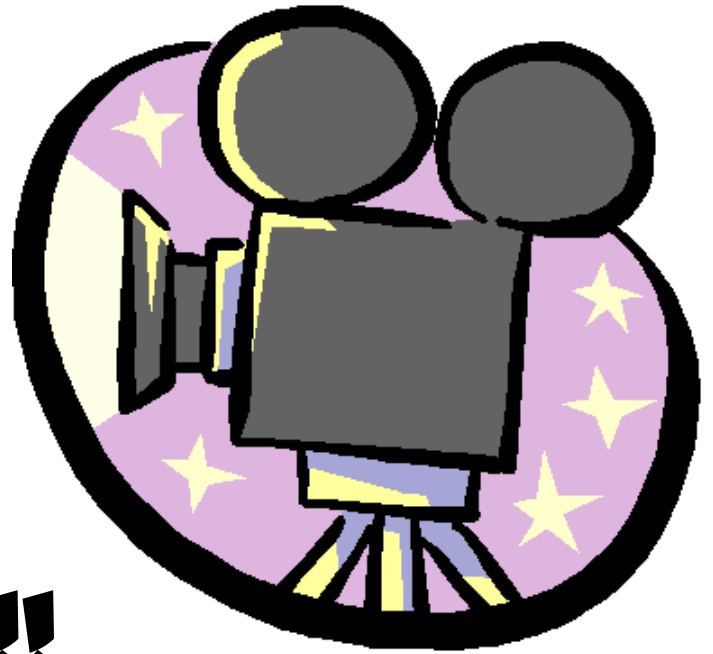




Presenting . . .

**THE
TURNAUS'
MOVIE
NIGHT KIT !!!**



How to have your very own movie discussion parties, complete with way too many capsule reviews . . .

The Turnaus' Movie Night Kit

By Ted and Carolyn Turnau



Dear Friends,

A friend asked us for movie recommendations and/or advice about how to run a movie night. We figured more than just one person would be interested, so Carolyn and I put together a “kit” of how to put together a movie discussion night (or, at least, how *we* put together our movie nights). Included in the kit are things we’ve learned in doing this for four years, plus the movies that we’ve found that have worked well for discussion, and some themes you might want to explore when showing them.

So first, a step-by-step run-down on how we prepare for and run a movie night (your situation may be different than ours, so feel free to adapt this as you need).

Introduction

First, before we get into “How to Run a Movie Night” or the recommendations, we need to let you know what movie nights are for, and what they’re not for; what they can do, and what they can’t do. If you get into doing movie nights with unrealistic expectations, you’re going to end up frustrated, discouraged, and you’ll drive some potential friends away in the process.

The goals for any movie night are two-fold: To let your guests know that you care for them, and to make them think. That’s it, love and reflection, heart and head. If you keep that in mind, you’ll be spared from trying to make your movie night do too much.

First, the heart. You want them to know you love them, but it’s awkward having somebody come right out and say it. But inviting them over and treating them well demonstrates what would be awkward to say. Your ultimate goal is to initiate relationship, or to build relationships that you’ve already started. God has chosen to work in and through relationships. So consider movie-nights to be primarily relationship-building activities. These relationships could lead to significant one-on-one discussions later, but to begin with, keep it simple and non-threatening.

Second, the head. The great thing about movie nights is that you can begin discussions about really deep issues (truth, beauty, love, death, parents and children, etc.) without folks feeling threatened. You’re not targeting them, you’re talking about what you’ve just seen in a movie. Movies are stories that engage us, and by exploring the contours of the movie’s story, you can also start exploring wider reality. And in doing that, you might be able to give glimpses of the Christian worldview. Don’t feel pressured to give a “gospel presentation.” You are *not* looking for a Philippian jailer-type confession (“What must I do to be saved?” Acts 16:30). The most you’re likely to get at a movie night is a “Hmmm. I never thought about that before.” The best response I’ve ever gotten during a movie night was a girl who furrowed her brow and exclaimed, “Now you’ve got me *thinking*.” “Oops. *Sorry*,” I said in an ever-so-slightly sardonic tone of voice (I mean, we wouldn’t want to get you thinking now, would we?).

In sum, if you can keep those two goals in mind (get them to think, and show them they’re loved), you’ll make things a lot easier for yourself.

I. How We Run Our Movie Nights

Step One: Prepare yourself. Learn how to discuss a movie with others, think through what movies *are* from a Christian perspective. One of the best guides to this that I've come across is a book by Brian Godawa called *Hollywood Worldviews: Watching Films with Wisdom and Discernment* (Downer's Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2002). Another good one is Michael Romanowski's *Eyes Wide Open: Looking for God in Popular Culture* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2001), though Godawa's book deals specifically with movies (and very helpful in thinking through how stories work, since he is a practicing screenwriter). Of course, the best way to think through a lot of these issues is simply to watch a lot of films and think about them. Pretty soon, you'll find that you're developing "instincts" about where to go thematically when you're talking about these films.

Step Two: Always always always preview the movies before you show them. You want to do this for three reasons:

1. You'll want to screen movies for objectionable content. This doesn't mean that you should always disqualify a movie if there's sex or violence or bad language (Godawa's appendix about sex and violence in the Bible is priceless when thinking over this issue). But if there is very strong sexual or violent content, it can be a distraction – at least it is to me. And that doesn't help discussion. Of course, you also have to be aware of what is age-appropriate. If you're doing this with middle and high-schoolers, you have to be more stringent than if you're inviting folks who are college student age or older.

2. You'll want to screen these movies for quality. My rule of thumb is this: If I can't gladly watch a movie twice, I won't show it to my students once. Sometimes the story is dumb, or the directing inept, or sometimes it's something more subtle, like pacing (I don't want students falling asleep during the movie). Or maybe the movie is just too depressing. That's one of the reasons I didn't recommend *Love Liza*. It's a well written, powerfully acted movie, but it deals with so much pain in such detail, it makes you want to slit your wrists afterwards. That's a reaction I'd rather avoid among my students.

3. You'll want to screen movies for themes that lend themselves to discussion. You might find a great movie, but it just doesn't lead to any themes worth discussing. But I find that to be kind of rare. If it's a truly good movie, 9 times out of 10, it will be worth discussing.

Other guidelines when choosing films to show:

Avoid movies that are too familiar (like *Matrix*). Otherwise, people either get bored or you get some rabid fan who dominates conversation. Neither of those is a good thing.

If you're dealing with a younger crowd (college student and below), beware of older movies, because they can come across as simply clichéd and insipid. One movie night I showed *the* archetypal cowboy-mythology film, George Steven's *Shane*. I love this movie, despite some corny scenes, but my students simply

couldn't take it seriously – and if they can't take it seriously, you can't seriously discuss themes in the movie.

Avoid movies that are too long (like all of the *Lord of the Rings* movies). I've found that for evening movie discussions, long movies just wear my guests down and they have little energy for good discussion. Two and a half hours is about the limit. (You can use clips to get discussion rolling, but you might leave some people disappointed if they came expecting a full movie).

What we've found works best are movies that are either recent and popular, but our guests haven't gotten around to seeing (or they want to see it again); *or* movies that are recent and obscure that they haven't seen, but they trust your judgment that it's worth seeing (and that kind of trust takes time to build, believe you me).

Step Three: Invite folks. I've found that a face-to-face invitation or a personal phone call works best. E-mails are too impersonal and too easy to ignore. You also have to have a feel for the rhythm of how people plan their weeks. If I call students too far in advance, they forget. If I call students too late (say, the day before I plan to have the movie night), they've already made other plans. For my students, two to three days before the planned event works best. When I'm calling my list of students, I try to pray for them, too, as I'm going down the list. And calling them one by one helps me keep in touch with how they're doing, what's going on in their lives, things I can pray for – even if they don't show up. It's a way of sustaining a relationship. I generally spend an hour or two calling through our list of 30 or so students or ex-students. It also helps if you have a regular schedule so that it becomes part of your guests "mental furniture" (I've had students call me up on a Wednesday and say, "Tomorrow's Thursday. Is there a movie night?").

Step Four: Provide a warm, inviting environment. This is where having a Carolyn is so essential, for she is a truly gifted hostess. (No, you can't have her – she's taken). Carolyn usually starts preparing a few hours ahead so that things don't get rushed just before students show up, so that she can relax and enjoy their company. I usually just ask how I can help and vacuum or straighten up, or chop vegetables – whatever she tells me to do.

One of our emphases is on food, and lots of it. Carolyn makes chocolate chip cookies (a rarity in the Czech Republic, and much appreciated by our students), a vegetable tray (for the vegetarians in the crowd), a tray of deli meats and fancy-schmancy cheeses, bread or rolls, chips, a bowl of fruit, and something special (we rotate week by week between chicken wings, grilled cheese sandwiches, hummus, spinach dip, layered bean dip, or black bean salsa). If you're working with students (i.e. living alone and don't quite know how to feed themselves the way mom used to feed them), food is crucial.

I've also found that putting on some good music also creates a friendly atmosphere (I'm kind of partial to Bill Frisell myself).

We also light tons of candles. It gives our living room this warm glow that (I hope) aesthetically reflects the spiritual reality – that there is light and life here and that we want the students to enter into it (at least temporarily, for the evening). It's kind of an outward symbol (with the food, drinks, music and the rest) that we love these students and want them to be here.

Last but not least, in preparation, you need to PRAY. We always reserve some time before students arrive to pray for students' hearts, to pray for our hearts (that we'd love them the way Christ loves us), and most important, that the Holy Spirit would show up and be our guest. I really can tell the difference when he does. I mean, he lives in us, so he's always there, but when we invite him to be our guest of honor, it really does make a difference to the way the students perceive the evening, how the conversation flows, etc. Occasionally, a student shows up very very early and we don't get a chance to pray, and the movie night is almost always the worse for it.

Step Five: Chill, hang out. We tell students to arrive at 7:00 PM (which means that they'll show up 7:15-7:30). We hang out with those who come early, eat and chat as people arrive, and then we start the movie between 7:30 to 7:45. Our goal is to create a relaxed atmosphere (especially important since it isn't all that common to have a professor invite students to his home in this culture).

Step Six: Prepare for the "event." I announce that we're starting. I turn off the music (that usually gets everyone's attention), and I ask if anyone has to go to the bathroom or needs to shut off their cell phones (a friend even gave us a "cell phone free zone" sign). The goal is to watch the movie free from distractions so they can think as they watch. Once this has been taken care of, I sometimes say a few introductory words about the film, what they should watch for. Sometimes it's better not to, it's better to let them enter this cinematic world fresh, open and unprepared. Then we dim the lights and let the film begin.

Step Seven: Transition back to the real world. I find that our guests (especially those who have seen the film for the first time) need 10 to 15 minutes to process what they've just seen. During that time, we'll boil water for tea, direct folks to the bathrooms if they need them, and just give them some quiet, some time to digest what they've just experienced.

Step Eight: Begin discussion. After they've had a chance to transition back to the real world, I'll get everyone to settle down and we'll open discussion. I use the following questions (you can be flexible, be willing to follow any interesting lines of discussion that come up, but these provide a good frame):

"Who's seen this movie for the first time? What did you think about it?" This gives first-timers the privilege of sounding off first (as opposed to the rabid fan who's foaming at the mouth to say his or her piece). It's also a good way of making sure everyone says something. Don't let them just say "I liked it," or "I hated it," but always follow up and ask them *why* they reacted the way did.

“Who liked the film, and why?” This is a great way to see where the viewers sense common grace and beauty in the film. This question can lead all sorts of interesting places.

“Who didn’t like the film, and why?” This opens up issues of where the film rings false (i.e. where the film lies about reality, often to cover up its own idolatry). Or viewers can express their dislike of some theme, or something a character did that they didn’t like, and you can get into great discussions about why that character was wrong, what is evil, etc.

After I’ve given folks a chance to vent their pleasure or displeasure (but always to back it up with some thought about what specifically they liked or didn’t like), I’ll move on to this question: “What are some themes that you noticed?” And we’ll start exploring the film’s imagery, leitmotifs, storyline, etc. Here’s where previewing the movie will pay-off, because you should have already spent some time thinking about this stuff, so you can guide discussion towards certain themes that you think could lead interesting places. In other words, you can allow the themes from the story to lead to bigger questions. If one character abuses another, you can talk about what real relationships look like and how they work. If there’s a scene involving reconciliation, you can talk about mercy and forgiveness.

One note of caution: Don’t try to force the gospel into this conversation. When we began movie nights, I’d let the conversation meander for a while, and then I’d feel compelled to “give the gospel,” in other words, to give a Christian reading of the themes in the movie. Students listened attentively (if somewhat uncomfortably), and then the conversation ended. It nearly always shut conversation down, simply because they felt it would be impolite to disagree with me when I had stated my opinion so strongly (postmodern students usually want to avoid conflict when possible). What I do now is that I try to introduce some small facet of the Christian worldview, and introduce it as naturally and winsomely as possible, so that the conversation can keep going. For example, when we were discussing *Moonlight Mile* and Joe’s conforming to what others expect of him for fear of rejection, I said, “I think that’s something that everyone struggles with, but unconditional love removes that fear. That’s what the Bible says about Christ’s love – that perfect love drives out fear, so you don’t need to live your life for others for fear of rejection.” And that’s all I said, just a small facet of the Christian worldview. It was enough to get them to think, but not enough to derail the conversation. My theory is that for students who come again and again, they’ll eventually see enough facets over time that they’ll be able to build a composite picture of what the whole Christian worldview gem looks like. *And* if they are one of my “regulars” and they’re intrigued by these facets, the might just want to join our Bible study where we get to tackle a lot of these issues head-on. Anyway, it’s a delicate balance, and a lot of times I come away from a movie night thinking that I should have said more. I’m still learning how to do this well. Every movie’s a new lesson.

Overall, I make it a goal to listen more than I talk. I don’t always succeed, but that’s the goal.

Step Nine: Cool down period. Let the conversation wind down naturally. Try to feel when everything that was going to be said has been said (if someone really wants to keep going, let 'em – they've got something important to say . . . unless you've got a rabid fan on your hands, in which case you may need to intervene or he'll keep everyone there until 1 AM). Then I put on some soft music (which signals that we're shifting from movie discussion to casual chatting), and we sit around and chill some more with the students. In American culture, it's polite not to stay too late. In Czech culture, it's impolite to leave too early. So after a particularly successful movie night, students may hang out until 11:30 or so (they would stay later, but the trams go to night schedule after 12 midnight). But there's no rush – the idea is to create this little oasis where time slows down and people feel like they can linger (a taste of eternity in time). However, if they stay very late, you'll want to leave the dishes for tomorrow.

That's it, that's all of my secrets (all of the ones I'm conscious of, anyway). Feel free to adapt these however you want to. The next section is a list of movies that we liked and that seemed to have worked well for movie discussion nights from the last four years or so, along with the themes that we explored from each movie.

II. Recommended Movies

My top movie night picks (alphabetically, not in order of preference). Remember, these are just suggestions – preview these movies first to see if they'll work for you.

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

affair just to shake up the routine), which outlook on life is more wise – optimism or cynicism.

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

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

Almost Famous. Another one of those road/coming of age movies. Charming in its own way. A tale of a young writer trying to write a story for the *Rolling Stone*. Issues to discuss are the corruption of fame, hero worship and the reality of rock-n-roll heroes, and where your true home is.

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

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

The Apostle. Robert Duvall wrote, directed, produced and starred (AND put up five million dollars of his own money). Duvall's character study of a Southern Holiness

preacher (Sonny Dewey) is a tour de force. He also wrote a very strong script that treats believers with dignity, while still showing their weaknesses. A good film for discussing what makes a good person, or a bad person, and what does grace mean. The scene where Billy Bob Thornton comes riding in on a bulldozer to knock down Sonny's church is worth the whole film.

Bringing Out the Dead. Directed by Martin Scorsese, starring Nicholas Cage. A very energetic mix of black comedy and existential drama. Cage plays a paramedic who is having a hard time coping with the ever-present reality of death (he hasn't saved anyone's life in a long time). And it has a GREAT soundtrack (Van Morrison figures prominently in it). The film has a feel very like Scorsese's earlier work, "Taxi Driver." Good for discussing death, search for salvation and how the movie answers that quest (finding relationship with a woman is the way to get saved). Well written and filmed. It does have some nasty language, violence and drug abuse scenes, so not for the kids.

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

Contact. Starring Jodie Foster. Good for discussing religion versus science (or better, science *as* religion). Other possible themes: why do we want to find extra-terrestrial life? Why do we long for something beyond us? A little preachy, but still interesting. This was Carl Sagan's swan-song.

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

Dogtown and Z Boys. The best documentary on a popular subculture that I've ever seen. This movie about the birth of the skater (in today's parlance, sk8r) subculture runs a bit long, but it's engrossing nonetheless. A very good diagnosis of youth culture as a subtle mix of inspiration (the attitudes of the skateboarders towards skating the perfect carve is almost religious), rebellion, community, technology, accident, and commerce. Plus the soundtrack rocks.

Drunken Master. An early Jackie Chan movie. Not particularly deep, bad dubbing, clumsy cinematography, a laughable story, but stunning fight choreography. All the things that make chop-saki movies so endearing. Issues to discuss include the father/son relationship (for the Chinese, being a good son is something you have to earn or be rejected by your father, vs. adoption based on grace in Christianity), honor, teachableness, revenge (and why we find revenge so darn satisfying to watch).

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

Gosford Park. Robert Altman's take on the murder mystery features a fine ensemble cast and explores such themes as class differences (with a very decided leaning towards the servants over the rich aristocracy), revenge, the parent-child relationship (again), and it raises the question: Is there healing for life-long bitterness? (there's an absolutely heart-breaking scene towards the end of the movie).

Heaven. Another movie we haven't done yet, but I'm sure it will generate good discussion. Recently deceased Polish filmmaker Krzysztof Kieslowski (my favorite European director) wrote the screenplay but died before he could make the film. Tom Tykwer (who won fame for *Run, Lola, Run* stays true to Kieslowski's vision and makes a truly beautiful film about a woman who strikes out at the corruption of the world with devastating results. You get a real sense of the fallenness of the world, and a desire for a better country (see Heb. 11:13-16). Topics to discuss might be the corruption that is not only in the world, but also in you, that longing for a place in which to be free, the nature of trust, etc.

Henry V. Kenneth Branagh's adaptation of Shakespeare started a spate of latter-day film version of the Bard's plays. Great acting, very well made movie. Good for discussing themes of kingship, God's acting in history, etc. Not for non-native English speakers, though, as the language is kind of rich (it's Shakespeare, right?).

The Hulk. It's no art-house film, but the latest offering from director Ang Lee (*Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*) raises enough interesting questions to make it worth watching (plus I really liked how Lee used split screen imagery to mimic a comic book). Themes include abandonment and resentment, what happens when technology falls into the wrong hands (in this case, greedy commercial interests), the myth of the hero who cleanses all things through violence (vs. the reality of what violence does to a community and to individuals), and the notion of freedom as complete lack of restraint (here's where the movie cheats since it wants to portray the Hulk as absolutely unconstrained in his violence, but he's also careful to protect lives like a good superhero and only get the bad-guys). The low point of the film for me – the father/son confrontation near the end of the film – too much like an actor's workshop. Overall, a really fun summer blockbuster – good to show in the middle of winter. *I wrote this before we screened the Hulk. It wasn't one of our better movie nights. Europeans just have a problem with American block-busters. Maybe an American crowd, or a high-school crowd, would like it better.*

King of Masks. A Chinese film about an old man whose craft is acting with masks (and changing them very rapidly). The story is about his relationship with a young child he takes to be his apprentice. Great story, very moving. And very good for discussing themes of Mahayana Buddhism, Confucianism, as well as themes of sonship, grace and adoption.

Levity. Another nicely shot, nicely scripted tale of guilt and forgiveness. Billy Bob Thornton plays a murderer released from prison trying to come to terms with his past and his conscience. A very quiet, evenly-paced movie full of interesting characters struggling with everything from living a lie, partying to cover an inner-emptiness, repentance, grief and a desire for revenge. It's an unusual movie in that it deals with these themes in more directly religious language than most movies would (after all, the main character is named "Manuel Jordan"). A good movie for discussion.

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

Magnolia. One of my all-time-favorites. Writer/director Paul Thomas Anderson succeeded in weaving together six or seven stories about lives that are intertwined (around a TV gameshow called "What Do Kids Know?"). The story is ultimately about the ravages of the past and the hope for redemption. A wonderful ensemble cast with Tom Cruise acting as well as I've ever seen him, plus Jason Robard's last role before he died (he gives the most powerful performance of the cast). Issues include dealing with the past, forgiveness, unconditional love vs. fear of opening up the truth of yourself to others. All of these interconnected stories spiral downwards towards the end of the film until something happens (it's an image of God's intervention, but I don't want to spoil the movie for you). A brilliant, intense movie. Be forewarned – it's long (about 3 hours), and Tom Cruise's character uses some incredibly offensive language (but then again, watching the development of his character is one of the most satisfying performances in the film).

Man on the Moon. Yes, we watched the Andy Kaufman biopic. It was fascinating in that Kaufman was the quintessential postmodern man: no stable identity, constantly changing who he was – which resulted in there not being any "real him" left. Plus, Jim Carrey was just outstanding. There is some nudity and some foul language, but still a good movie.

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

Matchstick Men. A nice character study of a con-man from director Ridley Scott. Nicholas Cage is absolutely convincing as an obsessive-compulsive con-man who yearns for his estranged family. A father/daughter relationship looms large here and could provide interesting conversation, as well as the meaning of truth vs. deception, or crippling fear/regret over the past vs. freedom and love and opening yourself to relationship. We haven't done this one yet, but I think it would work well.

Matrix. Great film, very stylish, somewhat violent, but raises good questions about the nature of reality, Neo as Christ figure, etc. I don't do this one anymore just because people are tired of it – too many people have seen it too many times.

Million Dollar Hotel. Director Wim Wender's treatment of a script written by U2's Bono (a better writer than most). It's a very quirky combination of love-story and murder mystery set amongst the down-and-out crowd in L.A. Some themes we discussed were this sense of community between all of these screwed-up people (sort of like the Church), the transforming power of love, and the crushing burden of guilt.

The Miracle Maker. This is the best adaptation of the life of Jesus I've ever seen on film, and it's all claymation! This movie is remarkable for the quality of the animation (you soon forget that it's animated), for the intelligent use of the biblical materials, for its faithfulness to the text (except for the last 10 seconds of the movie which tries to explain Christ's Second Coming solely in terms of the present Christian Church). First class voice talent (including Ralph Fiennes, Sir Ian Holm, and William Hurt). A very entertaining way to present the person of Jesus (but you need to have your guests aware that they are going to be watching an explicitly Christian film). Unfortunately, I believe that this is only available in PAL format or in Zone 2 DVD, so unless you have a multi-system videocassette player or a multi-zone DVD-player (with a PAL to NTSC translator), you're going to have trouble showing this.

Moonlight Mile. Nice cinematography, great 70s soundtrack, and wonderful acting. This story of a young man who has recently lost his fiancée focuses on themes of the fear of rejection (and therefore conforming to others' expectations of you and living a double life) vs. the truth and opening yourself to the possibility of unconditional love. You also get a good look at what grieving looks like without God. It tackles a hard subject without cliché.

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

Oscar and Lucinda. Cate Blanchett and Ralph Fiennes shine in this story about a two obsessive gamblers in 19th century Australia. Fiennes' character is also a parson, so Christian themes are right there: love, grace, damnation, true spirituality vs.

institutionalized religion (at the end of the movie, the church is literally a trap for Oscar), the meaning of death (as reaching peace after a fitful life), chasing foolish dreams as a grand ambition, love, innocence. An absolutely shattering tale and well worth watching.

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

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

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

Princess Bride. A classic, and wonderfully written. Directed by Rob Reiner. Theme: What makes fairy tales work? What is "True Love," anyway? Beware – there are plenty of rabid fans of this movie. When we showed it, we had a *lot* of Americans there (including a group of girls that I couldn't get to stop cooing over Wesley and "twuewuv"). Hard to have a discussion with all that cooing.

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

Raising Arizona. The Cohen brothers' wonderfully surreal comedy from the 80's about the search for a baby. Discussion topic: Nathan Jr. as a symbol of unconditional acceptance (and how much everyone wants that). Caution: For some people, this movie just leaves them cold. I have a hard time understanding those people.

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

Rok D'abla. This is a quirky little mockumentary in the line of *This is Spinal Tap*. It's the story of the Czech Bob Dylan (a musician named Jaromir Nohavica) who tours with a Czech folk band called Czechomor. A documentary filmmaker accompanies them, and spooky, spiritual things begin to happen. A good film for discussing what real spirituality is, why it draws secular people (Czechs are known as one of the most secular people in the world), the search for God, the significance of silence (some of the characters practice a sort of meditation). A very funny, very winsome movie. Unfortunately, like *Miracle Maker*, it's only available in PAL (though the DVD is multi-zone, you'd still need a PAL-NTSC converter for your DVD player).

Shipping News. Kevin Spacey, Cate Blanchett and Julianne Moore all give stellar performances in this tale of finding your place in the world by coming home (in this case, home is a barren, cold place in Nova Scotia). Themes include facing your past and getting free from it, finding your place in the world, there's a kind of acceptance of the supernatural (albeit a New Agey one), how to find hope in a barren world, etc.

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

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

Slingblade. This is a wonderful film (I know, I know. I'm starting to sound like Gene Shallit, but I only show really good films). Billy Bob Thornton wrote, directed and starred in this film about a mentally handicapped man who committed murder in his childhood who is released from a mental hospital and becomes involved in a very troubled family. Thornton is compelling as Carl, with good performances all around (even from Dwight Yokam (sp?) as the abusive redneck boyfriend of the mom of the boy Carl befriends). The cinematography is splendid, and the soundtrack (by Daniel Lanois,

one of my favorite guitar players) is perfect, atmospheric, understated. A great movie for discussing ethical themes (Carl has a big ethical choice to make at the end of the film), and themes of fatherhood (that keeps coming up in these movies, doesn't it?). My students had a really hard time understanding the English because of the accents, but native speakers should have no problem. It has no screen violence, despite the subject matter.

The Ten Commandments. No, not the Cecil B. DeMille production with Charlton Heston as Moses. I don't think that would work well for a movie night. No, I'm talking about the series of films Krzysztof Kieslowski made for Polish television in the 80s. I've only seen the first (they're a little hard to find), but it was close to perfect. In my opinion, he is the role-model for Christian filmmakers who want to say something without falling into cliché or hitting people over the head with their message. He delves deeply into the ambiguity and anguish of modern life. Any of these would be well worth discussing.

Three Seasons. A wonderful joint US-Vietnamese production about four different stories about people searching for something in and around Hanoi, and how their lives intersect. Some of the most beautiful cinematography I've ever seen. Carolyn and I saw it as a date night in Vietnamese with Czech subtitles and a little English. We didn't catch much dialogue, but we didn't care -- it was just so gorgeous to look at. Great for talking about themes of searching and sacrificial love (there is an exquisitely beautiful love story in there that reflects the gospel better than anything I've seen in the movies). One of my absolute favorites.

Truman Show. Jim Carrey's performance is great. A good film for discussing existentialist view of human freedom. Ed Harris plays Christof, the TV producer, and very thinly veiled God-figure.

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

Uncle Vanya on 42nd Street. This is a real actor's movie. No elaborate sets, no music, no fancy lighting or interesting camera work. Just good acting. It's a production of Chekov's play "Uncle Vanya" (updated by the prolific screenwriter David Mamet, but sticking very close to the original) put on in an abandoned theater on 42d Street in New York City. The once grand, crumbling interior of the place is the perfect setting for Chekov's work on human depravity and the human condition. Wallace Shawn (he was Vincini in *Princess Bride*) plays the lead. A tale of unrequited love, betrayal, rage, and other basic elements of 19th century Russian drama (and the human condition). The very last lines of *Vanya* give a theological interpretation to all that has gone before, and THAT'S a great place to start a discussion.

The Usual Suspects. A wonderful movie, wonderful ensemble acting (the cast includes Dennis Leary, Kevin Spacey, and Gabriel Byrne), and great writing (it won best screenplay at the Oscars that year). Themes to discuss: the nature of narrative (and does narrative lie or tell the truth?), and the nature of evil. It's one of the few films that raises the issue of a personal source of evil without being cliché and two-dimensional. Kaiser Soze as a crime-lord who plays the criminals like a puppet master is a stunning metaphorical representation of how Satan enslaves sinners so that they think they're doing what they want, all the while dancing to his tune. It's somewhat violent and has some foul language, but still a great film.

Vanilla Sky. Tom Cruise and Penelope Cruz star. This is, like *Matrix*, a “play with your head” type movie that explores the nature of reality, themes of love and obsession, friendship, loss and grief, and the fall of someone who “has it all.” Without spoiling too much, at the end of the movie Tom Cruise's character is faced with a choice – to go on living in a near-perfect dream world or to go into a much harsher, unknown reality. That allowed me to ask the question, “Which would *you* choose?” and discuss which was preferable – a world where all your desires were met, or the real world, and why. A great discussion.

Waking Life. Very cool animation (animation was “painted” over live video footage using computers). This may be the perfect movie night movie, because you can discuss any and everything. 90% of the movie consists of short but deep philosophical discussions about the meaning of life. Then again, it may be too much for many viewers to handle. It's a journey of self-discovery for the main character (Wiley Wiggins played by . . . Wiley Wiggins). The key line of the movie (spoken by a pinball playing character played by the director): “All of time is saying ‘No’ to God, until you say ‘Yes’ and open yourself to eternity.” Issues to discuss: reality vs. dreams, being a spectator vs. being a participant.

One final note: If you want more information on any of these movies (or any other movie), check out www.imdb.com (the Internet Movie Database). It's been a lifesaver for me many a time.

Th-th-that's all folks!