



# IN THE NEWS

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## Getting Ready for the Oscars

| *And the winner is . . . !?*

### Introduction

On March 2, 2014, about forty million Americans (and several hundred million more viewers overseas) will tune in to watch the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences present the 2014 Academy Awards. In the United States, only the Super Bowl is watched and talked about by more people. This year, the Academy Awards offer us the opportunity to recognize some of the year's best movies, but it also presents us with an opportunity to learn some things about ourselves. Oscar films tend to cluster around certain ideas and stories that express the zeitgeist—the spirit of the times. In 2008, for example, as America was mired in two wars and a deep recession, the best film nominees were so uniformly dark that host Jon Stewart turned to his audience and asked, “Does this town need a hug?” This year, too, the top movies reflect the hopes, fears, and obsessions of their audiences and offer us a chance to reflect on what these films can teach us.

It's true that most of the time when we go to the movies, we are simply hoping to escape into a world where we can vicariously experience the lives of interesting characters living outside lives. We go to the movies because we want to be entertained. But even the most entertaining of movies can also bring us face-to-face with the loneliness

and search for meaning that characterizes twenty-first-century life, with its real-world moral issues and authentic ethical dilemmas. In these movies, we recognize not just entertainment but the opportunity to better understand ourselves, our world, and even our faith. Whether we watch a story about a free man forced into slavery (*12 Years a Slave*), about a bereaved mother who is literally and figuratively lost in space (*Gravity*), or about a swindler who thinks he wants the good life but actually seeks connection (*American Hustle*), the Oscar films present powerful dilemmas in the lives of characters with whom we can identify—and from whom we can learn.

### The Oscar Front-Runners

We can't forget that the Academy Awards are a competition as well as a fashion show, and until the night of the show, none of us know which movies, actors, directors, or costume designers will be walking home with a statue. But in 2014, Oscar watchers generally agree that *American Hustle*, *12 Years a Slave*, and *Gravity* are locked in what *The Guardian* calls “the tightest three-way Oscar race in years.”<sup>1</sup> Each is a worthy work, an exhilarating film experience about characters who draw us into meditation on some of the most important human issues imaginable. Each has a primary theme that

seems to be the connecting tissue between many of this year's best film nominees: an awareness of the essential loneliness of human life and the necessity of connection. And each merits closer examination of its other themes, as great works of art always do.

### ***12 Years a Slave***

*12 Years a Slave* may be the most powerful film-going experience in a year marked by great movies. Its depiction of the brutalities of slavery might make you hide your eyes at crucial moments, but Steve McQueen's direction and Sean Bobbitt's cinematography can be heartbreakingly gorgeous, as though to capture the extremes of this simultaneously hellish and heavenly existence. Dana Stevens of *Slate* describes *12 Years a Slave* as "a beautiful film about the ugliest of subjects," and viewers are simultaneously repelled by the human anguish and cruelty the film depicts and struck by beauty in the film's depiction of nature and in the compelling performances and visages of Chiwetel Ejiofor, who plays the kidnapped Solomon Northrup, and Lupita Nyong'o, who portrays Patsy—both are among the favorites for acting awards.<sup>2</sup>

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It may seem unnecessary to some to make a film about the evils of slavery in 2014 (although the news is full of sad instances of people held in bondage), but *12 Years a Slave* serves as more than

an object lesson about involuntary servitude. It reminds us of the inhumanity human beings—even "civilized" and "cultured" human beings—are capable of. It is a jarring representation of human prejudice that dehumanizes others. It is a cautionary tale about how a culture can take for granted evils at its very heart because they have become foundational truths. And, in the amazing performance of Mr. Ejiofor, it is a story about the triumph of the human spirit as profound as *Schindler's List*. As Chris Vognar writes in the *Dallas Morning News*, "*12 Years* is the opposite of an escape narrative. It's about refusing to accept unimaginable captivity with no end in sight."<sup>3</sup> It is a movie about hope and perseverance, a movie about refusing to give up that is an inspiration to many.

### ***Gravity***

When we meet her, Dr. Ryan Stone, the lead character of *Gravity* played by Sandra Bullock, has already given up. As the movie begins, although she is walking in space, an experience many of us would give anything for, she is really sleep-walking through her days since the death of her daughter. Alfonso Cuarón's blockbuster film is

acclaimed by many critics as the most mind-blowing cinematic experience of the year, and the human characters (Stone and George Clooney's Matt Kowalski) are the reason for the groundbreaking special effects. As noted in *USA Today*, as amazing as the scenes of space are and as difficult as they were to make, "we don't notice the bells and whistles:

They're on hand to immerse us in an unforgettable personal story."<sup>4</sup>

If Solomon Northrup's story is about a man who wants to live despite insuperable odds, Ryan

Stone's story is about a woman who wants to die. She's already started to give up on life before the crisis that drives this movie, the destruction of a Soviet satellite that sends deadly shrapnel arcing through the International Space Station. At its heart, *Gravity* is a movie about the appeal of death, about how much easier it sometimes seems than living. As David Denby observes, "In this movie, silence is not only the sound of chilly outer space; it's the stillness of death, whose easeful allure beckons from the opening sequence to the last."<sup>5</sup> It would be easy—too easy—to drift away.

It is as much a surprise to Dr. Stone as it is to the audience that she fights so hard for her survival. In a moment of deepest despair, she resigns herself to death and the hope that perhaps she will see her daughter again. And then—in what can only be described as a miracle on the order of the frogs from heaven that shake the characters in *Magnolia* (1999) from their despair—she is given new hope and seizes it. At ninety minutes, *Gravity* is a short and spectacular movie about that most important of subjects, the idea that life is worth living and that in the darkest hours—as is also shown in *12 Years a Slave* and *Dallas Buyers Club*—we can't give up.

Something better awaits us, some possibility of connection. Some new day will dawn.

### ***American Hustle***

The characters in *American Hustle* might charitably be described as "morally ambiguous." Some would call them unlikeable. Christian Bale plays con man Irving Rosenfeld, and he is introduced to us in the film's opening moments as he pieces together his elaborate comb-over. Appearance would seem to be everything, and *American Hustle* is a crime film about what people think they want—and what they discover they don't want. As Tom Long points out, this is a movie "exploring the dark and dizzy heart of American ambition."<sup>6</sup> Every character in this movie wants something. Some of those things are good things,

even if they're sought through less than savory methods. Perhaps the most sympathetic character in this film full of grifters, gangsters, and morally compromised law enforcers, a New Jersey mayor (Jeremy Renner) wants jobs for his down-and-out friends and will take any risk to get them. Others have less noble goals, things that never truly satisfy, like money, sex, or notoriety.

*American Hustle* lays bare the disordered desires at the heart of the American dream and concludes that authentic connection—a true friendship, an honest love—are worth more than all the treasure in the world. It could be said that David O. Russell's direction out-Scorsese Martin Scorsese; the movie is fast-paced and frenetic. But deep down, it is full of old-fashioned messages. Greed is bad. Accepting yourself is good. The greatest thing of all is finding someone to love who sees you and knows you and accepts you all the same.

### **Other Great Films**

The 2014 Oscars again feature nine best film nominations, and they are a mix of blockbusters and tiny films, but all offer us significant ideas worthy of reflection. We'll touch on a few of those films here. And though we won't discuss them here, we'd like to acknowledge that there are some other films that may have deserved nominations too, such as Robert Redford's star turn in *All Is Lost*, the Coen Brothers' *Inside Llewyn Davis*, and the much-talked-about movie *The Butler*. These films all have a lot to teach us about what it means to be human in 2014.

### ***Dallas Buyers Club***

*Dallas Buyers Club* is, like *12 Years a Slave*, a historically based story about the resilience of the human spirit amid the injustice of our institutions. Its main character, Ron Woodroof, goes on a journey that fundamentally changes him for the better. Set in the early years of the AIDS crisis, *Dallas Buyers Club* presents a character who is brimming with life and vitality—and living life so fully that it's

become deadly. In the film, Woodruff is portrayed as rabidly heterosexual, though some of Woodruff's friends and acquaintances in real life suggest he was not homophobic and may in fact have been bisexual. He finds out that he has AIDS at a time when almost all its victims were homosexual men.<sup>7</sup> Shunned by his friends, he finds himself gradually, reluctantly entering the gay community as he pursues and then pushes lifesaving off-the-books drugs and vitamins to his "buyers club." Woodruff's working relationship with Rayon (Jared Leto), a gay transvestite who also has AIDS, proves to be the vehicle that breaks him open. The story doesn't have a "hearts and flowers" ending—Ron Woodruff died in 1992—but in the film, he dies a changed man who has fought hard, not just to stay alive, but to help others stay alive. Woodruff dies having discovered the fundamental humanity linking him to everyone else who suffers.

### **Her**

*Her* is Spike Jonze's meditation on alienation and connection in the wired age. How is it possible that we are all so available to receive and send various types of communication, and yet we are often so lonely at the same time? Theodore (Joaquin Phoenix) works as a writer of personal letters (at a business called beautifulhandwrittenletters.com) whose wife (Rooney Mara) has left him. He can communicate through his computer, it seems, but not in real life, and this movie's central conceit is that Theodore falls in love with his computer's operating system (played with surprising effectiveness by the voice of Scarlett Johansson). It reminds us about the importance of connection when we are alienated from others and even from ourselves. Steven Rea enumerates the big themes this lovely parable-like movie wrestles with: "loneliness, longing, the nature of consciousness,

the need for human connection—and, increasingly, the fear of it."<sup>8</sup> What does it mean to love and be loved? That question is at the very heart of our humanity—and it illuminates our relationships with others, with our community, and with our Creator.

## The Oscar films present powerful dilemmas in the lives of characters with whom we can identify—and from whom we can learn.

### **Philomena**

That desire for connection is at the heart of *Philomena*, which explores connection through the simple love felt by a parent for her child. Philomena Lee (Judi Dench) is an Irish Roman Catholic forced by the church to give up her illegitimate son for adoption. The movie is about her quest to find the son she gave up long ago, about a jaded journalist (Steve Coogan) who helps her, and about their growing friendship. It is also about the church, its past failures, and the difficulty of remaining faithful to a church that hurts its adherents. All of us, at one time or another, will be hurt by our bodies of faith, and Jesus devoted an entire discourse (Matthew 18) to the difficulties of keeping the faithful community together. But *Philomena* sets forth a powerful example of faith and devotion. Despite the atrocity visited upon her by the church, *Philomena* keeps her faith and forgives even those who hurt her in the name of religion. This gentle piety shines through in Dench's soft-spoken and down-to-earth performance. The film—along with many this year based on true events—could be (like the quiet *Nebraska*) overshadowed by splashier nominees, such as *The Wolf of Wall Street* and *Captain Phillips*, but it too entertains and teaches us important lessons in the guise of story.

Each of us brings our own set of concerns and passions to the stories we consume, so it's likely that you and those you discuss these films with will bring up other themes you found important. Take note of them, considering what the films bring to the ongoing conversation that includes our Scriptures, our traditions, and our own artistic preferences. Although works of art don't always set out to discuss theology, theology is often a product of any attempt to grapple with what it means to be human.

## What's Next?

Many churches and small groups already regularly think about the spiritual messages found in film. If yours is not one of them but this study has sparked some interesting discussions, consider starting up regular film viewings or discussions of films commonly agreed upon. For further study of theology and film, you might want to consult the author Greg Garrett's *The Gospel according to Hollywood* or delve into another useful collection on religion and film, such as *Reframing Theology and Film* (Robert K. Johnston, editor), *Religion, Media, and Culture* (Gordon Lynch, Jolyon Mitchell, Anna Strhan, editors), or the recent *Light Shining in a Dark Place* (Jeff Sellars, editor).

To explore the real-life stories presented in this year's best picture nominees, consider reading and discussing Solomon Northrup's autobiography *12 Years a Slave*, recently republished in print, e-book, and audio by Harper Perennial; Bill Minutaglio's article on Ron Woodroof (<http://www.buyersclubdallas.com/>), which originally appeared in the *Dallas Morning News*; or Robert W. Greene's book *The Sting Man: Inside Abscam*, a source for *American Hustle*. Martin Sexsmith's *The Lost Child of Philomena Lee* is the basis for *Philomena*, while the drama *The Magdalene Sisters* (2004) presents another fictional version of the Irish Catholic Church's practice of "reforming" sexually active women in the 1960s by taking their babies and putting them up for adoption

on the open market. You might also read Jordan Belfort's memoir *The Wolf of Wall Street*, although like some of those who argue about the film's moral stance, you may find it hard to discover moral lessons in the life of deceit and debauchery related therein.

If you find yourself moved by these movies to discuss or take action on some of the real-life issues depicted in them, here are some possible next steps. You can discover how you're connected to modern slavery by determining your "slavery footprint" (<http://slaveryfootprint.org/>), and you can read about and take action against slavery through any of a number of organizations (including <http://www.antislavery.org/english/> and <https://www.freetheslaves.net/>). AIDS (which features in *Philomena* and *Dallas Buyers Club*) is still one of the top ten killers of Americans between 25–44, and millions around the world are living with HIV or dying of AIDS. You could lobby your congressperson for increased funding for AIDS research and medication or for assistance to foreign sufferers, particularly in Africa, where AIDS remains endemic (about 70 percent of deaths from AIDS occur in Africa). The One website is an excellent one-stop website for AIDS activism (<http://www.one.org/us/aids>).

## Endnotes

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2. Dana Stevens, "12 Years a Slave," October 17, 2013, [http://www.slate.com/articles/arts/movies/2013/10/\\_12\\_years\\_a\\_slave\\_directed\\_by\\_steve\\_mcqueen\\_reviewed.html](http://www.slate.com/articles/arts/movies/2013/10/_12_years_a_slave_directed_by_steve_mcqueen_reviewed.html).
3. Chris Vognar, "'12 Years a Slave' Lays Bare the Brutal Truths of American Slavery," October 24, 2013, [http://www.dallasnews.com/entertainment/movies/reviews/20131024-12-years-a-slave-lays-bare-the-brutal-truths-of-american-slavery-a.ece?nclck\\_check=1](http://www.dallasnews.com/entertainment/movies/reviews/20131024-12-years-a-slave-lays-bare-the-brutal-truths-of-american-slavery-a.ece?nclck_check=1).

4. Claudia Puig, "'Gravity' Exerts a Profound Emotional Pull," October 4, 2013, <http://www.usatoday.com/story/life/movies/2013/10/03/gravity-review/2870259/>.

5. David Denby, "Drifting," October 7, 2013, [http://www.newyorker.com/arts/critics/cinema/2013/10/07/131007crici\\_cinema\\_denby](http://www.newyorker.com/arts/critics/cinema/2013/10/07/131007crici_cinema_denby).

6. Tom Long, "Review: Ambitions Go Wild in 'American Hustle,'" December 20, 2013, <http://www.detroitnews.com/article/20131220/ENT02/312200009#ixzz2roKyDEMg>.

7. Forest Wickman, "Was the Hero of *Dallas Buyers Club* Actually Bisexual?" January 17, 2014, [http://www.slate.com/blogs/browbeat/2014/01/17/was\\_dallas\\_buyers\\_club\\_s\\_ron\\_woodroof\\_gay\\_or\\_bisexual\\_friends\\_and\\_doctor.html](http://www.slate.com/blogs/browbeat/2014/01/17/was_dallas_buyers_club_s_ron_woodroof_gay_or_bisexual_friends_and_doctor.html).

8. Steven Rea, "'Her': Alone with the Lovely Voice in His Computer," January 9, 2014, [http://www.philly.com/philly/entertainment/20140110\\_\\_Her\\_\\_\\_Alone\\_with\\_the\\_lovely\\_voice\\_in\\_his\\_computer.html#LXTc8lCvIDd6rMZY.99](http://www.philly.com/philly/entertainment/20140110__Her___Alone_with_the_lovely_voice_in_his_computer.html#LXTc8lCvIDd6rMZY.99).

[http://www.philly.com/philly/entertainment/20140110\\_\\_Her\\_\\_\\_Alone\\_with\\_the\\_lovely\\_voice\\_in\\_his\\_computer.html#LXTc8lCvIDd6rMZY.99](http://www.philly.com/philly/entertainment/20140110__Her___Alone_with_the_lovely_voice_in_his_computer.html#LXTc8lCvIDd6rMZY.99).

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Greg Garrett is 2013 Centennial Professor at Baylor University and author or coauthor of twenty books, including *The Gospel according to Hollywood*, *The Other Jesus*, *We Get to Carry Each Other: The Gospel according to U2*, and the novel *The Prodigal* with Brennan Manning. One of America's most respected commentators on religion and culture, Greg is a frequent speaker and media guest. He serves as writer in residence at the Episcopal Seminary of the Southwest and as a licensed lay preacher at St. David's Episcopal Church in Austin, Texas.

# QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Of the movies mentioned in this handout, which film that you have seen is the most powerful? What was its main message for you?
2. Was there another film you watched this year that deserves discussion? What was its message?
3. Which film do you think should win best film for 2014?
4. What do you look for most in a film? A momentary escape? A story that relates to your life? Inspiration? Something else?