



Movies and Culture Report

April Fool's Box Office No Laughing Matter



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Editor's Note: **Scott on Moody Radio, Mon. Apr. 4**



THEATRICAL RELEASES

April 1



Source Code (PG-13 for violence, disturbing images, language – Summit Entertainment) A decorated soldier finds himself within another man's body as part of a government project. He's able to experience the last few moments of the other person's life and uses this ability to discover the identity of a terrorist who is plotting to kill a boatload of Chicago residents.

([Watch the trailer.](#)) Jake Gyllenhaal, Michelle Monaghan, Vera Farmiga, Jeffrey Wright.

Groundhog Day meets the War on Terror™. Call me cynical but I'm assuming the terrorist in question will be a plain ol' white guy and not a seething, wild-eyed Middle Eastern Islamic radical—we all know they're not murderous fanatics, they're just misunderstood; at least that's the way Hollywood portrays them.



Hop (PG for scatological humor – Universal) What better way to celebrate the risen Christ than a bunny who literally poops jelly beans? Nah, that isn't offensive. ([Watch the trailer.](#)) James Marsden, Russell Brand, Elizabeth Perkins, Hank Azaria, Kaley Cuoco.

Is anyone surprised by a movie made by people who don't recognize the origins of the Easter holiday and have no concern for delivering family-friendly content?

Christians have allowed the holiest celebrations to be reduced to cartoon gags and marketing campaigns. We deserve crap like this.

Also

Rubber “an inanimate tire discovers his destructive telepathic powers”; French; comedy horror

The Last Godfather Mafia boss trains his mentally impaired son as his successor; South Korean comedy

In A Better World two families face real choices of revenge and forgiveness; Danish/Swedish drama





THEATRICAL RELEASES, continued

April 8



Hanna (PG-13 for violence, sexuality, language – Ardustry Entertainment) Teenage girl is raised to become the perfect assassin cuz, y’know, if you wanna make the perfect killing machine you look for a teenage girl swamped in the confusion of emotions and hormones that is puberty cuz, y’know, that makes like a whole bunch of sense and stuff. Saoirse Ronan, Eric Bana, Cate

Blanchett, Vicky Krieps.

Bottom line: this is an illustration of why it’s good policy to be mindful of an actor’s complete body of works. *Hanna* stars Cate Blanchett, one of the better film actresses of her generation, but that doesn’t translate into her picking great projects. Truth is, she often gravitates to nice sounding but ultimately forgettable works such as *Bandits*, *Babel*, and *The Gift*. Keep that in mind when deciding whether or not to see her new releases.

Also, the story’s core involves a teenage female assassin, so expect plenty of Ripley moments ([see my book](#), *You Are What You See: Watching Movies Through a Christian Lens*, pg 142, for detailed explanation).



Soul Surfer (PG for an intense accident sequence – Brookwell-McNamara Entertainment) Based on the true story of surfing champion Malina Birch who lost her arm in a shark attack and found the strength to return to surfing through her Christian faith. AnnaSophia Robb, Dennis Quaid, Helen Hunt.

The silly title doesn’t help alleviate my concern that this is yet another well-intentioned Christian film with high hopes and a lowered bar as regards story quality. I hope I’m wrong.

Also

Your Highness fantasy/comedy/adventure; looks to be a bad rip-off of *The Princess Bride*

Arthur Russell Brand remake of Dudley Moore’s original

American: The Bill Hicks Story documentary of the late satirical social commentator





DVD RELEASES

April 5



The Chronicles of Narnia: The Voyage of the Dawn Treader (PG for action sequences and images frightening to small children - 20th Century Fox) [Watch the trailer.](#) [Read the review.](#) Ben Barnes, Skandar Keynes, Georgie Henley.

The opening act of this production is one of the more presumptive and forced film openings I've seen in a long time. Director Michael Apted spends almost no time setting up characters or situations in his opening act. He is comfortable assuming you're in the know. If you've not seen the first two *Narnia* films, this will be a huge issue. You will be lost.

Forgiving the presumptive opening, the film is actually rather enjoyable. It's a simple story where the characters move from one peril to the next, yet there is a comfortable, conventional tone to the film that carries the previous *Narnia* productions into this film. If this had been a stand-alone movie it would be a failure, but as a sequel, it works.



Tron: Legacy (PG for violent action sequences and language, but **NOTE** the film is LOADED with Buddhist ideology –Walt Disney Pictures) [Watch the trailer.](#) [Read the review.](#) Jeff Bridges, Garrett Hedlund, Olivia Wilde, Michael Sheen.

I was awestruck by the original *Tron*. Then again, I was a kid and was easily distracted by the Day-Glo lights and Cindy Morgan in a bodysuit. Production-wise, this sequel hit's the nail on the head. It doesn't pretend to be anything but what it is: a spectacle formed by technology catching up with the original concept. The film begins in 2D and suddenly moves into 3D when the hero enters the computer world—a production decision which highlights the techy reason the film was made.

In most cases I find presenting movies in 3D to be unnecessary. In this case, it's not only suitable but enhances the production. Director Joseph Kosinski created a visually

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DVD RELEASES, continued

stunning world in his film and, despite the silliness of the premise, he lays out an entertaining feature worth the price of admission.

It should be noted that [actor Jeff Bridges brought in a Buddhist teacher to consult on the film](#) to give his character a philosophical/theological vibe. Bridges turned his character, Flynn, into a Zen Buddhist/Dude from *The Big Lebowski*. I find it humorous that his attempt to give his character a Zen mindset seemed to, instead, turn him into an ineffectual hippie wearing loose-fitting pajamas.

Also

Little Fockers another comedy in the Ben Stiller / Robert De Niro exercise in crassness

Casino Jack leftist Kevin Spacey's bio-drama of lobbyist Jack Abramoff

I Love You Phillip Morris Jim Carrey and Ewan McGregor as homosexual con-artists; billed a comedy romance

April 12



Country Strong (PG-13 for thematic elements involving alcohol abuse and some sexual content – Screen Gems) Garrett Hedlund, Gwyneth Paltrow, Tim McGraw, Leighton Meester. ([Watch the trailer.](#)) Paltrow is a past-her-prime country music star who teams with a young songwriter to mount a comeback.

Partly undermined by its own muted delivery and easy comparisons to other films like *Crazy Heart* and *Black Swan* (another suffering female performer) and, thus, didn't become the hit it may otherwise have been.

Films about musicians are frequently less about the music and more about the tormented backstage lives of the artists. *Ray*, *Crazy Heart*, *Walk the Line*, *Great Balls of Fire*, *Coal Miner's Daughter*, and *Tender Mercies* exemplify this fallen hero motif. In a way, these films let those in the entertainment business expose the very human side of propping up stars and icons.





DVD RELEASES, continued



Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows, Part 1 (PG-13 for sequences of intense action violence, frightening images, brief sensuality – Warner Bros. Pictures) [Watch the trailer](#). Daniel Radcliffe, Emma Watson, Rupert Grint, Bill Nighy, Alan Rickman, Ralph Fiennes, Helena Bonham Carter. The first part of the last edition of the Harry Potter franchise hits the DVD shelves. *Bottom line*: if you enjoyed

the series up to now, you'll probably like this grand finale.

In Christian circles there have been numerous arguments over this series of books and movies. Are they wicked? Can fiction involving witchcraft be useful to Christians? If not, then how can you explain *The Lord of the Rings* series?

Personally, I don't find these films offensive. Yes, it's about witches and warlocks and there is plenty of magic and divination. As with sex, violence, nudity, and language, the issue isn't the presence of questionable content it's the reason it is there. That's why it's QUESTIONABLE content – you should question why it's present.

In the case of Potter, there are clear delineations between what is good and what is evil. Yes, Potter is a Christ figure in many respects, but this is not uncommon in stories. Magic is not promoted but simply used as a narrative device and to make the tale more fun. It is very unlikely a rational person would be drawn into Wicca or other pagan beliefs after seeing this or any of the other Potter films.

Also

White Material drama; a white family swept up in an African war; French

Marwencol documentary; a brain-damaged man manufactures a 1/6th-scale WWII-era town in his backyard which results in providing the therapy he needed to recover from his trauma





Culture Links

EDITOR'S NOTE: Monday, April 4 (3:00 CT), Scott Nehring will be a guest on Moody Radio's [Chris Fabry Live!](#) radio show. Scott and film producer/director [Dallas Jenkins](#) (*What If...* [2010]; son of *Left Behind* author Jerry Jenkins) will be discussing Christianity and film. To find a station [click here](#) or [listen to Moody Radio live on-line](#). Podcasts and replays will be in [Chris Fabry Live! archive](#). WE WOULD APPRECIATE YOUR PRAYER for Scott—that his heart to see excellent art done for God's glory would be heard. THANK YOU for your support for Scott and for *You Are What You See: Watching Movies Through a Christian Lens*.



This weekend, Los Angeles' Brehm Center holds the 2011 Reel Spirituality Conference. This year's subject is of special interest to me: *The Death of the Critic ... Rise of 30 Million Critics?* [On their conference site they say,](#)

We used to read trusted reviews. But now a blogspot may sway our thinking on a movie. What does this mean for the traditional critic? The minister? The teacher? Is it a replacement of the critic? Or is the critic dead?

As an online-based film critic, I can answer that. It is the death of the bad critic. The Internet doesn't kill anything, it merely allows for open competition, which includes offering of opinions.

New York Press film critic [Armond White](#) states, "I do think it is fair to say that Roger Ebert destroyed film criticism." I disagree. Roger Ebert made film criticism accessible. The snobs are still there, they're just testy because they have to share their space with the unwashed.

Alan Noble at *Christian and Pop Culture* has [an interesting defense of reading secular critics:](#)

Fundamentally, it is always the obligation of the individual believer to test films and reviews of films against the Truth. And of course, there is tremendous benefit in reading Christian criticism (this website is a testament to that fact). But the benefit of Christian criticism and our obligation to test everything against the Truth does not diminish the fact that secular critics can produce helpful and accurate reviews of film.





Culture Quote

Man never achieves a clear knowledge of himself unless he has first looked upon God's face, and then descends from contemplating Him to scrutinize himself.

~ *John Calvin, Institutes 1:1:2*





Movie Watching Tip

Trailer Rush

It is common at the end of a movie trailer to see a little editing trick I call a “trailer rush”—those final moments that explode into a flurry of images as the soundtrack erupts into an ear-splitting screech which leads to an even further crescendo, then silence as the title fades onto the screen.

This editing flurry gives the illusion of excitement and conflict. It is also nearly impossible to pull your eyes away. The sudden stop is anti-climactic and, in theory, leaves you wanting more. The sudden silence gives the film’s title a touch of gravity. For example,

Apocalypto

Cranky Mel Gibson’s trailer actually has a double rush: The first leads to the moment with the panther and uses a trick normally used for horror movies—rushes set up that creepy moment as you approach a darkened doorway or an innocent is suddenly dragged away. The second rush in Gibson’s trailer sets up the title of the movie in traditional fashion.



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Battle Los Angeles

This trailer is quite effective on numerous levels. The moody soundtrack mixed with slow editing helps build to the end. It finishes with a trailer rush but doesn't give the traditional "boom" ending; instead it just ends with a slight rumbling sound. Nice.



Spider-Man

A very traditional trailer rush. The editing is already quite quick and the music is pumping loud, still, as if this weren't enough to heighten the attention of the audience, there is a final push of snap editing and a shrill spike in the audio. All of this leads to a short, humorous line which eases the artificial pressure—the release feels good and psychologically makes you relate that feeling with the film.





At Rest [Daniel 12:13](#)

Elizabeth Taylor (1932–2011)
Actress



One of the last great film stars and a central figure in the rise and dominance of Hollywood, Elizabeth Taylor’s career is as storied and influential as other iconic American* actors such as John Wayne, Marilyn Monroe, James Stewart, and Marlon Brando. The stunningly beautiful Taylor made an early mark on American cinema with her performance at the age of twelve as Velvet Brown in *National Velvet* (1944). From there she built one of the greatest acting careers in human history, including *A Place in the Sun* (1951), *Giant* (1956), *Cleopatra* (1963), and *The Taming of the Shrew* (1967). Nominated for Best Actress Oscars for *Raintree Country* (1957), *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (1958), *Suddenly, Last Summer* (1959), she won two Oscars for her performances in *Butterfield 8* (1960) and *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* (1966).

Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?, based on the play by Edward Albee, was notable not only for its production quality (the only film ever nominated in every eligible Academy Award category) but also for its harsh language and frank sexual content. It was this film, along with Antonioni’s classic film *Blow-Up* (1966), that gave Jack Valenti the momentum to push forward the MPAA’s film rating system in use today.

After Taylor’s peak in the 1960s, she devolved into cheaper movies and television appearances, spent her time developing philanthropist campaigns (AIDS awareness), and, due to fluctuating weight gain and multiple marriages, was publicly mocked by comedienne Joan Rivers and others. Despite the rough treatment, Taylor remained an icon for the remainder of her life, even when reduced to forgettable television and film projects (*General Hospital* [1981], *Hotel* [1984], *The Simpsons* [1992], and *The Flintstones* [1994]). Ultimately, Elizabeth Taylor was one of the true “stars” of Hollywood. She set the standard for starlets and actresses for generations to come as one of the final reminders of Hollywood’s Golden Era.

* - Film geeks will note Dame Taylor was born in England and was considered a British subject. Both of her parents were Americans and returned to the States in the late 1930s.





Information

Learn more about Story. Buy the book: YouAreWhatYouSee.com.

Find Scott Nehring's latest film reviews: GoodNewsFilmReviews.com.

Scott is a film critic whose reviews have been published on a number of websites across the United States, Australia, and India including Reuters.com, USAToday.com, *The Chicago Times*, FoxNews.com, and a variety of local news stations across America.



As a former screenwriter, Scott is focused on balancing his love of story structure and cinema with his Christian faith. He loves to teach film studies to Christians, showing them how to read films and how to deal with the sometimes thorny subject of engaging modern culture.

Scott was a co-founder of the [Catholic Media Review](http://CatholicMediaReview.com). His current reviews can be found at [Good News Film Reviews](http://GoodNewsFilmReviews.com) and at ChristianCinema.com.

Good News Film Reviews (GNFR) was established in June 2007 to discuss film and culture from a Christian perspective. From the first post onward, Scott has called for Christians to change both the way they view film and how they engage in culture. GNFR fell quiet following a short sabbatical, was re-launched in January 2008, and has been going strong since. GNFR is also home site for the Carnival of Cinema, a bi-weekly collection of film-related posts submitted from around the world. The Carnival of Cinema has been in operation since September 2006.



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