

July 13, 2012: [My upcoming Dan Rodricks radio appearance leads to summer movie marathon](#)

On Friday, July 20, 2012, some time between 12 and 2pm, I will have the great pleasure of substituting for Linda DeLibero, the Associate Director of Film and Media Studies at Johns Hopkins University, as the film critic for WYPR's [Midday with Dan Rodricks](#) show. Nobody can replace Linda, but I'll do my best to be both informative and entertaining. The theme of the show that day will be "Summer Blockbusters (and Indies)," or something like that. I don't know whether I'll be speaking during the first or second hour, but I'll let everyone know when I know.

The only problem with having this honor bestowed on me is that, until this Wednesday past, I had only seen the following "summer films:"

Abraham Lincoln: Vampire Hunter, The Avengers, Men in Black III, Prometheus, Snow White and the Huntsman

Since I took a trip to New York yesterday, I was only able to get started on the marathon of movie watching ahead of me ... today. But I managed 3 films so far, and as long as I find time to watch 2 films a day through next Thursday, 7/19, I should be able to talk about the summer selection without coming across as too much of an idiot. Oh, wait ... it won't be for *me* to decide if I'm an idiot, will it?

Let's start with my brief impressions of the films I had seen before today, shall we? These are not full-fledged reviews, but just my notes on each film (some are longer than others).

Abraham Lincoln: Vampire Hunter (Timur Bekmambetov, Director) Grade = D-

I loved *Night Watch* and *Day Watch*, two (Russian) previous films by this director. They were unpredictable, over-the-top, ridiculous, with terrific special effects, and scripts that sparkled with originality. I couldn't for the life of me recount their convoluted plots, but I enjoyed every minute of both of them. They were not great works of art, but they were masterful works of great entertainment.

Unfortunately, I thought this new film was terrible. I did not see *Wanted*, an earlier English-language film by Bekmambetov, but if this film is any indication of what happens to his talent in translation, he should stay in Russia.

As much as I hated this movie, I didn't hate it for the first 45 minutes or so. As long as we stay with the young Abe Lincoln, pre-Presidency and pre-Civil War, the film has a goofy charm. I have no objection to high-concept ridiculousness where a real historical figure ends up in an artificial context. *Inglourious Basterds*, Quentin Tarantino's silly take on World War II, had its moments of brilliance. So why can't a film about our 16th President have fun turning him into a vampire slayer? Yes, why not, I ask you?

Well, the problems arise when we flash forward (clumsily) from the young Abe to the Civil War. At this point the film trivializes the horrors of the carnage of that war, as well as the abomination that was slavery. The complicated politics and tortured justifications for the lifestyle of the antebellum South end up being wiped out in favor of an alternative, "Southern

slaveholders were all actually vampires" theory. This sounds like it could work as a great visual metaphor for how unforgivable slavery was, but in practice it just ends up making it all feel like scenes from just another bad action movie, complete with the now-tired technique of frame-ramping in the middle of leaps, jumps, swings, and blows.

But let's say you just wanted to watch a film with crazy stunts and great 3D, would it be worth it then? I think not, as this film features the worst looking 3D images I have seen all summer. Давай, Тимур! Домой уезжай. Ты там лучше работаешь ...

The Avengers (Josh Whedon, Director) [Note - much to my amusement, we are supposed to call this film "Marvel's The Avengers"] **Grade = B/B+**

I enjoyed this far more than I thought I would, given what short shrift ensemble action films usually give to any kind of character development. The 3D technology was also very pleasingly incorporated into the story, and overall the performance of the actors was strong. I haven't kept up on the reasons why Ed Norton did not return as Bruce Banner (no need to explain why it's not Eric Bana ...), but Mark Ruffalo did fine in that role. I've begun to forget the plot already - and don't really care that much to force myself to remember it - but that's OK. The film did its job, which was to entertain me for a few hours.

I will add, however, that I remain a staunch opponent to the inclusion of the Thor and Loki characters in this universe. I understand that they have been part of this universe since Stan Lee created all of these characters, but the pure fantasy elements of their world don't mesh so well with some of the more science fiction elements of the other characters (like the Hulk, Iron Man, Captain America, etc.). For this viewer, that contrast is a jarring disconnect (and I hated hated the actual *Thor* movie).

One final note - I was much amused during the overlong battle sequence in New York at the end whenever we would go from a shot of Iron Man with his fancy firebolts, to the Hawk with his advanced high-tech arrows, to Captain America with his super shield, to Thor with his hammer, to ... Black Widow with her ... pistols. Yeah - like that's going to stop much ... seems like Scalett drew the short straw.

Men in Black III (Barry Sonnenfeld, Director): **Grade = B/B+**

Men in Black III is a very pleasant frivolity. It is certainly a much stronger entry in the series than was *Men in Black II*. Josh Brolin - as all of the critics I have read have noted - does a spot-on (and therefore hilarious) imitation of Tommy Lee Jones, but it is Michael Stuhlbarg as Griffin whom I found to be the most welcome surprise. I had previously only seen him in the Coen Brothers' *A Serious Man* - in which he was a revelation - and here he shows that he has real (and truly comedic) range.

The 3D was well used in the action scenes, actually adding to the tension (and vertigo) in the moments staged at great heights (especially at the Chrysler Building). And for once the glasses did not give me a headache. I'm not sure if it's because the technology is improving or I am just getting used to it, but this is a welcome shift.

I don't rate the film higher because I was distracted by the (usual) time travel inconsistencies; in particular the one where it would have been impossible in a world without K for J to be living his life exactly as it had previously been lived (including his apartment, job, etc.), without K to recruit him to the agency. But hey - the rest was good fun, and perfect for a summery confection.

Prometheus (Ridley Scott, Director) Grade = B/B-

I have just one word: "Father." That about sums up the problems with the film. Whereas a movie like *Alien* left much unspoken, and took its time letting us get to know the characters before the mayhem started, this movie feels rushed, and is very unsubtle. So when Charlize utters that one word, I wasn't surprised, as it summed up what the filmmakers think of their audience - we're dumb, we're crass, and we have a short attention span. Then again, if you look at all of the other movies playing ...

The problem is that there is a lot that is done right, which makes the stuff that is done less well feel really lazy. I love the Michael Fassbender android character, and I love the premise of the film. The landing and first exploration on the planet also raised some hopes. But then, stuff just started happening too quickly. I wanted more time with these people. I wanted to know Shaw as I knew Ripley. I wanted to care when people died.

The 3D is nice, as is the production design (still riffing off of the original Giger work). Noomi's good, and her desperate caesarian was definitely cringe-inducing. I didn't like Logan Marshall-Green, however, as he seemed way too vacuous to be a scientist. And speaking of science, just what kind of doctor is Shaw supposed to be? For an archaeologist, she seems to be doing an awful lot of medical doctoring, as well.

So I would call this an imperfect film that is nevertheless a notch above most of the other summer fare, with an intelligence of sorts below its unfinished surface.

My friend Hollis marveled at the number of other movies referenced directly or indirectly in here, as if Scott and his screenwriters were taking the DNA of what they know and using it to create a new creature based off the old one. That might be giving them too much credit, but you never know.

Snow White and the Huntsman (Rupert Sanders, Director) Grade = B/B-

Liked it OK - but the ending shot was horrible - the actors didn't know what to do as the camera clumsily dollyed back, waiting for the doors to close. That fumble is a perfect metaphor for the things that DON'T work, since it encapsulates the film's failure to make much of the Snow White/Huntsman connection. Oh, and it was way too long, and could have lost the Joan of Arc battle scenes. That said, I liked much of the acting, including Charlize Theron and the dwarves.

And now, here are my impressions of the three films I just saw today, which were, in screening order: *Savages*, *Ted*, and *Brave*. One interesting note about all three is that they all feature inconsistent use of voiceover (one of my pet peeves). Use it or don't (and I say mostly, "don't"), but please don't use it for the first five minutes, forget about it for 90 minutes, and then bring it back at the end to tie things up ..

Savages (Oliver Stone, Director) Grade = B

From a pure filmmaking point of view, this film was very strong. I was also blown away by most of the actors. The young people - Aaron Johnson, Taylor Kitsch and Blake Lively - were all quite fine. I can't believe how much Blake Lively has grown as an actress since I first saw her in *The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants* (in which I thought she was the worst one of the four friends). I also can't believe that Aaron Johnson, who plays Ben, is as young as he is (born in

1990), and is the same guy who played the main character in *Kick-Ass*. Really? Amazing! I think he's someone to watch.

All of the older, more established actors, including Salma Hayek, Benicio Del Toro and John Travolta, were in top form. My favorite scene in the whole movie was the one between Del Toro and Travolta. They were so much fun to watch together. And Salma - well, along with Cate Blanchett, she is one of those people whom I would watch in just about anything ...

So why only a "B?" Well, I just couldn't relate to the people. I didn't identify with the main characters, and I didn't care what happened to them. From a script point of view, they were underdeveloped and shallow, and none of the fine craft on display by director, DP, and actors could make them more interesting.

The graphic violence didn't bother me that much, since I expected it. But one should expect it, or else one will be quite upset when it comes, and it comes right away. This is, after all, a movie about the drug trade on the California/Mexico border.

Ted (Seth MacFarlane, Director) Grade = F

Yesterday, on the bus home from New York, I watched last year's *The Muppets* on my iPad. As I was watching that charming and sweet film about a man who needs to grow up and leave his youthful obsessions behind, I thought to myself, "hmmm, from what I know about *Ted*, it seems like these two films have a lot in common." Sadly, I was mistaken.

While it is true that both films deal with the stories of boy-men who must accept the responsibilities and joys of the adult world, including making a commitment to a romantic partner, the one is masterfully crafted, while the other is a disgusting and crass mess of a movie.

On the surface, *Ted* is one of those high-concept stories I love. It's tough when you're writing a screenplay to find convincing visual metaphors that effectively externalize the internal conflicts of the characters. Unlike in a novel, you shouldn't generally resort to having people come out and say how they feel, since the visual nature of the medium dictates that images can usually be more expressive than words. So what better way to represent a 35-year-old adolescent than by showing a man who still lives and hangs out with his teddy bear, who in this case just happens to talk (and smoke pot, drink, fornicate, and all of that good stuff).

Sadly, for this viewer, however, the film is part of the "vulgarity is funny for its own sake" style of filmmaking that I abhor. While David Mamet so brilliantly showed, in *Glengarry Glen Ross*, how hundreds of f-bombs could work to show the aggressiveness of his characters, their mere presence does not usually constitute "TRUTH." Mr. MacFarlane seems to believe that prostitutes, feces, tired homophobic jokes, swearing, farting (and more) are the soul of wit. And why not, right? It worked for the makers of *Bridesmaids* ...

Finally, the character played by Mark Wahlberg is, in fact, a total loser (his portrayal is not helped by the fact that the usually stellar Wahlberg seems to be stoned, himself, throughout the film). Everyone who calls him that in the film is correct. Mila Kunis is right to leave him. Too bad she has to come back.

Brave (Mark Andrews, Brenda Chapman, Steve Purcell, Directors) Grade = B

As usual for a Pixar film, the animation in this movie was beautiful. My favorite characters were the bears. Especially mama bear. The 3D was also quite fine. If you're looking for a lovely film to which to take your family and kids, and you can't rent *The Muppets* and stay home, then this is the summer film to see.

Unfortunately, it's also a little bland, despite the flaming red hair of the main character. I think it's wonderful that Pixar finally decided to write a lead female character, but I wish they had done it in a film that was as inventive as such masterpieces like the *Toy Story* films, *Monster's Inc*, *Finding Nemo* and *Up*.

It seems as if the Disney influence has finally permeated the Pixar culture through and through, and not the best of the Disney influence, either. We've seen this plot before, of the rebellious child yearning to be free, who asks a witch/sorcerer for a magic solution to their problem, only to have it backfire ... The Scottish accents, while fun to listen to, don't freshen it up enough.

And that's all for now. Not sure what I'll see tomorrow, but I'll be sure to write something up at the end of the day. Here are some of the films on my to-see list for the next week:

The Intouchables

Rock of Ages

Tyler Perry's Madea's Witness Protection

Katy Perry: Part of Me

Ice Age: Continental Drift

Batman (for 7/19)

Spider-Man

Beasts of the Southern Wild

Moonrise Kingdom

Magic Mike

To Rome with Love

Thanks for reading!

July 14, 2012: [Spider-Man, To Rome with Love, and Beasts of the Southern Wild](#)

And so my movie marathon continues. Today, I watched *The Amazing Spider-Man* (in 3D! in IMAX!), *To Rome with Love*, and *Beasts of the Southern Wild*. It was nice to get away from "summer blockbusters" with the latter two films, after 4 BIG MOVIES in a row. That said, watching *The Amazing Spider-Man* was a very positive experience. Much to my surprise, I loved it. More below.

Before I start, however, a short anecdote. Yesterday, I watched two movies in a row at White Marsh. Today, when I stepped up to buy my ticket to *The Amazing Spider-Man*, the young man at the box office recognized me, so I told him why I was watching so many movies. His name is Josiah, and I told him I'd give him a shout-out on the radio next week. This paragraph is my way of reminding myself to do so.

And now - 3 more reviews:

The Amazing Spider-Man (Marc Webb, Director) Grade = A-

Spider-Man, directed by Sam Raimi and released just 10 years ago, in 2002, was a very good superhero origin movie. Unlike Ang Lee's disastrous 2003 *Hulk*, *Spider-Man* did good business and got good reviews. Starring Tobey Maguire and Kirsten Dunst, two actors still not past their youthful prime - even today - the film launched a series that continued (successfully) through *Spider-Man 3*, released in 2007.

I understood when the owners of the Marvel Universe rights wanted to reboot the *Hulk* franchise after Ang Lee's effort (and 2008's *The Incredible Hulk* was actually a pretty good film), but I was completely flabbergasted when I heard about *The Amazing Spider-Man*. Why, I asked? Why not just pick up where *Spider-Man 3* left off, much as the James Bond franchise does when it continues its own series with new actors? Did we really need - just 10 years later - a reboot with new actors?

Well, I'm still not sure we needed this new film, but it's pretty damn good. I was surprised. After seeing Andrew Garfield in *The Social Network* and *Never Let Me Go*, I knew he had some decent range, but I was not prepared for how good he is as Peter Parker. I knew from a variety of films that Emma Stone was charming, lovely and funny, but I did not expect to like her as Peter's love interest Gwen as much as I did. What really makes the film work, though, is an extremely smart script, which is surprising, since the number of credited writers (3 for screenplay and 1 for story) make it seem like it should be the usual failed "franken-script" that we often see in big budget disasters.

But this story works. The plot is tighter, and Peter Parker speaks in wisecracks, as he does in the original comic books. I also loved the fact that Parker's web does not come out of his body (a ridiculous conceit that should NEVER have made it into the original film), but is a product of scientific tinkering. I once read one of those "Stupid Movie Science" books that pointed out how quickly Parker's body mass would shrink as he put out as much silk as he needs to swing through the city. Can you imagine that? We need these movies to be scientifically sound, after all ... ;-)

So - my conclusion is that this is actually a better movie than Sam Raimi's *Spider-Man*, and Garfield and Stone are much more enjoyable to watch than Maguire and Dunst. Rhys Ifans as the ill-fated bad guy and Denis Leary as the police captain are both excellent, as well. The only reason I only give it an A- is that the film falls prey to the usual overblown, over-long effects-laden battle sequence at the end, and ... I'm still not sure we needed a new film, even as good as this one is.

Beasts of the Southern Wild (Benh Zeitlin, Director) Grade = B+

Finally! A movie that uses voiceover as it should be used: consistently throughout, and as a point-of-view commentary on the action, rather than as an explanation of the action. Think of this as a Mississippi Delta, multiracial version of Terrence Malicks's 1973 film *Badlands*, and you'll get a sense of the simultaneous dreaminess and precision of the narrator's voice.

This film, written by the director, Benh Zeitlin, and Lucy Alibar, and based on Alibar's one-act play *Juicy and Delicious*, is a refreshingly original and off-beat entry into our summer 2012 movie fare. Eschewing traditional narrative storytelling, the film nevertheless manages to

recount a moving tale of a young girl's precocious coming of age, as she navigates a flood - literal and metaphorical - of biblical proportions, that washes away the world as she knows it, leaving her with no choice but to confront an unknown future.

The film was shot on Super 16mm film, which used to be the format of choice for low-budget and student filmmakers, as it was cheaper to shoot on than 35mm, yet could be blown up to 35mm with less loss of quality than regular 16mm film. These days, many filmmakers on a budget opt for some kind of inexpensive digital camera, such as a DSLR. Zeitlin's choice to shoot on the older film format lends the film a nice retro feel, which suits the subject. Since the film is also shot in a handheld style reminiscent of the 1960s cinéma vérité documentary movement, and shot with many non-actors, the grain of the blown-up film stock additionally helps create a sense of grit and reality that contrasts nicely with the fantastical and allegorical elements of the story.

Why, then, do I only give the film a B+? Well, in my opinion, the hardest thing in the world to do is to tell a coherent story and to tell it well, and while narrative coherence may not have been foremost on these filmmakers' minds, I wish it had been. The lead performance by young newcomer Quvenzhané Wallis, as Hushpuppy, is mesmerizing, and almost carries us across the plot gaps, as does the performance of Dwight Henry as her father, but ... not quite. I often feel as if we in the film appreciation world give special allowance to certain independent voices in cinema to ignore story structure, since we're often so tired of the formulaic Hollywood fare, but a little more structure would have worked better for this particular viewer.

All of that said, I strongly recommend that people see this film in the theatre, rather than later, at home on DVD. This is one of those films that requires and rewards the immersive experience of a darkened cinema. Its unconventional narrative will be challenging to many viewers, so everyone should see it without the additional distractions of the home (phone, light, the ability to stop the movie). If the film sounds interesting to you, then go and give the Charles Theatre your money while *Beasts of the Southern Wild* is still playing there.

To Rome with Love (Woody Allen, Director) Grade = B/B-

Ah, Woody! Ever since the mid-1990s, you just haven't been the same. Even your more interesting pictures of the last 15-20 years have generally been weaker than your films of the 1970s and 1980s. Sometimes, watching some of them, I wonder how people would react if they didn't have your name attached to them. I suspect that films such as *Scoop*, *The Curse of the Jade Scorpion*, *Hollywood Ending*, *Melinda and Melinda*, *Small Time Crooks*, and even *Celebrity*, would not receive nearly the attention that they did had they been made in exactly the same way by someone else.

But that's the nature of art and entertainment, and of much of human interactions with other humans: context is everything. Still, I miss the Woody of *Annie Hall*, *Manhattan*, *Hannah and Her Sisters*, *The Purple Rose of Cairo*, *Zelig*, and even of *Broadway Danny Rose*, *Crimes and Misdemeanors*, and *Mighty Aphrodite*. In spite of how disgusted I was by the the whole Soon-Yi affair, I still love those films of "old."

True, films like *Match Point*, *Vicky Cristina Barcelona* and *Midnight in Paris* have their charm, but they lack the brilliance I once took for granted. I would put *To Rome with Love* close to their category ... but not quite. At the end of the day, as fun as are certain episodes and scenes in the film, the overall result produces a mere trifle. Still, it's better than *Ted*, and the actors are

fun to watch. Even Judy Davis, so often badly served by the shrewish roles Woody Allen seems to love to write for her, comes across fairly well.

Some high points of the movie, for me, were: Robert Benigni's performance as a hapless sudden celebrity; Fabio Armiliato (a real-life operatic tenor) as a mortician who sings beautifully, but only in the shower; Penélope Cruz spilling out of her red dress in inappropriate surroundings; and Domenico Modugno's lovely version of "Nel Blu Dipinto Di Blu (Volare)" over the opening credits.

Tomorrow, I believe I will only be able to see 2 films, at most, and as of right now those films will be Wes Anderson's *Moonrise Kingdom* and Steven Soderbergh's *Magic Mike*. See you on the other side!

July 15, 2012: *Moonrise Kingdom and Magic Mike*

I'd like to offer a qualification to all of my "reviews" of the past few days. First of all, they are not really full-fledged film reviews, as I wrote them usually late at night, and quickly, and are therefore best read as my immediate impressions upon seeing each film. Secondly, I frequently change my mind over time, as my impressions mellow and/or mature. As I think more about these movies, I may find that I think a bit differently about them. I therefore reserve the right to change my mind. I doubt that I'll ever think well of *Ted*, but I may start to think even more highly of *Beasts of the Southern Wild* after a week or so.

Finally, everybody is different (how's THAT for a truism!). I am grateful that there are films out there for everyone. Let us all be thankful for diversity.

And now – 2 more reviews. I only made it to two films today, one at the Charles (*Moonrise Kingdom*), and one at the Landmark Harbor East (*Magic Mike*). Here are my thoughts:

Moonrise Kingdom (Wes Anderson, Director) Grade = C+

Wes Anderson is truly hit or miss for me, although I am beginning to suspect that he is evolving into more of a miss. I absolutely adored *Rushmore*, his 1998 breakout feature starring Jason Schwartzman and Bill Murray. I loved the voice of the main character, and loved the intrusion of childlike antics into the adult world, and adult mannerisms into the world of children. And then came *The Royal Tenenbaums*, in 2001, which I loathed. Somehow that lovely sensibility had warped into something twee and overly whimsical, and I can only take so much twee. It's why Miranda July doesn't quite work for me.

But here is Wes Anderson with a new feature, after making first another film that I kind of liked (*Darjeeling Limited*), and another film that I kind of didn't (*The Fantastic Mr. Fox*). I never saw *The Life Aquatic with Steve Zissou*, so I don't know where that film would fall (his first feature, *Bottle Rocket*, was kind of a dud).

This new film strikes me as the perfect example of what would happen if someone took the website etsy.com and adapted it into a movie. And why not? We adapt board games (*Battleship*, anyone?). It is both beautifully and carefully crafted - hand-crafted, that is - with love and meticulous attention to detail, but at the end of the viewing experience it has all just been ... a little too much. There is not one scene or shot that is not infused with intentional artifice and affectation. Such a style cannot but get tiring after a while if one is looking for any kind of emotional authenticity.

Of the films of Anderson I have seen, there seem to be two major themes: the intersection of childhood and adulthood, and depression. Sometimes the two themes blend. Perhaps, then, one can see Anderson's aesthetic as a distancing technique - without the artifice, life might just be too tough to bear. If that is at least one of the reasons for why Anderson makes films the way he does, then I am sure (and glad of it) that his films speak to many people in need of such distancing. The box office clerk at the Charles Theatre asked me, as I was buying my ticket, "Is this only your first time seeing it?" Clearly, the film spoke to her, and deeply.

It's too bad for me, as there was much that I enjoyed for a while. I found the camera work, with its constant moving tracking shots and pans, quite fun. Bruce Willis gave a great understated performance. The kids felt a bit forced, but that's because they were deadpanning everything, clearly at the director's insistence. The film really lost me for good, though, when a certain small furry creature met his demise for no good story reason. Anderson did this in *The Royal Tenenbaums*, as well, and I didn't get it then, either.

The bottom line is this: if you're generally a Wes Anderson fan, you'll probably love the film. If you hate him, then you'll hate this. If he's hit or miss, then go ahead and take the chance (but don't say you weren't warned). He is a unique artist, and devotes himself to his projects. They might lack in emotional authenticity, but they are authentically his.

Magic Mike (Steven Soderbergh, Director) Grade = A-

I have enjoyed Soderbergh's films since 1989's *Sex, Lies, and Videotape*, which won the Palme d'Or at Cannes that year, as well as Best Actor for James Spader. Soderbergh is a master craftsman who is not afraid to experiment both stylistically and narratively. Lately, [he has been saying that he is set to leave the film world](#) which, if true, will make me very sad. Films of his that I have enjoyed over the years include: *Kafka* (1991), *Out of Sight* (1998), *The Limey* (1999), *Traffic* and *Erin Brockovich* (both in 2000), *Ocean's Eleven* (2001), *Solaris* (2002), and *Contagion* (2011). Although I enjoyed neither *The Good German* (2006) nor *Bubble* (2005), I genuinely appreciated the chances he took with both of them.

Now he has brought us *Magic Mike*, a film produced in part by its star, Channing Tatum, who plays the titular character. The script is ostensibly based on the experiences of the young Tatum as he made his way in the world as a young male stripper. Good thing he moved on to better options, as he is terrific in this movie.

Indeed, he is so good and charismatic that he completely overshadows the young up-and-comer Adam, played by Alex Pettyfer, who, for me, is the one (not insignificant) weak link in this otherwise superb movie. His character is supposed to be vague and unformed, but we are also supposed to see something in him that explains the potential to which others allude. Instead, we just see vacuity.

The story is fairly conventional Hollywood three-act stuff - we have a main character with dreams and aspirations, and conflicts that get in the way of his journey towards fulfilling them. But the world is new, and it's good to see a mainstream film exploiting the male figure, for once ([though women do not exactly come across as empowered here - it's still a man's world](#)). The script is well written, with generally good character development, and the relationship between Brooke (Adam's sister) - an excellent Cody Horn (who just happens to be the daughter of the current CEO of Disney) - and Mike progresses at the perfect pace.

[The film has been portrayed in various forums as a possible critique of our capitalist system](#), and how it serves the big players and not the little guy. I buy that. But the structure of the film is hardly radical (though the sex and drugs may offend some viewers). So if you're looking for a good solid drama with some extra intellectual heft to spell you from the action hero extravaganzas, you can't go wrong with *Magic Mike*.

Oh, I almost forgot. Matthew McConaughey is almost worth the price of admission, alone. Nice to see he's continuing to return to good work after last year's excellent *The Lincoln Lawyer*.

So - what's next? Well, I don't know. Tomorrow night, I know I will watch *The Intouchables* at the Charles, but I'm not sure if I'll make it to a film during the day. I guess it will be a surprise. If I do watch another movie, it will have to be in the morning, and so I'll have to choose from among the early options at White Marsh.

But now that I just watched 8 films over the last 3 days, I can relax a little. The only other summer film I really must watch before the Dan Rodricks show on Friday is the new *Batman* film, which I won't be able to see until Thursday.

Happy watching on your own end!

July 16, 2012: [Ice Age and The Intouchables](#)

This will be a short blog post, as neither film I saw today inspired much love or admiration. Those two films were *Ice Age: Continental Drift* and *The Intouchables*, a French film now playing at the Charles Theatre.

Here we go:

***Ice Age: Continental Drift* (Steve Martino and Mike Thurmeier, Directors) Grade = C-**

I don't need to write a full review, since much of what I think about the film has already been expressed in [this piece](#) by A.O. Scott of the *New York Times*.

I'm giving the film a C grade, but I will admit that it was not as terrible as I thought it would be. I suspect - though I can only judge from the previews - that *Madagascar 3* would live up to my worst fears. This film at least (sort of) held my interest for its blissfully short 94 minutes. But the plot and the characters are so insipid and uninspired! And I agree with A.O. Scott that there is too much incessant chatting. Like him, I loved the *Simpsons* short that precedes the feature. It was perfect - much like the Pixar shorts that precede their features.

I also object - even though this is "just a movie," as people are wont to say when one takes issue with illogic in a silly movie - to the crazy mishmash of animals that are supposed to have all lived at the same time in the "Ice Age" of the title. I do not remember feeling quite this annoyed during the first *Ice Age*. Since this is the fourth entry in the series, then perhaps it is understandable why the filmmakers have run out of interesting and original ideas with which to advance the story.

I don't rate the film lower, as you could do worse than sit through this movie. Other than by its lack of imagination, it does not offend, and would be a decent film to see with children. The fur on the sabre-toothed tigers is beautifully realized through the state-of-the-art digital animation,

and is one of the many such visual pleasures to admire. Scrat the squirrel also remains a fun character to watch, and provides a welcome reprieve from the rest of the tired plot.

Finally, there is one scene that rescues this movie from complete blandness, and that is the pirate song, where Peter Dinklage, Jennifer Lopez and company sing a really original and interesting song that reveals a wit and inventiveness that was lacking in the rest of the film. It's almost as if a different writer and/or director put this scene together, then went home and let someone else take over. I sat up, rubbed my eyes, opened my ears, and had a rollicking good time while it lasted.

The Intouchables (Olivier Nakache and Eric Toledano, Directors) Grade = C

Allow me to link to another [A.O. Scott NYTimes review](#). I think the title of that review says it all: *Helping a White Man Relearn Joie de Vivre*. Later in his review, A.O. Scott writes: "It is possible to summarize the experience of watching *The Intouchables* in nine words: You will laugh; you will cry; you will cringe."

And that's all so true. This is a film with wonderful French actors, based on a true story, that nevertheless manages to be a film where a "magic Negro" saves an uptight white man (and his uptight white friends), while himself being bettered though contact with their more refined culture.

François Cluzet plays Philippe - the white guy, who is a wealthy paraplegic - and Omar Sy plays Driss - his African savior who is in need of saving, himself. Both actors are excellent, and Omar Sy won the César (the French Academy Award) this past year, beating out Jean Dujardin of *The Artist*. [The French don't seem to find the film that racist](#), but it's very hard to watch in America, with our long history of racial stereotypes on screen, and not be uncomfortable, [as this review in Variety makes clear](#).

I nevertheless had some good laughs as I watched the film, but I found the simplicity of its cultural worldview insulting. I look forward to seeing other films with Omar Sy in the future, however.

So I have now watched 10 films since Friday, and will scale back from my viewing from now on to be able to get some of the other things done that need doing in my life. I will go see *Rock of Ages* tomorrow, though, at the one theatre in Baltimore at which it is still playing (since it bombed rather miserably - and quickly - at the box office). It qualifies as neither a "blockbuster" nor an "indie," but I was intrigued enough by the previews and [an interview I heard with Alec Baldwin on FreshAir](#) to want to check it out.

July 17, 2012: [Madea, Dark Horse, and a Tale of Two Davids](#)

I did **not** make it to *Rock of Ages* today. In fact - <gasp> - I only saw **one** movie in a theatre, and that film was Tyler Perry's *Madea's Witness Protection*. So in this evening's blog post, I will include a brief write-up about *Dark Horse*, a film I saw at the 2012 Maryland Film Festival which will soon be opening at the Charles Theatre, which makes it a topical entry - as an "indie" - into this pre-*Midday with Dan Rodricks* series.

Before I get to those two films, however, I wanted to share links to two reviews of *Beasts of the Southern Wild*, by two different Davids - Edelstein and Denby - in case anyone reading these blog posts is curious to know more. I had not realized until reading these reviews that the film had won the Camera d'Or (among other awards) at this year's Cannes Film Festival. That doesn't change my opinion of the film, but it might influence others to want to see what the hullabaloo is all about.

David Edelstein, [in his review](#), comes to the same conclusions as did I, that the film is beautiful in many ways, yet lacking in some narrative coherence without a clear reason for that lack. I like this paragraph: "*Beasts of the Southern Wild* came out of nowhere to win the Camera d'Or at Cannes and the Grand Jury Prize at Sundance, and I hope I'm not raining on its, well, rain, to say it doesn't completely justify its formlessness. There's a lot of unshaped babble, draggy landscape footage and over-insistent music — lovely in small doses, numbing when it underscores everything."

David Denby, on the other hand, [in his review](#), sees only great things. I like both reviewers, at times, and always find it interesting to read other people's writings on subjects about which I also have an opinion. I hope you do, as well.

And now, on to *Madea* and *Dark Horse*:

Tyler Perry's *Madea's Witness Protection* (Tyler Perry, Director) Grade = D

Tyler Perry's Madea's Witness Protection is not a good film. It was, however, a better viewing experience for me than was *Ted*. A full confession: I had never seen a Tyler Perry film, much less a *Madea* film, before today. I do happen to have *Tyler Perry's Good Deeds* at home on DVD right now, from Netflix, so by the end of the week I will have seen two of Mr. Perry's recent movies. We'll see how the second one compares to the first.

To be fair to this unstoppable and prolific writer/director/actor, this particular film is the latest in a long line of films featuring his large and vocal Madea, and if the whole enterprise feels tired and uninspired, there is good reason for it to feel so. I notice that the *New York Times* assigned the [review of the film](#) to someone other than one of their top three critics. He didn't think much of it. For me, a first-time Tyler Perry watcher, there was actually something interesting about seeing him play three different roles in the same movie, like a modern-day Peter Sellers. I found his Joe character to be the best, as Madea, herself, felt flat and uninspired (as the *New York Times* reviewer notes).

Unfortunately, none of the other actors seem particularly inspired, either. Eugene Levy - a great character actor - doesn't quite have what it takes to play so central a role, and Denise Richards is, well, Denise Richards (I must say, however, that as she gets older, she looks more real, and therefore more attractive - her wrinkles soften the plastic contours of her face and body). Finally, the film's visual look was also terribly flat. It was shot on a 35 format film-style digital camera, the [Arri Alexa](#), that should deliver beautiful results in the right hands. The cinematographer, [Alexander Gruszynski](#), is hardly inexperienced, and yet something about the way the movie was shot and then output in post production has produced a crisp and evenly lit image that reminded me of a ... soap opera. This was not a pretty movie. I was similarly surprised that a director who has made as many films as has Mr. Perry would deliver scenes comprised of such boring shots, edited together in the most utilitarian way. His aesthetic style - such as it is - does nothing to enhance the storytelling. In fact, it hurts it, since there seems to

be no reason why we cut back and forth between characters in dialogue scenes. Filmmaking 101: there must always be a valid reason for a cut.

I'm giving the film a grade of "D," since I did actually laugh out loud once or twice. Most of the time, though, I would turn my head in bewilderment when other members of the audience were laughing (albeit not very enthusiastically), since I just didn't get it. Then again, I frequently feel the same way when watching Will Ferrell comedies, so maybe it's just me ...

Dark Horse (Todd Solondz, Director) Grade = B+

Todd Solondz has made one film in the past that I love, and that is 1998's *Happiness*. I frequently use clips from it in class, since it is so simply shot and edited, and yet so masterfully crafted. *Dark Horse* came close to matching that experience (I haven't been a huge fan of Mr. Solondz's other films).

I had never seen the lead actor, Jordan Gelber, before, and he is quite a revelation here. His on-screen presence is annoying yet moving, and he interacts very well with his character's love interest, Selma Blair (who is also quite fine). Gelber plays Abe, a 30-something loser who is about to start losing even more, with a robust confidence that helps to keep us watching even during the squeamish parts. This being a Todd Solondz film, they're almost all squeamish parts (in the sense that we are uncomfortable watching pathetic and sad people fumble their way through life).

Christopher Walken and Mia Farrow are very strong as Abe's parents. Walken reigns in his usual volatility and allows Gelber the room to be the unpredictable one. Farrow manages to be nagging without being shrill.

In the last half hour, the film begins to unravel, as Abe's life unravels. I am sure that this is probably deliberate, and yet it somehow proves unsatisfying in a narrative way. We have a conclusion of sorts, as sad as it is, yet it feels like a cop-out. By that point, we have invested enough in Abe's journey that we'd like to see more rhyme and reason to the turns the plot takes. That said, the final moments of the film are extremely affecting.

And that's as much as I remember, since I didn't write anything down at the Film Festival screening.

One interesting note, on a personal level, is that the cinematographer of this film is someone with whom I went to film school: [Andrij Parekh](#). Nicely done, Andrij!

Tomorrow, then, I plan to actually see *Rock of Ages* (before it disappears from the one local theatre where it's still playing). I also plan to see *The Hunger Games*, since I just finished reading Book 1 of the series this morning. I know it's not a summer movie, but since it's still playing at the theatre (the Beltway 6) where I'll see *Rock of Ages*, I figure, why not? Perhaps it will come in handy, for context, in a discussion of action-hero (or heroine) films. See you tomorrow evening with my reactions on those two films!

Just to remind everyone to listen ...

July 18, 2012: [THAT's the way you need it \(just kidding\): The Hunger Games and Rock of Ages](#)

Listen to this masterpiece: [Any Way You Want It](#)

Yeah - now *that's* what I'm talking about. It's like that Journey hit, but not, you know? Perhaps it reminds you of rock greatness, or perhaps it makes you sick to your stomach.

So the theme of today's blog is ... adaptation (well, sort of, until I can't make that theme work and then I'll just forget about it). I saw two films today that were both, in their own way, adapted from previous work: *The Hunger Games* and *Rock of Ages*. The former is the first of 3 more book-to-film translations from Suzanne Collins's best-selling *Hunger Games Trilogy* (as with *Harry Potter* and *Twilight*, the studio has decided to turn the final book into 2 movies in order to maximize the return on their investment). The latter is a one-off (especially since it bombed at the box office) rock musical, based on ... 1980s rock songs (and the 2005 stage musical that was based on those rock songs). It features a few Journey songs, which explains my brilliant song mix, above.

Neither film won me over, but I enjoyed the silly rock musical much more than the self-serious and dull book adaptation. Go figure.

But before you go and "figure," I want to add something to my critique of the Tyler Perry movie I saw yesterday. In addition to the pedestrian camera work, I remembered that what really bothered me in the film was the almost non-existent sound design. Every scene sounds empty. Sure, they put a few car horns when there's a street nearby, but otherwise the soundscape is just bare. It almost makes it seem as if every scene had been ADR-ed (which means that the sound had been dubbed over in post), with little to no attention paid to filling out the design later (much as in Italian cinema of the 1950s and 1960s - but we forgive them because that was just what they did). Very odd (and very distracting to me).

OK - back to today's movies, neither of which count as summer blockbusters (*Hunger Games* was released in March, and *Rock of Ages* flopped), but both of which I felt like seeing for general movie context. Thank you, Beltway 6 Cinemas, for keeping movies past their prime (and for cheap tickets), so that people like me can see them in an actual theatre!

The Hunger Games (Gary Ross, Director) Grade = D

Why Gary Ross? Why Jennifer Lawrence? Why Josh Hutcherson? And the list goes on. The film, while remaining faithful enough to the general outline of the book (which I just finished yesterday and liked a lot), is flat and dull where the book is robust and taut. In spite of the gruesome subject matter, no one acts as if they're in any real danger.

I wanted a sinewy and muscled Katniss who looked like she could actually run me down, instead of the soft Pillsbury dough-girl look of Ms. Lawrence. I wanted a stocky broad-shouldered Peeta who looked like he'd worked in a bakery his whole life instead of the whiny and pouty Mr. Hutcherson (although I liked him a lot in *The Kids Are All Right*).

Not to quote the two Davids again ([Edelstein](#) and [Denby](#)), but they agree with me (which is why they're awesome). [Manohla Dargis](#) is a bit more favorable towards the film, and I agree with some her points, as well. But she is brilliant in her dissection of why Jennifer Lawrence (whom I loved in *The Burning Plain*, *X-Men:First Class*, and *Winter's Bone*) is wrong for the part.

Finally, what is the man who directed *Pleasantville* doing at the helm of this rough-and-tumble post-apocalyptic tale? Help! THEY DON'T KNOW WHAT THEY'RE DOING! Every camera angle is wrong. They're wide when we should be close, and close when we should be wide. The only thing that saves this movie from a total wash is that the story on which it was based is a good one. I wish I could say I was looking forward to the sequel, but only if they change directors (and cast). Maybe they can reboot it right away, with different actors.

Rock of Ages (Adam Shankman, Director) Grade = C+

Answer me this - when did *Don't Stop Believin'* become the reigning rock anthem of the 1980s, or at least the one that people love to cover, beating it to death until every last vestige of affection for the song bleeds out of me? Is it the fault of *Glee*? Did it start earlier?

I remember, as a kid, hearing the song on the radio but missing who it was by or what album it was on, and running around singing it for people to figure out how I could get a copy. That song used to give me goosebumps. But now ...

But a larger question is - when did we start, as a culture, loving to cover great rock songs of yore in sappy versions drained of life? I'd like to blame *Glee*, but maybe it's the fault of the Japanese and their infernal karaoke machines ... just kidding (and I love karaoke). Hmmm, I wonder if we're just evolving into a society where rock and pop (in all their varieties) are our common musical currency, and so, instead of passing around the sheet music for Strauss waltzes, Brahms arias, or Joplin rags, as we may have done in days past, we now do this. But I digress wildly. This will be brief:

Rock of Ages is silly, grotesque, offensive in so many ways (why is the only African-American character the owner of a strip club), yet somehow not the disaster I thought it would be. I really do hate the current taste for covers of 1980s rock songs. HATE HATE HATE IT (and that's me at my most eloquent). Yet I didn't hate this movie.

The plot actually kind of works, and everyone looks like they're having such a good time that I started to have a good time, as well. It didn't hurt that I saw this right after seeing *The Hunger Games*, but still, there is something appealing in all of this mess.

You don't need to know the plot.

And yes, there is a lot of Journey. And you can't really have it any way you want it, because the film's versions of the songs are just not that good, and they get stuck in your head and clash with the originals.

Tomorrow, I will see nothing. But at 3:45am on Friday morning, I will watch *The Dark Knight Rises* (in IMAX! in 3D!). If I can, I will post my thoughts before my appearance on *Midday with Dan Rodricks* at 1pm that same day.

Stay cool!

July 20, 2012, part 1: [Of Good Deeds and Dark Knights](#)

Allow me to say how sorry I am for everyone in Colorado who lost someone or was injured or traumatized by this morning's tragic events.

I appeared briefly on *Midday with Dan Rodricks* this afternoon, just to say a few words about my own experience watching *The Dark Knight Rises* at White Marsh at 3:45am, but otherwise the show was devoted to people's thoughts on the shooting, as it should have been.

I will return to *Midday* next Thursday, 7/26, at 1pm, to do the show I was supposed to do today, on Summer 2012 movies.

Before the memory of *The Dark Knight Rises* fades, I'd like to write down my thoughts here, as I have done for the other films I watched over the past week.

First, though, one more reaction to Tyler Perry. I watched *Tyler Perry's Good Deeds* on Thursday, on DVD, and liked it more than *Madea's Witness Protection*. I didn't love it, but I found it harmless enough. The mediocre shot choices bothered me less this time, although the mediocre writing bothered me just as much (especially that unnecessary pure-exposition opening voiceover). The best part of the film was the fact that both Gabrielle Union and Thandie Newton were in it. Both women are actresses of real power and charisma, and I am grateful to Tyler Perry for developing decent roles for them (especially for Thandie). I've been reading a lot about Perry and his career this week, and though I do not think he is a good filmmaker, I am very impressed with his stamina and confidence. He is truly a self-made success (well, OK, his fans helped a lot, but he assiduously courted them).

And now - on to the adventures of the Dark Knight ...

The Dark Knight Rises (Christopher Nolan, Director) Grade = B

How I feel about this film can be boiled down to this: the descent is better than the rise. The film has a duration of 2 hours and 45 minutes, and over half of that is the set-up and fall of Bruce Wayne/Batman. I thought that part of the film was brilliantly written and executed. But then the film started to feel rushed and over-edited, as if Nolan was told to keep it under 3 hours, and started cutting important information. As a result, we end up having confused geography and chronology which defuses some of the tension, since we end up spending time wondering how Bruce Wayne got back to Gotham (so quickly and without money), or how people flit effortlessly across the city in no time while the bomb is ticking away. Perhaps Nolan should have divided the film into two separate ones, allowing for better development of the second half.

The positives outweighed the negatives, however, for me, and I am glad I saw it. I enjoyed Anne Hathaway as Cat Woman, and always enjoy Michael Caine and Gary Oldman in everything. Joseph Gordon-Levitt was a nice addition to the cast, as was Tom Hardy. I disagree with those critics who disliked Bane's (Hardy's) mask, as it creeped me out and really made the character for me (it did, however, make most of his lines unintelligible). Christian Bale was his usual excellent self.

The film could have used slightly less exposition, such as Selena Kyle's speech to Wayne at a ball, where she spells out the revolution to come. In fact, any time any character (Bane, Gordon, etc.) speechifies, I say lose the speech.

I'm not sure about the politics of the film, nor am I sure that they matter. This is, in fact, typical of most comic books and graphic novels that I have read. They may seem deeply anti-authoritarian or anti-capitalist at first glance, but then they also flirt with fascist themes simultaneously. After all, who is Bruce Wayne but an angry Michael Bloomberg with muscles? And Bloomberg, for me, is a walking contradiction, often seeming libertarian in his approach to some issues (drugs, sexuality) and authoritarian in his approach to others (food, smoking). Love him or hate him, but you can't easily pin him down.

But if you think about what the film means - or is trying to mean - too much, you may get so frustrated that you'll hate the film. Nolan uses the visual iconography of terrorism, its villains and its aftermath to say ... what exactly? That we are corrupt (whoever "we" might be)? That there is evil in this world? That we all just need a Batman in our lives?

So my advice is to *not* overthink it, but to go - if you go - and enjoy what Nolan is good at, which is the big sweeping moody comic book vision of a GOOD GUY (compromised though he may be) fighting a BAD GUY. On that level, it works (with the caveat that the first half works better than the second half).

The film has, as of this writing, an 86% rating among all film critics on the Rotten Tomatoes site (and 94% among fans), but just a 76% rating among so-called "top critics." That means 1 out of 4 "top critics" didn't like the film. I found the negative reviews quite interesting, even if I didn't share all of the writers' opinions, so I thought I would post links, below, to a number of them, plus a link to one positive review:

[Dana Stevens of Slate](#) (negative) - read her review, as she mentions how Rotten Tomatoes had to shut down comments on the film, as fans were threatening those critics who wrote negative reviews ... geez!

[David Edelstein of NPR](#) (negative)

and the funniest ... [Rex Reed of The New York Observer](#) (negative)

[Manohla Dargis of The New York Times](#) (positive)

Enjoy your own movie-going. And stay safe out there.

July 20, 2012, part 2: [Excerpt from today's Midday with Dan Rodricks show](#)

As I mentioned earlier, today on WYPR's *Midday with Dan Rodricks* I had the great privilege to appear on the show to discuss *The Dark Knight Rises* and violence in films in the wake of this morning's tragedy in Colorado.

Today on WYPR's *Midday with Dan Rodricks*, I had the great privilege to appear on the show to discuss *The Dark Knight Rises* and violence in films in the wake of this morning's tragedy in Colorado.

Here is the excerpt of the show that features me:

[Midday July 20 Reed Excerpt](#) (it may take a moment to download)

If you want to listen to the whole hour, check out [this link](#).

I will be back on next week, Thursday, 7/26, to do the show we were meant to do today.

Thanks for listening!

July 26, 2012: [WYPR's "Midday with Dan Rodricks" show on summer movies](#)



So today, after a delay of almost a week, I finally appeared on "Midday with Dan Rodricks," at 1pm, with WYPR's summer interns Stephanie Hom (left, above) and Galen Druke (center, above). It was fun!

We discussed films ranging from *Beasts of the Southern Wild* to *The Amazing Spider-Man* to *Magic Mike* to *Ted*.

You can listen to the podcast of the full show [here](#).