

Advanced Placement English

Mr. Wall

(2010-2011)

The ---- There Are Many Books You Must Read But Movies Are Lovely And Here are Thirty-Five and One Documentary You Must Watch For Your Proper Education To Have Partially Begun, Yes, This Is So ---- List

Action is Eloquence.

Coriolanus, III, ii; Shakespeare

I love stories, and therefore I love literature, and therefore I love good movies. The intimate connection of the three is inescapable.

My Aunt Elsie taught me how to read using *The Catholic Book of Martyrs* and *The Boys' Big Book of Dinosaurs*. Those are the first stories I remember.

My father took me to the movies. Together we watched *The Guns of Navarone*, *The Way the West Was Won* and *Tarzan's Greatest Adventure* (which ends with Sean Connery, in his first movie, drowning in quicksand).

As a boy I loved history, epics, battles, combat, adventure. My imagination filled up with berserk T-Rexes, sieges, charges; with Sam Jaffe as Gunga Din climbing to the top of a minaret in India and blowing the bugle to warn British troops that they were riding into an ambush. In turn, my imagination filled up my heart. Over time, in grade school and high school and into college, this love only deepened and broadened through hundreds of movies and several thousand books. Stories and pictures and excitement all coalesced in me and in some way led me to become an English teacher.

Over thirty-six years I have talked about and taught movies to students, but in late September I decided that I wanted to create a more precise and more descriptive document to introduce our study of motion pictures; thus, the list you have in your hands.

I make no claim that these are the best movies ever made. If you love movies, you have made those lists; they are great fun. No, I wanted to make a list of movies I have grown to love, and that I believe are worthy of your attention. Thus, I have purposely organized this list not by a ranking of best, etc., but by their year of production. I chose movies that will reward serious viewing and analysis and at the same time are thrilling and a joy to watch.

Lord, keep me from recommending movies that will bore. All thirty-six are terrific. Enjoy.

M. J. Wall

The Wizard of Oz, 1939: Children, Musical and Fable. D: Victor Fleming. Starring Judy Garland, Bert Lahr, Ray Bolger, Jack Haley

Even now, 70+ years later, this movie feels fresh. Garland is the perfect American innocent of the time – sweet and quick to regret any hurt she may have caused another but also resourceful, resilient and persevering. Her singing is pure. You believe in Dorothy. The supporting cast is flawless and Bert Lahr's Cowardly Lion steals every scene. This is old Hollywood doing its unmatched best to make joyful, thoroughly professional, mass entertainment. This musical may have the best selection of songs ever put together for one movie. Oh and did I mention the flying monkeys and the little snippet of a chant the Wicked Witch's guards do as they march into her castle? Wonderful.

Casablanca, 1942: War and Romance.

D: Michael Curtiz. Starring Humphrey Bogart, Ingrid Bergman

Bogart was an original on-screen presence. He is not handsome in any traditional way, but he is authentic. His line delivery is so filled with a world-weary confidence. In *Casablanca* he may have given his best performance masked as an American cynic, Rick Blaine, someone who looks out only for Rick, when actually he is an American Romantic, ally of the defeated, an existential hero familiar with sacrifice and the capacity to survive with his integrity intact. This is the best of the wartime love stories because it acknowledges love's transcendent ability to make us better men and women than we thought possible. A tight, memorable script with quotable line after line. Filmed in crisp black and white, the perfect set of hues for this time.

The Third Man, 1949: Film Noir

D. Carol Reed. Starring Orson Welles, Joseph Cotton, Trevor Howard

Begin with the soundtrack – one musical instrument, a zither, creating a weirdly upbeat and disturbing sense of foreboding. The viewer is disoriented before seeing the first tilted frame of a wrecked post-war Vienna inhabited by black-market denizens, Trevor Howard as a cop whose voice tells you he has seen everything, Joseph Cotton as a silly American writer and Orson Welles as a charming monster (his crime is unforgivable). Welles gives one of the great monologues in movie history on the Borgias and this follows his dialogue with Cotton in the giant Ferris wheel where he articulates the ethos of every Luciferean character in books and movies.

The Thing, 1951: Science Fiction

D. Howard Hawks. Starring Kenneth Tobey and Margaret Sheridan

A “B” movie – no big stars, no grand themes, but the best of the post-war sci-fi movies (along with *The Day the Earth Stood Still*, 1951). The setting is isolated, the men forced to rely upon their own devices to fight a terrifying creature who remains mostly off-screen, but we do see what he can do. One image of his capacity for violence has stayed with me for 50 years. This is essentially a movie about can-do American spirit; even while fighting the creature the characters crack wise.

Rear Window, 1954: Thriller and Murder

D. Alfred Hitchcock. Starring Grace Kelly and Jimmy Stewart

Hitchcock subverts the comfortable idea of neighborliness and the illusory intuition we like to believe that suggests that all goes well behind those neighbors' doors when they close. Stewart plays an injured and emotionally detached photographer (he resists Grace Kelly, arrgh!), confined to a wheelchair, who observes (spies) on his New York neighbors and discovers that shocking, sad, perhaps murderous actions are being taken. We join him in his voyeurism – we get to enjoy his point-of-view, his access to their private moments. This is another of Hitchcock's sly conceits. Hitchcock is unparalleled in ratcheting up suspense until we cannot bear to watch. Raymond Burr is very good in the role of the plodding, hulking neighbor who has something to hide.

Night of the Hunter, 1955: Fable, Drama

D. Charles Laughton. Starring Robert Mitchum, Lillian Gish

Lillian Gish, beautiful as a silent screen heroine, is heroic in *Night* as the antithesis of Robert Mitchum's psychopathic hunter of children.

The Searchers, 1956: Western

D. John Ford. Starring John Wayne and Jeffery Hunter

Even at his hammiest, a parody of his screen character, as Genghis Khan in *The Conqueror*, you cannot take your eyes off him. He is an underrated actor. Sometimes, as Ethan Edwards for example, a racist, obsessed with pure blood and determined to find his captive niece and the Indian killers of his brother's family, he is a force. Imagine him blown up to 20 feet tall on the huge movie screens of the 50's and you have a genuinely mythic persona. John Ford's landscapes, his compositions and his sense of pacing are masterful. The film ends with one of the most bittersweet images of homecoming in movies -- so sad and inevitable. But you also have the chance to see Wayne, in the final sequence of his hunt, wearing the coolest, biggest, whitest cowboy hat ever. It just kicks. I want that hat.

Lawrence of Arabia, 1962: Epic and Bio-Pic

D. David Lean. Starring Peter O'Toole, Omar Sharif, Alec Guinness and Anthony Quinn

Promise yourself that you will, someday, see this movie at a Revival House on a big screen. No one has shot landscapes like David Lean in this movie, ever (Terrence Malick might be the only director who has come close). No home screen can do justice to the sweep and sense of depth of his desert scenes, and that sense of the desert is central to understanding the psyche of T.E. Lawrence (google him – astonishing man!) as played by Peter O'Toole in a great performance, based as much on withholding and internalizing emotions as on expressing them. This is a long picture but it never flags. Its energy is constant, its battle scenes both complex and stirring, and yet it is filled with small moments that are emotionally true and visually perfect. I do not like to use the word *beautiful* very often because the word has been so corrupted, but this movie is a *thing* made beautiful, a treasure.

The Godfather, 1972; Godfather II, 1974: Gangster

D. Francis Ford Coppola. Starring Al Pacino, Marlon Brando, James Caan, Robert Duvall, John Cazalle, Diane Keaton

These two movies are proof of the existence of God (I do not speak blasphemously here). They are miraculous. *The Godfather* does not have 1 wasted minute. Working against great pressure from studio heads, Coppola brought on Pacino and Brando, both of whom were hungry for success and thus very serious in applying their craft to their characters. Pacino gives what might be the greatest performance by a male actor in a movie; his Michael Corleone evolves through the most subtle of gestures and through silences and stillness into a hero-villain. Pacino creates an acute sense of Michael's interior life using a minimalist approach to character formation. Brando's Don Vito is the supreme realist who also, somehow, preserves the love of his family. *The Godfather* is a tighter, better paced movie than *GF II*, but together they are the best 6 ½ hours of cinematic American storytelling, a narrative that, with time and repeated viewings, grows more powerful and more resonant.

Chinatown, 1974: Film Noir

D. Roman Polanski. Starring Jack Nicholson, Faye Dunaway, John Huston

Film Noir: Betrayal. This is the relationship that seems the best way to quickly describe this genre. A man, usually, who either is a criminal or who skirts the edge of the law, gets into a situation, becomes part of a plan, goes deeper into an investigation than he anticipated. There's a woman involved somewhere. She tells her story and lures him in deeper. Then it all blows up; he doesn't see it coming. He is blinded by his love or lust for her, by misbegotten loyalty or by his own sense of honor. Jake Gittes, Nicholson's character, is a

private investigator in LA in the 30's who makes his living on adultery/divorce cases. Evelyn Mulwray comes into his life and then comes murder and threats and a sliced nose and stolen water and a sociopath, Noah Cross (played by John Huston) who is a demon. This is a great movie, pitch-perfect in dialogue and plotting. The LA atmosphere is stark and beautiful and filled with a corrosive darkness while bathed in all LA's glorious light.

Jaws, 1975: Drama, Summer Thriller

D. Steven Spielberg. Starring Roy Scheider, Richard Dreyfuss, Robert Shaw

Forget the shark. Forget its sometimes clumsy appearance. Keep your eye on the idea of the shark and on the superb performances given by the three leads. Spielberg does not show us the shark until more than ½ way through the movie, but ahh, its suggestion, its attacks, the mayhem that surrounds its threat and the response of three, essentially flawed but good men to its terror make this movie the best of the summer, thriller blockbusters, even now, 35 years later. The leads are not throw-away characters, stick figures to be pushed out of the way when the special-effects crank up. They are funny and fully realized. I especially love Shaw, the Ahab figure, who in one mesmerizing monologue told late at night in a tense silence reminds us that at their best great storytelling and movies inhabit exactly the same space.

Network, 1976: Drama

D. Sidney Lumet. Starring Faye Dunaway, William Holden, Peter Finch, Robert Duvall

The TV, Radio and Internet Media seems to have lost any sense of coherence; politics has become a link in celebrity trash journalism where facts no longer matter; all that matters is who has the loudest megaphone, who can lie most shamelessly and who has the snarkiest attitude. *Network* shows you how it began. Set in the 70's, another wretched era in our history, the movie concerns the malign power of TV networks, corporate cut-throats, and the price in humanity we pay for buying into their demeaning illusions. Peter Finch is unforgettable as the news anchor whose descent into insanity is played for ratings, but whose ferocious cry of "I'm mad as hell and I'm not gonna take it anymore," seems to never age. William Holden plays the newsman who still wants to believe in the integrity of his profession but who is being pushed aside by rising sociopaths as played by Dunaway and Duvall. In a deep sense, this is a horror film about the real world, but one made with great energy and panache.

The Deer Hunter, 1978: War and Drama

D. Michael Cimino. Starring Robert DeNiro, Meryl Streep, Christopher Walken, John Cazale, John Savage

This movie has the single-most wrenching, suspenseful scene of any of these films – Walken and DeNiro and the Russian roulette contest while being held by the Viet-Cong. Even though I know what's coming, I still grip the chair and fully merge with DeNiro's controlled rage. What riches are here – DeNiro's hunting sequences, the marriage in the Russian Orthodox church, Walken's astonishing boyishness, the final scene in the bar when the surviving characters sing, watching Streep emerge as a star of boundless talent, Deniro's character's absolute integrity, courage and stoicism. This is a movie to break your heart. This is a movie to make you angry. You gain a sense of what we have lost when you watch this – those steel towns, the way of life that gave them such vibrancy, the innocent patriotism of its young men and women.

Alien, 1979: Science Fiction

D. Ridley Scott. Starring Sigourney Weaver, Tom Skerritt, John Hurt, Harry Dean Stanton, Yaphet Kotto, Ian Holm

Has there ever been a more terrifying beast than this insect-like, penetrative, almost indestructible creature – a true denizen of our nightmare subconscious, a vision of absolute natural nihilism? Arrayed against it is a rag-tag assortment of tired corporate workers (a terrible vision of corporate morality in all the *Alien* pictures). Scott knows how to make you jump, but also how to make space-living real. No gleaming Star-Wars gadgetry here – just harsh lighting, mucky looking food, disgruntled mechanics, a captain tired of it all. Then comes the distress signal (one must answer a distress signal, right?) and very bad episodes, one after another and all are superbly terrifying. Sigourney Weaver made her career with this movie as the smart, resourceful heroine.

ET, 1982; Children and Fable

D. Steven Spielberg. Starring Henry Thomas, Drew Barrymore, Dee Wallace

Spielberg's versatility is the mark of some kind of genius. Three movies on this list and all three are extravagantly singular (although both *Jaws* and *Shindler's List* contain ferocious beasts); *ET* is a fable, the creature given a child-like shape, anthropomorphized, innocent, needing protection, yet wise and a being that draws out the best in the children who rescue him. An often faceless, emotionally detached, techno-military-science complex serves as the villain against whom the children must rally. Henry Thomas' young boy, the hero of the movie, possesses all those qualities you want your own child to find – perseverance, ingenuity, a streak of rebellion, deep kindness, resilience, sacrificial love. The ending always moves me no matter how often I see it. I'm happy that Spielberg never made a sequel (he was offered gigabytes of money to do so); this is the way friends should part.

The Right Stuff, 1983: Drama

D. Philip Kaufman. Starring Scott Glenn, Ed Harris, Sam Shepard, Fred Ward, Dennis Quaid

Technology also has its romance, especially when it is tied to cowboy daring. The jets and missiles in *The Right Stuff* blow up, spin out of control, kill men, leave families fatherless and create blistering suspense. The men who pilot those vehicles (and their wives) offer the audience a flawed heroism, sometimes flamboyant as in Quaid's *Gordo Cooper* but most often underplayed, and edged with a tough humor and quiet as found in Sam Shepard's *Chuck Yeager* (the hero of the movie, the pilot with the most righteous stuff) or Scott Glenn's *Alan Shepard*. The conflict between a human being's skill and the very conscious drive of technicians to make that skill obsolete serves as the heart of the movie. The ending, a series of cross-cuts between the Mercury Astronauts watching a stripper and Chuck Yeager going up again to challenge the limits of his god-like talent with a jet is sublime. This is a great, underappreciated, thoroughly American film. Sam Shepard is utterly natural on screen; he seems like the essence of everything we want American manhood to be at its best.

Witness, 1985: Police and Murder and Romance

D. Peter Weir. Starring Harrison Ford, Kelly McGillis, Lukas Haas, Josef Sommer, Danny Glover

Philadelphia as the 7th circle of Dante's *Inferno* and Lancaster County's Amish farms as the upper reaches of Paradise – as they were putting this movie together in the cutting room, someone had to make that connection. *Witness* turns the notion of the police as the keepers of order and our safety on its head. A terrible murder, corruption, innocence caught in the middle of a foreign world, one lone officer assisted by a community that sees peace as necessary to its collective character – these are the components of a tight, suspenseful police drama. In movie after movie Ford is so good at portraying the man caught by a dilemma who must think on his feet to survive. His budding romance with McGillis' widow seems reasonable; the director stays true to its contradictions -- a feat in itself considering the temptations to sentimentality that must have intruded. The barn raising scene provides about 7 minutes of the closest we get to a realistic utopian vision in this life; however the barn sequence that closes the movie is a counterpoint. It shows us how evil cannot be avoided but must be confronted.

Hoosiers, 1986: Sports and Drama

D. David Anspaugh. Starring Gene Hackman, Barbara Hershey, Dennis Hopper

If you have ever played on a high school team, if you have ever shoveled pot-holed b-ball courts in the winter so that you could play with cut-off gloves and red faces, if you have ever loved the feeling of your body in movement, then this is the dream of a picture for you. How can we not love a movie where high school kids play out of desire and heart, where a man moving into deeper middle age yearns for redemption, where the desire to do one thing perfectly right is paramount, where an entire middle-of-nowhere town begins to giddily suspect that history may actually be on their side? Hackman's gruff, scary intensity, a constant in any serious role he takes on, works even better when his character knows that he has to control it.

Bull Durham, 1988: Sports and Comedy

D. Ron Shelton, Starring Kevin Costner, Susan Sarandon, Tim Robbins

This is sexy, smart movie that treats its audience like adults. Its comedy arises out of the traditions and tropes common to sports and romantic relationships. Kevin Costner, who can be self-important and pseudo-serious on screen, is well-cast as a catcher nearing the end of his baseball career, one where he has never made it to the "Show". Tim Robbins as *Nuke LaLoosh* (a great name) is very funny as the everyman of all those talented knucklehead athletes we have watched over the years. Oh Susan Sarandon, oh Susan, spectacular Susan....sigh... serves as the linchpin of the plot, the prize. She alone makes for a happy ending.

Glory, 1989: War and Drama

D. Edward Zwick. Starring Matthew Broderick, Morgan Freeman, Denzel Washington, Cary Elwes, Andre Braugher

Let us acknowledge the emotional power of film. This movie makes me love my country more deeply. *Glory* is the story of the 54th Massachusetts, the first African-American regiment of the Civil War. It is the story of their training and their actions in combat. Freeman, Washington and Braugher's characters are so authentic, played out of such deep feeling, that they sweep you into their transformation, into their ascent from former slaves into free men who pick up arms to free more men and women. It stirs the heart.

Matthew Broderick is the core of the movie. He plays a blooded veteran, and a blue-blood, whose decency makes him appalled at what he must sometimes do, but whose honor, courage and devotion to his men, his love of his men, makes him an emblem of everything that was right in the tragedy that was the War. Just before the attack on Fort Wagner, the climax of the movie, Broderick's Robert Gould Shaw dismounts and gazes at the sea, the birds, the waves, all that is sweet in his life, for he knows that he is going to die. It is a truthful moment. You sense that he does not want to let it all go, all that is life, but he does, and he slaps his horse and walks through his men to the lead position. By this time we have seen the 54th in action. We understand the terrible calculus of sacrifice necessary to win the Civil War, to destroy slavery, to preserve the Union -- but my God, this moment's sorrow and acceptance, its deepest pity, gives you a glimpse into whatever quality of the eternal we carry within us as a species.

Say Anything, 1989: Teenage Romance and Comedy **D. Cameron Crowe. Starring John Cusack, Jock Mahoney, Lili Taylor, Ione Skye**

Say Anything is the best of the teen romantic comedies because it respects teenagers. It portrays them as impulsive, sincere, goofy, aimless, honest, resilient, yearning, an inch away from adults, sometimes an inch away from children. It takes their commitment to love seriously. If I had a daughter, I doubt whether I would want her to marry Cusack's character, *Lloyd*. Much of his energy has been channeled into "being with" *Diane*, Skye's character, but I would be fine with the two of them as a couple. Lloyd is a young man of honor and sincerity whose protective instincts are fully developed. If we fall in love in high school, most of us eventually have to deal with the gravitational pull of dissimilar ambitions and of sudden moves to places far away, and thus with separation. We never forget that first love though. *Say Anything* reminds us of its intensity and its ability not only to stun us into whole new lives when we are 17 or 18, but to remind us, so many years later, of its power to make us ache with its memory alone.

The Civil War, 1990 (11:30 hours): Documentary **D. Ken Burns**

Images change us -- powerful, evocative images such as those that suffuse these 11+ hours, especially of all the many nameless, sharp, living faces that would have been lost except for photography's robust popularity. This documentary is the best television I have ever watched. As Shelby Foote, the author of the great Civil War trilogy and the best of a superb array of commentators, points out, The Civil War was our great, tragic epic, the cataclysm that made us Americans. His wry, deeply felt compassion is so present, so contemporary, it is as if he were speaking from the era itself. Permeating all of this work are the brilliant words and language of Lincoln, "the better angel" of what we have come to be. Try watching this in conjunction with *Glory* and then read Foote and Catton and McPherson, Crane and Frazier, and Lincoln; please, please read Lincoln.

Goodfellas, 1990: Gangster **D. Martin Scorsese. Starring Robert DeNiro, Joe Pesci, Ray Liotta, Lorraine Bracco, Paul Sorvino**

Shot after shot comes with such speed, as if every life lived inside the mob or in conjunction with it is kicking on the adrenaline and joy of believing himself to be bullet-proof. Is there another film that so conspires to show the audience how much fun it can be (for a while, until killing and cocaine and prison intrude) to let go of law, morality, middle-class expectations and common sense? Ray Liotta's narration has perfect pitch. He is the smart-ass inside all of us except that our escape is sitting comfortably in our homes, safe, vicariously enjoying his *thug life*. Pesci is an actor of deep limits, but his sociopaths seem spot-on -- utterly impulsive, unpredictable, terrifying in their lack of restraint and very funny. There is nothing stately

and traditional about this gangster film, unlike *The Godfather*. It is banging rock-n-roll. If *The Godfather* is analogous to The Beatles, *Goodfellas* is The Rolling Stones.

The Silence of the Lambs, 1991: Thriller and Murder
D. Jonathan Demme. Starring Anthony Hopkins, Jodie Foster, Scott Glenn, Ted Levine

Hannibal Lector is a sociopath who does possess restraint, who chooses carefully, who charms the audience with his insight and wit. Like Iago, he aims to seduce us. Shakespeare is rumored to have imagined what the devil would be upon assuming human shape – thus Iago. Hopkins' Lector is the devil, seemingly immortal, diabolical, possessing a sense of humor that is rebellious and fearless, yet also a creature of manners. Foster's Claire Sterling opposes him with two perfect weapons, politeness (second nature to her) and unflinching honesty. She does not try to control Lector. She tries to persuade him to help her. Hopkins' and Foster's time together on screen is electric. *Lambs* is not a movie that celebrates evil (although Hopkins may be the audience favorite) so much as it rewards grit and ingenuity in both characters.

Unforgiven, 1992: Western
D. Clint Eastwood. Starring Clint Eastwood, Gene Hackman, Morgan Freeman, Richard Harris

Whatever myth-making capacity the western once possessed, Eastwood tries to strip it away in *Unforgiven*. Heroic gunfighters standing alone against corruption and injustice; lawman bringing civilization to the empty, lawless West; someone writing all of it truthfully – all of these familiar motifs are shown to be empty. There is nothing heroic about the violence in this movie. It is brutal and stupid and vengeful. Eastwood subverts his own western persona. His character wishes himself redeemed through the love of his wife, but he needs the money, so he picks up the gun, again, and adds injury to his fall by convincing Freeman's character to join him. Hackman's character is a terrible man who desires order, even if he has to capriciously brutalize others to achieve it. There is no romantic figure of a cowboy riding into the sunset when *Unforgiven* ends – just soaking rain and a threat to kill everything alive.

Last of the Mohicans, 1992: Western and Romance
D. Michael Mann. Starring Daniel Day Lewis, Madeline Stowe

Back to the western myth: when D.H. Lawrence characterized the American soul as “hard, isolate, stoic and a killer,” he may have had Natty Bumppo in mind, Lewis's character in *Mohicans* as adapted from Fennimore Cooper's novel about the French and Indian War. Lewis is an 18th century American backwoodsman. Search all of these movies and you will find only a handful of performances where the actor or actress takes on the complete mask of the character – Lewis and Streeep seem to be the best at doing this. He fades into being Bumppo. His warrior-hunter is supremely competent, efficient even in his physical movements, and sure of his sense of right and justice (no existential angst in him), and my God, can he shoot. Stowe is passionate and tough, the requisite warrior-woman to his persona. She unlocks his steely tenderness and provokes his declaration, “I will find you,” one of the great lines any man might wish to say to a woman he loves and might lose.

Shindler's List, 1993: the Holocaust

D. Stephen Spielberg. Starring Liam Neeson, Ralph Fiennes, Ben Kingsley

In Act III, vii of *King Lear*, Gloucester, Lear's defender, is blinded by Cornwall and Regan, Lear's son-in-law and daughter. It might be the worst scene of cruelty in Shakespeare's great plays. However, within this terrible moment, a man who had served Cornwall since he was a child, a servant, tries to stop him from carrying out the torture. He pulls a sword on Cornwall, fights him, eventually mortally wounds him, but is himself killed for his actions. To me he has always been the emblem of the mystery found in goodness. He had nothing to gain from his action and everything to lose. He acted in spite of what was in his self-interest. Liam Neeson's Oscar Shindler is another example of such a mystery. As played by Neeson, he is a jovial, smooth, corrupt womanizer who suddenly begins to devote his life to saving Jews from transportation to the ovens. His counterpoint is Fiennes' Amon Goeth, the man released by ideology to become what he has probably always wanted to be – someone who wants to “watch the world burn.” Fiennes somehow crawled inside and made real a character whose absolute power over the lives of the Jews in his camp has rendered him in-human, literally a shell, a crust, with human features only. We read *King Lear* after 400 years not because we love sadness, but because we love life and understand on some level that tragedy gives life its value, its precious individual worth. When Stern, his record keeper for all those Jews who have been saved, says, “The list is an absolute good. The list is life. All around its margins lies the gulf,” he speaks for us, the audience that also wishes to choose life, to say that we too believe in its magnetic virtue.

Sense and Sensibility, 1995: Historical Romance, Comedy and Drama

D. Ang Lee. Starring Emma Thompson, Kate Winslet, Alan Rickman, Hugh Grant

Sometimes, often really, good things do happen for good people, and movies like *Sensibility* give us characters whose graciousness and resolute natures make us want them to fall in love and be happy. Who doesn't like a story that ends with a joyous marriage celebration of characters who know how to love and whom we have grown to cherish? Emma Thompson is the oldest, solid, practical Dashwood sister, the daughter who should be married first, but for whom romance seems never to blossom. Winslet is passionate as the Romantic, swooning, stars-in-her-eyes younger daughter who yearns for the handsome and righteous suitor, even if she has to first be hurt to finally be able to see him. Rickman's naval officer is the virtuous 18th century man of honor, the best catch of all. Hugh Grant has developed none of the comedic tics that mar his more recent performances. He is charming and innocent. This movie may suggest the method by which we secretly desire our one, devoted love to arrive in our lives.

The Matrix, 1999: Science Fiction

D. Andy and Lana Wachowski. Starring Lawrence Fishburne, Keanu Reeves, Carrie Ann-Moss, Hugo Weaving

Some movies are philosophically and logically silly, but who cares when they are so bloody cool. Unlike *Avatar*, a dazzling visual event, you will want to watch this movie again. Cameron did not care about his characters; none are memorable. *Avatar* is all about spectacle. We like spectacle, but we love memorable, dynamic personalities on screen, and *The Matrix* provides several. Fishburne is calmly hypnotic as the prophet for the one, Neo, Keanu Reeves, for once in a part that serves his innocent screen persona (although as the movie unreels Reeves shows real acting chops in his growing belief in himself as a kind of Christ figure). Moss is sexy and deadly and romantic and convincing. However, Hugo Weaving steals the movie. His agent is such threatening fun. Just the way he says “Mr. Anderson,” all hard, rolling Norwegian r's and d's is a kind of movie ecstasy. To cap it all off, a banging ending – a rebel rocketing into the stratosphere in very cool shades to the perfect musical selection; it signals a sequel, that curse of

contemporary Hollywood, but at that moment, it doesn't matter. The machines have been stayed, and the fight goes on. I remember the audience clapping in the theater when the credits were rolling.

Band of Brothers, 2001 (10 hours): War and Brotherhood and Bio-Pic Starring Damian Lewis, Ron Livingston, Donnie Wahlberg

You cannot forget Dick Winters. You cannot forget Easy Company. *Band of Brothers*, the child of Tom Hanks, is truthful, tearing, heartening, epic. Told over ten episodes, *Brothers* tells the story of the men of Easy Company from training to the end of the war in Europe; it tells the story of the citizen-army, the non-professionals who became very good soldiers and who really did save the world from the worst darkness imagined by the 20th century. Damien Lewis catches the humane competence of Dick Winters and his complete confidence in his mission. Other soldiers here are cynical, often with good reason, but not Winters. Lewis is so good at showing us how Winters discovers his competence, and how he discovers that he can be courageous under fire. Lewis brings a subtle delight to the part. He knows he is living more intensely than he will ever live again. All the actors are excellent, the action sequences, realistic, down to the sound of bullets zipping through the sir like cloth being quickly torn. WW II is our 20th century *Iliad*; *Brothers* is a good place to begin understanding what our fathers and grandfathers preserved for us through their sacrifice.

Lord of the Rings (all three), 2001+: Epic D. Peter Jackson. Starring Viggo Mortensen, Ian McKellen, Orlando Bloom, Elijah Woods, Andy Serkis, Liv Tyler, Sean Astin, Ian Holm, Hugo Weaving, Christopher Lee

Hobbits, Orcs, ghost-warriors, wizards, an evil eye the size of ten-story building, the Nazgul, elves, dwarves, Uruk-hai, some of the best battle scenes ever filmed, human warriors the likes of which one might find in the Arthurian legends, and wonderful Ents – all in an inexhaustible, imaginative, rousing 9:28 hours. The warrior-heroes, Mortensen, Bloom, etc. call to mind a chivalric age; not so much Achilles and Hector as Roland and El Cid. A faux-Shakespearean script works well to bring us deeper into a place where language is a great separating line between heroes and creatures. Neither Jackson's ambition nor his execution seems to have waned over all the time of filming. The pacing is crisp; he sustains narrative clarity in setting into motion the complex interplay of many types of creatures over a wide-ranging landscape over time. At the center of *Rings* is love – a chaste relationship between Frodo and Sam Gamgee that Woods and Astin make stirring and brotherly. I cannot think of one bad actor out of the dozens and dozens we meet, and some, such as McKellen and Mortensen, carry not a hint of modernity in their characterizations. *Rings* is what used to be called a family picture – a story told in such a way that children and sophisticated adults can witness a struggle for survival for all that is good in humanity and then see that struggle succeed.

Master and Commander, 2003: Drama D.. Peter Weir. Starring Russell Crowe, Paul Bettany

Gladiator has the allure of Rome but *Master and Commander* has a sense of humor, and Crowe shines when he can be both heroic and foolish; his character, Aubrey, a British naval captain during the Napoleonic Wars, can put away the death-seeking glower he wore for most of *Gladiator*. Aubrey is a man who demonstrably loves both life and battle.

Patrick O'Brien wrote 21 historical novels with Aubrey and Stephen Maturin, doctor and spy, as inseparable friends. They give a better picture of 18th century life than anything else I have read.

Angels in America, 2004 (5:58 hours): adapted from the play; AIDS, Reagan's America, Angels, a Comedy
D.Mike Nichols. Starring Meryl Streep, Al Pacino, Patrick Wilson, Mary Louise Parker, Justin Kirk, Ben Shenkman, Jeffery Wright

Read the plays (*Millennium Approaches* and *Perestroika*) before you watch the movie. Please. Please. They are, along with *Death of a Salesman* and *A Streetcar Named Desire*, the best of post-WW II American drama. They are also the best plays I have ever seen performed; their HBO production keeps that level of excellence (a note – they are filmed as a movie, not as a stage play). A plot synopsis: AIDS has begun to ravage gay communities in a 1980's Reagan America that seems uninterested in the suffering and deaths of those men. The play particularizes that era in eight characters: two couples, a figure of incarnate evil, his nurse, a ghost of an executed woman and a Mormon mother. Kushner's imagination is audacious. All of the play's seemingly unevenly matched and wildly improbable events and characters make sense and help the audience make sense of the desperation of any community in plague time. The casting is brilliant, but Pacino as a funny, reptilian Roy Cohn (google him) and Streep in two roles are perfect emblems of the transformational genius of the best actors and actresses. What pleasure they provide! Ultimately this play is about human suffering and endurance, and our moral weakness in the face of death, but also, it is a witness to our heroic resistance to the power death and suffering strive to exert over us. This is a comedy that confronts tragedy, yet ends in hope and harmony. One of Prior Walter's (the hero) final lines is fitting: "The world only spins forward."

The Bourne Identity (all three), 2004+: Thriller and Spies
D. Paul Greenglass. Starring Matt Damon, Franka Potente, Clive Owen, Brian Cox, Chris Cooper, Joan Allen, Julia Stiles, David Strathairn, Albert Finney

All three movies are carried by their rat-tat-tat editing, by their superb casting and by Matt Damon's tortured super-man (I believe JB could kick Mr. Batman's behind). Draw a long breath and in the pause something thrilling will have occurred – a knife fight in a tiny bathroom, a chess match using a sniper rifle and a hunter's shotgun, two men disarmed and knocked out in 5 seconds. Through all three movies JB searches for his identity and for the back story to his otherworldly skills; in a tense scene in the first movie set at an autobahn fast-food restaurant, JB lists everything in his immediate environment of which he is hyperaware to a woman who is helping him escape. Damon gives us a man completely confident in extreme situations who also cannot inhabit his own skin because of his terrible dreams and his sense that he has committed terrible deeds. His Jason Bourne may be the premier contemporary existential character in American movies.

The Wire, 2004-2008 (60 hours): Police and Work and the City
Starring Dominic West, Idris Elba, Michael K. Williams, Wendell Pierce

My confession: I have seen only the first full season, but that is enough to convince me of writer David Simon's brilliance and of the verisimilitude of an army of actors and actresses. *The Wire* is set in Baltimore in the present time and over 60 episodes describes how a city unravels when it has been gutted by the loss of good jobs and been relegated to a political dead-zone. This is Baltimore, but it is also a stand in for every American city so treated. The title, on one very basic level, refers to a plan by the police to gather evidence about drug-dealing in the projects. That central thread is followed through all 60 hours, but each season also concentrates on another facet of Baltimore life – working, schools, newspapers, etc. This is a grand serial novel of a show, akin to Dickens or Hugo in its ambition and its stories of men and women struggling to make a living. This is fascinating, layered, intense film-making filled with characters who will break

your heart, the most vivid for me being Omar, Williams' outlaw hold-up man who preys on drug dealers. There are stories here that should be told every day until someone listens.

Michael Clayton, 2007: Drama, Lawyers and Murder
D. Tony Gilroy. Starring George Clooney, Tilda Swinton, Tom Wilkinson, Sydney Pollack

Michael Clayton is in deep trouble. He owes money to a loan shark on behalf of his brother, he is trying to keep his ties to his son and other family members alive, he has as a friend a mentally ill lawyer who has the inside story on a terrible case of pollution on the part of the company that lawyer has been hired to defend, and someone is trying to kill him. He is a 'fixer', responsible for cleaning up the dirt of the connected and the powerful, but his own life is a shambles that he keeps under control through pure nerve. George Clooney gives his best performance in a movie of intelligence and an adult perspective – both rarities. This is visceral, thrilling acting in a world recognizable as our own, one devoid of CGI and stupid plot twists, and one where corruption is beaten back, just barely, but defeated nevertheless.

Eastern Promises, 2007: Gangster and Police and Murder
D. David Cronenberg. Starring Viggo Mortensen, Naomi Watts, Vincent Cassel

I like Russell Crowe in his action movies, but I want Viggo Mortensen for authentic-I-believe-his-life-is-on-the-line-action. This movie has the best hand-to-hand combat sequence I have ever seen, and it takes place in a Turkish bath; it took Cronenberg a week to film it. That sequence builds on the authenticity of Mortensen as a Russian crime-lord's driver, someone scary but contained, someone who has mastered his demons and come out on the other side with a degree of honor left intact; he is not who he seems to be. In spite of the violence, this is a movie of quiet, intense moments when you enter worlds you have not seen before on the screen such as when Nikolai (VM) strips down and shows off his tattoos for crime bosses who will determine his fate. A wonderful supporting role by Armin Mueller-Stahl as a soft-spoken boss who is utterly damned – a monster worthy of Noah Cross from *Chinatown*.

The Social Network, 2010: Drama and Bio-Pic
D. David Fincher. Starring Jesse Eisenberg, Justin Timberlake

Watching this, I kept thinking of Daniel Day Lewis as Daniel Plainview in *There Will Be Blood*. Ayn Rand's Darwinian, genius-driven capitalism, where smarts and ruthless drive are all that matters, finds both its early 20th and 21st century apotheosis respectively in *Blood* and in *Contract*; it also reveals the terrible emptiness, the heartlessness at the core of such capitalism. Unlike Plainview, Jesse Eisenberg's Mark Zuckerberg is not an actual killer, but he has scenes of such scathing contempt here that it is good that he does not have a weapon in his hands. Also present in both movies, the heady romance of inventing, of making a new world out of nothing but ideas -- the rushing excitement of creating vast regions of interconnected 'machinery'. Both movies suggest that the characters' intense drive to create, to succeed, actually to triumph, is itself machine-like, almost as if both merge with their creations. So vivid at times is that excitement in the air around Zuckerberg and Plainview that their acts of creation come off almost as if they are conjuring something breathing, something alive. In a long, long era of dumbed down movies Aaron Sorkin's script is a joy to listen to – so smart and fast and witty with memorable line after line singing out to us (a favorite: "Let's gut the nerd."). Both movies end with loss. In *Blood*, a mad act crystallizes all that Plainview has become, and in *Contract*, Zuckerberg finishes the movie alone, bereft of even one friend, aware of his isolation. Both protagonists are wealthy beyond our middle-class imaginings, brilliant, superbly equipped to survive in business, but more fragments of a human being than whole. I don't think that they are tragic figures, but they are pitiable.

And please do not neglect:

All the dance sequences of Fred Astaire and Ginger Roger's movies.

All the dance sequences from *An American in Paris* (1951) and *Singin' in the Rain* (1952).

The production numbers from the Busby Berkeley musicals of the 1930's.

Countless song and dance performances from the great American musicals – *Pajama Game*, *Cabaret*, *Oklahoma*, *Meet Me in St. Louis*, *West Side Story*, *On the Town*.

All the great *Looney Tune* cartoons of Chuck Jones.

A common metaphor used by some writers to describe the movie experience is that of dreaming. I do not agree. Our dreaming is often fragmented, only occasionally linear and logical, and since we know we have multiple dreams every night, we therefore also know that we forget almost all of them. In contrast, our memory of movies can be encyclopedic, we can recite whole plot lines and threads of character development for dozens (hundreds?) of films, and we have deep memories of more images than we could comfortably list. However, another metaphor that invokes dreaming might work.

In Australia, the Aborigines speak of “dream-time” and “song-lines”; the Aborigines, before the Brits arrived, had a pre-literate, oral culture, a culture based on stories (think of Homeric Greece, another place where poets memorized thousands of line of verse and stories). The continent is criss-crossed with these unseen lines, with these stories, that connect memory, ancestry, sacred places, animals and sacred journeys all in a spiritual whole.

In a secular context, our love of stories and thus movies is the same. Think of the landscape of your lives, criss-crossed with lines connecting places, friends, fundamental experiences, and your stories, your favorite movies and books all in the mix, and all of this coming together to create a spiritual core that is largely who you are. Think of all the images of movies you carry in your head and heart and all the lines of happiness that emerge from and end in them. Oh please love good movies. Love books. Love stories, the best water for our always thirsty spirits.

MJ Wall May, 2011