir (who also did the recent Master and Commander: The Far Side of the World). Jim Carrey brilliantly portrays Truman Burbank, a man who has been raised within a huge set as the unknowing hero in a 24-hour a day TV show. It?s a great film for

discussing the existentialist view of human freedom. Ed Harris plays Christof, the TV producer, and very thinly veiled God-figure.

Unbreakable. (2000). A very well done movie written and directed by M. Night Shyamalan (starring Bruce Willis and Samuel L. Jackson) about what would happen if there really were a superhero among us. A very un-comic book treatment of the nature of the comic book hero. It was fascinating, and raises some interesting questions about the nature of good and evil, why we long for heroes, as well as some sub-themes about the father-son relationship. Shyamalan?s movies, despite being creepy (he also did Sixth Sense and Signs) always have at their base a concern with family belonging and reconciliation. Plus he always shoots his films in or near Philadelphia, where we lived for eight years, and I always get a kick out of seeing Philly on film.

The Usual Suspects. (1995). Directed by Bryan Singer (who went on to direct the X-Men movies, though this movie is by far his strongest work to date). A wonderful movie, wonderful ensemble acting (the cast includes Stephen Baldwin, Dennis Leary, Kevin Spacey, comedian Kevin Pollak, Benicio Del Toro (see 21 Grams above), Chazz Palminteri, and Gabriel Byrne), and great writing (it won best screenplay at the Oscars that year). It also placed 18th on the imdb.com?s top 250 movies of all time. Themes to discuss: the nature of narrative (and does narrative lie or tell the truth?), and the nature of evil. It?s one of the few films that raises the issue of a personal source of evil without being cliché and two-dimensional. Kaiser Söze as a crime-lord who plays the criminals like a puppet master is a stunning metaphorical representation of how Satan enslaves sinners so that they think they?re doing what they want, all the while dancing to his tune. It?s somewhat violent and has some foul language, but still a great film.

Vanilla Sky. (2001). Directed by Cameron Crowe (of Jerry Maguire fame), and adapted from the 1997 Spanish film Abre Los Ojos. Tom Cruise and Penélope Cruz star (in fact, Penélope Cruz had the same role in the Spanish original). This is, like Matrix, a ?play with your head? type movie that explores the nature of reality, themes of love and obsession, friendship, loss and grief, and the fall of someone who ?has it all.? Without spoiling too much, at the end of the movie Tom Cruise?s character is faced with a choice ? to go on living in a near-perfect dream world or to go into a much harsher, unknown reality. That allowed me to ask the question, ?Which would you choose?? and discuss which was preferable ? a world where all your desires were met, or the real world, and why. A great discussion. Caution: Many folks who have seen both this film and the original Spanish film said that the original was much, much better (I can?t say since I haven?t been able to rent it). If you can get your hands on Abre Los Ojos, do so and watch it before Vanilla Sky. Also, be aware that there is some foul language and nudity. Still, it worked for us.

Vanya on 42nd Street. (1994). Directed by Louis Malle. This is a real actor's movie. No elaborate sets, no music, no fancy lighting or interesting camera work. Just good acting. It's a production of Chekov's play "Uncle Vanya" (updated by the prolific screenwriter David Mamet and Andre Gregory, but sticking very close to the original) put on in an abandoned theater on 42d Street in New York City. The once grand, crumbling interior of the place is the perfect setting for Chekov's work on human depravity and the human condition. Wallace Shawn (he was Vizzini in Princess Bride) plays the lead, and does a darn good job. The only problem was that I kept expecting him to say, "You don't love me? InconCIEVable!" A tale of unrequitted love, betrayal, rage, and other basic elements of 19th century Russian drama (and the human condition). The very last lines of Vanya give a theological interpretation to all that has gone before, and THAT'S a great place to start a discussion.

Vicky Christina Barcelona. (2008). Written and directed by Woody Allen. Not up to the standard of Allen's greatest (*Hannah and Her Sisters* and *Crimes and Misdemeanors*), but still, a decent move with themes well worth discussion. And that's good enough for me when I do a movie night. The movie concerns two college friends who have very different perspectives on love. The engaged Vicky (played by the gorgeous Rebecca Hall) values commitment and stability. The very not-engaged Christina (played by the gorgeous Scarlett Johannson) values passion and change. They spend a summer in beautiful, magical Barcelona. (One of my students commented that it's a very stereotypically exotic Barcelona, but that's exactly the role Barcelona plays in the movie -- a place where anything is possible). During their stay, they meet the dangerously seductive artist, Juan Antonio (played by the gorgeous Javier Bardem -- sensing a theme here?). And, not to give too much away, meeting him sets off a chain of events which will challenge both Vicky's and Christina's

perspectives on love. The movie sets out an argument about love, and gives us two choices for a life of love: choose boring, rigid, safe structure and commitment, or choose unpredictable, chaotic, go-with-the-flow moments of passion. Each has their upside: security for the first, life affirming passion for the other. Each has its downside: boredom, and unrelenting restlessness. Though the movie leaves us undecided about which option is best, it isn't too hard to see which Allen favors (he's got a thing about passion and infidelity).

But it's a false dilemma that depends upon a number of unspoken but powerful presuppositions. First, the movie assumes that desire rules human life (when it beckons, we *must* follow), and that happiness is somehow to be found in gratifying powerful passions, for these give life meaning. All in all, very, very Freudean (not surprising, since Allen has been in psychoanalysis for, what, half a century or more?). But the fact is that human desire is a tricky thing, and is sometimes best served not by following it, but by giving it boudaries. Second, commitment is not a dirty word (the movie -- surprise surprise -- gives us no models of what a good marriage looks like. They are comfortable, safe and passionless. But one thing that any of us who have been married for some time (I've been married 23 years when I wrote this) can affirm is that feelings in a life-long, commited relationship come and go. And further, when the relationship is in a funk and passion is flagging, you can do something about it -- you can love the other person. It's not simply about gratifying myself, but it's about loving the other person, and *therein* lies the arena for passion. Passion doesn't make us victims, or at least, not all the time. Sometimes, human passion responds to *our* beckoning.

The other thing that I should have said, but didn't (it's getting more common that I wake up the day after a movie night and think of all this cool stuff I *should* have said) is that the movie gives these two young women an impossible mission: find true happiness, contentment and fulfillment here on earth. Should we expect perfect happiness, perfect passion, perfect contentment in our lives on earth? Well, if our lives on earth are all that we have, then perhaps yes. But, along with C. S. Lewis, perhaps we can read this lack of perfect fulfillment as an indication that there is something more to human existance than what we experience here on earth, that there is something more that our soul longs for. Each of these young women is searching for heaven on earth, in Barcelona. But heaven doesn't dwell in Barcelona, beautiful and magical as it is. In a fallen world, we can have contentment, but not perfectly. We do our best when we love others selflessly, let the passion come when it may, and be faithful to the One in whom we will find our perfect peace. That's what I *should* have said. Maybe I will, if we watch the film again (in a few years).

Other notes on the film: Penelope Cruz won an Academy Award for best supporting actress for her portrayal of Maria Elena, the brilliant and psychotic ex-wife of Juan Antonio. She deserved it. My biggest gripe about the movie (besides the worldview): every character ends up sounding like Woody Allen, which gives the dialogue an odd, stilted sound. Everybody is psychoanalyzing everything in language that sounds just too clever and academic. Even so, a movie worth watching. Do be aware of there are some discrete sex scenes (no nudity).

Waking Life. (2001). Written and directed by Richard Linklater (who also gave us such Gen-X anthems as *Dazed and Confused* and *Slackers*). Very cool animation (animation was "painted" over live video footage using computers). This may be the perfect movie night movie, because you can discuss any and everything. Ninety percent of the movie consists of short but deep philosophical discussions about the meaning of life. Then again, it may be too much for many viewers to handle. It's a journey of self-discovery for the main character (Wiley Wiggins played by . . . Wiley Wiggins). The key line of the movie (spoken by a pinball-playing character played by the director): "All of time is saying 'No' to God, until you say 'Yes' and open yourself to eternity." Issues to discuss: reality vs. dreams, being a spectator vs. being a participant.

Walk the Line. (2005). Directed by James Mangold, and adapted from Johnny Cash?s own autobiographies, Man in Black and Cash: An Autobiography by Mangold and Gill Dennis. This is the first and definitive bio-pic about Johnny Cash, produced with the creative consultation of his son, John Carter Cash. But what I liked about this one, and what made it more than ?Ray with white people? (Jon Stewart?s memorable line from the 2005 Oscars) was the way it dealt honestly with the struggle of sin, judgmental attitudes, and forgiveness and mercy. When you watch it (if you haven?t already), consider the attitudes of the characters towards Johnny. His father and his first wife give him nothing but disapproval and judgment, driving him further from them. June Carter, who knows

what it is to be a messed-up sinner, gets down on his level, gets her hands dirty lifting Johnny up from the mud. It?s a wonderful picture of the messiness of grace when it is lived out by real people. I know I?m trying to avoid spoilers, but there is one line when Johnny is discussing doing a live prison album (a project that would finally be released as Johnny Cash at Folsom Prison). One record exec complains that Christian church people aren?t going to want him taking his music into a prison. Without missing a beat, Cash retorts, ?Well, then, they ain?t Christian.? That sums up the man, and the movie. Reese Witherspoon deserved the Oscar she won, and any other year, Joaquin would?ve walked away with one, too (but Philip Seymour Hoffman was just too good as in Capote). Well written, well directed, well acted. See it. By the way, after you see the movie, check out Cash?s last music video, his take on Trent Reznor?s (of Nine Inch Nails fame) song ?Hurt.? It is a transcendent video. You should be able to find it on Youtube.com or Google video without too much trouble.

Where the Wild Things Are. (2009). Spike Jonez directs this adaptation of the beloved children's book by Maurice Sendak. In the book, Max gets mad at his mother and travels to a far-away land where he meets monsters and begins a wild rumpus, only to return and get a late supper. All those elements are there, and then some. Max is now an out-of-control child of a single-parent household. The monsters themselves have issues, and look to Max their King to solve them. One even struggles with anger issues, just like Max. The result is a much more complex tableau than the children's book, but without sacrificing the texture of the original. And these issues -- like acting out, acceptance, hurting others, where to draw the line -- make for great conversations. This is a movie I'd heartily recommend for children. Spike Jonez made a movie for kids, but with enough depth to give the grown-ups something to talk about.

The White Countess. (2005). Directed by James Ivory (of the creative cinematic team, Merchant & Ivory), written by Japanese-English novelist and screenwriter Kazuo Ishiguro (most famous for his novel and screenplay, also made into a Merchant & Ivory movie, Remains of the Day). Ralphe Fiennes plays a blind American ex-diplomat, Todd Jackson, who lives in 1930s Shanghai. He has a passion for nightclubs (ironically enough for a blind man, a visionary passion). It is a passion that he shares with a mysterious Japanese friend, Matsuda. He also meets a Russian countess (played by Natasha Richardson) whose family has lived in poverty since having to flee Russia after the Bolshevik revolution in 1917. I can?t say too much more without giving away spoilers. What I can say is that this film is about the fragile nature of human communication and community, of overcoming isolation, becoming vulnerable enough to connect with others. We tend to create our own little perfect worlds that shield us from the hurt that comes with human relationships. This film is ultimately about how those worlds rise and, finally, must fall. It is a beautiful commentary on human existence and how we are made for deep community. This is a film that is marked (as are all Merchant & Ivory productions) by restraint, understatement, and very deliberate pacing. It may feel slow, but your patience will be rewarded. And there is some mild swearing and implied sex, but little else that anyone would find offensive. I?d let my older children (11 and 15) watch it.

Winter Passing. (2005). Written and directed by Adam Rapp. This is, in some ways, a typical indie production: character-driven, quirky, and emotionally cathartic. But it?s also very heartfelt ? the writer really does have empathy for these characters. Zooey Deschanel plays Reese, a troubled actress living in New York (Deschenel has two of the biggest, bluest, most expressive eyes I?ve seen. My wife calls her the female Elijah Wood). Reese is into drugs, loveless sex, even self-wounding. And she is bitter, never talking to her estranged father, a famous writer living in Michigan. After the death of her mother, she is paid by a literary agent to go see her father. And what she finds there is a small community made up of one of her father?s ex-writing students, and a refugee from a Christian rock band (played by Will Ferrell with surprising sensitivity). And in that community, Reese begins to thaw. We discussed the way we are made for community, how it can help us away from isolation and self-destruction. But we also spent some time discussing the Christian rock-refugee, Corbit. Corbit is one of the best portrayals of a genuine Christian I?ve seen in any film (Robert Duvall?s ?Sonny Dewey? might tie for first with Corbit). Corbit is not that bright, not that sure of himself, not that together, but he welcomes Reese into the community. He sees her struggles, but he never judges her, never tries to use her. Rather, he reaches out to her and befriends her. He becomes like the older brother she never had. Anyway, Corbit is the way Christians should be. It?s a very good film. There?s some language, and some sex, so not for children.

Th-th-that's all folks!

About the authors: Ted and Carolyn Turnau love and serve university students through the International Institute for Christian Studies in Prague, Czech Republic. Ted teaches courses on popular culture theory, world religions, and how religion interacts with culture and society at a couple of secular colleges and universities in Prague. Carolyn teaches introduction to the Bible at a local Christian K-12 school and makes chez Turnau into a place of light, warmth, love and food for students and friends. Ted and Carolyn have three children (Roger, 19; Claire, 15; and Ruth, 11) and two cats (Marbles, 7; and Enkidu, 3). If you want to learn more about our ministry, you can contact us through Twitter [[2]).

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