

Cobra Presents: Movies with Consequences

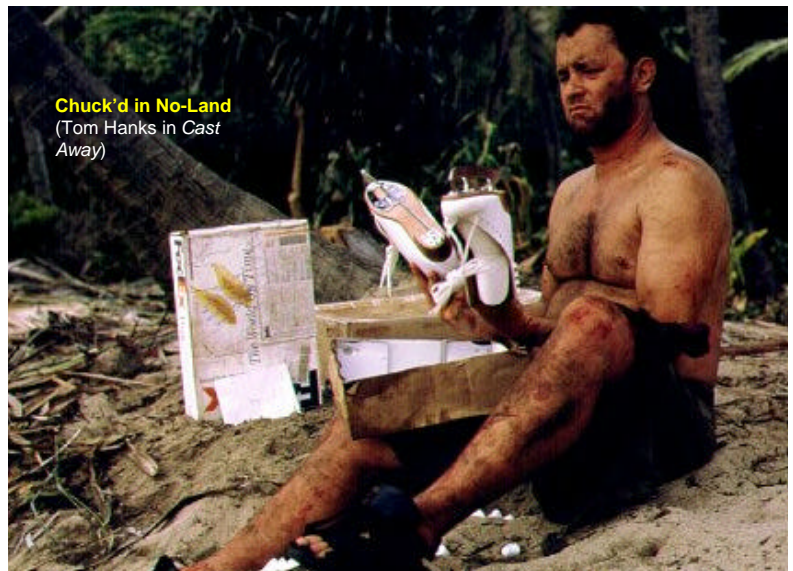
A SHOW I LOVED before I got sick to death of it is *Blind Date*. For those of you who never succumbed to *Blind Date* fever, it spikes its premise of arranging a blind date and following

the couple around for an evening by inserting subtitles, thought bubbles, cartoons, and other commentary by the producers when the proceedings are broadcast. It's all good fun for a while, and frankly, it's hard to tire of the ridicule of beautiful dopes. After a while, though, I began to wish the pool of *Blind Date* candidates would dry up, or wise up (which would have the same effect). Seeing a dozen or more women per week who described themselves as "loud," "sarcastic," and "a bitch" get rejected because, well, they were loud, sarcastic, and bitchy was almost as rewarding as seeing at least as many guys who described themselves as "obnoxious" and "players" kissed off because they were insufferable sluts. Perhaps in some undocumented moment, these assholes detected a connection between their attributes and actions and their being dateless losers (as I have in my own life), but *Blind Date* never aired such a payoff. That could be why my favorite movies this year were about characters with intractable, though relatively minor, flaws that became major problems for which they had to pay and pay and pay.

In **CAST AWAY**, Chuck Noland's septic tooth is emblematic of a smallish irritation that festers into a horrible wound. As with the myriad details of his personal life, he was not so much unaware of its importance as he was careless about his priorities. As a Fed-Ex manager, he figures life is long but time is short, so move move move because one of those packages might have berries or a paycheck in them—dental work and marriage proposals can wait a week. Likewise, the camera is rooted and aloof until a parcel labeled Fed-Ex comes into view. Then the camera attaches itself and zips along with it. The camera POV, like Noland, is high on activity and thrills in efficiency. "We live and die by Time," he tells his staff. "And we must not commit the sin of turning our back on Time."

But then, Time turns its back on its most devoted acolyte. He is cast away from civilization—Chuck'ed. He becomes a resident of Noland (this movie is nothing if not direct). The first thing he does upon washing ashore is to check his drowned pager. The second is to check the watch his almost-fiancée gave him a just few hours before. Though he promised to always keep it set according to the time zone in which she lived, it was wrecked in the crash and would forever after record the moment he lost her—lost just about everything, in fact.

Including a lot of weight. There were press releases contemporaneous with the release of *Cast Away* that claimed Tom Hanks packed on sixty pounds in preparation for filming, but I don't buy it. Hanks was plenty hefty in his last few movies, *The Green Mile*, *Saving Private Ryan* and *You've Got Mail* (yes, I saw it—I don't want to talk about it). He was a fat cat on the screen (as a prison warden, army captain, and CEO, respectively) and off (as a producer in television and documentary film), and his weight gave him an air of authority and purpose. Go to the gym? No time! He's got important stuff to do. That gravity was lost, psychically and well as physically, in *Cast Away*. It was simply impossible to imagine that little curly haired slip of a guy running a prison, army unit, corporation, or even a bunch of Fed-Ex flunkies. His absence of flab was an persistent, unmissable trope for all that was absent in his life—even that awful tooth. This is reflected in the camera's movement. Where at the beginning it was fleet and sure, it was shocked in to lethargy on the island, and in the end, just tags along with Noland. And Noland, having delivered the package that gave his island life focus, is bereft of everything that was important to him except the thing that was most important to him—Time.



Chuck'd in No-Land
(Tom Hanks in *Cast Away*)



Lily & Lawrence (Eric Stoltz & Gillian Anderson in *The House of Mirth*)

Unlike Chuck Noland, who was sentenced by fate to a four year time-out, Lily Bart in **THE HOUSE OF MIRTH** is damned by her own nature. Noland, perhaps unwisely, made efficiency his priority, but Lily is constitutionally unable to prioritize at all, and proves insufficient in every respect to compensate for this flaw, or even cope with her surroundings.

In the beginning, *The House of Mirth* seemed every bit the lame-o, by the numbers, *Masterpiece Theater* production its libelers claimed. Pretty redheads Lily Bart and Lawrence Seldon (Gillian Anderson and Eric Stoltz—not known for costume dramas) circle each other, speaking stilted dialog in fluty tones, blatantly performing. They are engaged in New York Kabuki, and Lily at least knows that if her performance isn't impeccable, the critics will destroy her. But though Lily starts well, she keeps dropping out of character and blowing her lines. Eventually, she will be driven from the stage.

The House of Mirth is the arena where Society engages in theater and sport. It is the only venue that matters. One character remarks on Seldon reentry on the stage, "So you are not so far removed from being manipulated by the strings of society as one might think." He replies, "Mrs. Fisher, none of us are." Lily least of all. She is a rapidly fading starlet still in search of a big break. She has some money, but not enough to maintain the lifestyle she prefers. She is pretty, but familiar. She has hopes, but no foresight. More than anything she wants Seldon to want her. While they banter, however, he thinks they are engaged in a romantic comedy while she knows her life is turning into a tragedy of manners.

The difference is reflected in the stakes Lily and Lawrence have in a culture in which genteel games of bridge take on aspects of blood sport. Lily is a poor gambler and a terrible risk. The piddling amounts she loses at the table collect and mark her gradual loss of status. Worried about her losses, she asks a savvy businessman and social superior to invest her remaining income. He gives her an enormous, and largely fraudulent, return, and she spends it all before she understands the tremendous obligation it places upon her. In a milieu where financial and personal compromises are directly and inextricably linked, Lily must make a bold play. She has an ace up her sleeve that would at once rehabilitate her socially and allow her to call the bluff of a Machiavellian schemer who finds it convenient to ruin Lily's life. But occasional pangs of conscience combine with unfortunate timing and prevent her from using it. In the end, she sacrifices everything to pay her debt to a society that neither needs the money nor appreciates her effort.

As the story progresses and Lily loses her place, Anderson drops the flourishes and mannerisms that signaled her membership in that rarified sphere. They do not serve her when she joins the working classes, but she has nothing practical with which to replace them.

"I have tried, I have tried *hard*," she confesses to Seldon. "But life is difficult, and I am a useless person. And now I am upon the rubbish heap."

The drama and games go on without her.

David Lynch is among the privileged few American directors who has an unmistakable vision and the opportunity and integrity to indulge it for the past twenty odd years. His record has been spotty. His weird and distinctive (but meaningless) *Eraserhead* was followed by the not nearly weird and distinctive enough (but equally meaningless) *The Elephant Man*. For that he was rewarded with an Oscar nomination and a plum assignment, which ultimately became the lunatic *Dune*. I love *Dune* and try to catch at least part of it whenever it plays on the Sci-Fi channel. No idea what it is about—worms, spice, blowing stuff up by yelling at it. Or something. It doesn't matter.

Which is not so much the problem as the primary characteristic of Lynch's movies. They are more focused on concepts (ie, "malaise") than story, imagery (grotesque floating fat men) more than plot points. As a result, they have a private, almost hermetic feel; they are involving, but only kind of. Until *Mulholland Dr.*

MULHOLLAND DR. began as a television pilot. When support from the networks evaporated, Lynch refigured the work as a feature film. As a result, characters appear without a proper introduction and disappear without explanation. Scenes are disjointed and marked by radical shifts in tone. This would make it no more than a typical David Lynch production were it not imbued with a sympathetic spirit unique in his kinky, flaky, oeuvre.

The story, such as it is, records the rapidly disintegrating fantasy world of a woman occasionally known as Diane Selwyn. When she makes her first appearance, she has re-cast herself as would-be starlet Betty Elms, who immigrated to Los Angeles from Canada, deplaned, and then takes the down escalator to the street, flanked by a kindly old couple. She meets an amnesiac who lost her memory tumbling down a steep hill bordered by Mulholland Drive after a car accident. The young woman calls herself "Rita" after looking at a poster from the movie *Gilda*. Both physically descend in to the realm of the Hollywood dream factory, marked by shifting identities and lies. They don wigs and dress up—they are part actress, part spy, but mostly engaged in a girlish romp. When Rita helps Betty prepare for an audition, the scene plays as the banal protests of an outraged ingenue. ("That was *really* good," Rita marvels.) Performing the same

Like Betty and Rita in *Mulholland Dr.*, Enid and Rebecca inhabit an exclusive, though rapidly disintegrating world—**GHOST WORLD**. The fall begins with high school graduation.

"Can you believe we finally made it?" enthuses a classmate.

"Yeah, we graduated from high school," Enid deadpans. "How totally amazing."

But Enid hasn't graduated—she has to retake an art class in summer school. And unlike Rebecca, who passed, got a job, and started shopping around for an apartment and kitchen supplies, Enid is stuck in the past. She experiments with new looks, but sticks with old materials, including a snood, and later an "authentic circa 1977 punk look." She even gets nostalgic about the people who won't be around for her to despise anymore. So she and Rebecca go looking for somebody new to victimize.

Almost immediately they find Seymour, a middle-aged bachelor who wears a



In Costume and in Character (Naomi Watts & Laura Harring in *Mulholland Dr.*)

scene in the presence of a cheesy has-been actor and sleazy never-will-be director, Betty is transformed into a supple femme fatale. Judged too talented for the room by an alert casting director, Betty is whisked away to another set. There, the star making part that should have been hers is bestowed upon somebody with less ability, but mysterious and powerful sponsors.

As my astute cousin Evelyn pointed out, this event is the turning point of the fantasy. Even in her own imagination, Betty/ Diane cannot conjure a happy ending. The starlet implodes, and *Mulholland Dr.* marks the metaphorical event horizon of the resulting black hole. Characters are inexorably drawn into and crushed by blackness and despair. The nice elderly couple is reformed into cackling homunculi, an intuitive young man is utterly destroyed.

David Lynch's movies have drowned in glamour for years. Women possessed of a nearly supernatural beauty have capsized narrative after narrative in their wake. The presence of the ultra-glamorous young women of *Twin Peaks*, for instance, was so improbable—even unnatural—that a corresponding ugliness had to be summoned into existence to restore balance to the world. But where *Twin Peaks* devolved into labyrinthine and cynical plotting, *Mulholland Dr.* takes the manufacture and consequences of glamour as its pure subject. Diane is twisted and demoralized in the effort it takes for her to create Betty; but even the pretty, plucky Betty is easily commodified and discarded. Hollywood is the only logical setting for this drama. Nowhere else is beautiful artifice so co-dependant with degradation. Legions of hopeful and disappointed working girls are the necessary fields from which a very few movie stars are plucked. And like Lily Bart, Betty/ Diane is not destined to ascend.

truss, collects rare blues albums and racist advertising, and is funny looking in a general sort of way. Rebecca, whose new job exposes her to a non-stop parade of weirdoes tires of him quickly. Enid, however, is fascinated to the point of hero worship. When she sees his collection, she declares she would kill for it. "Ha!" he scoffs. "Go ahead and kill me."

Seymour is further along the road to non-conformity that Enid wants to travel and Rebecca wants to abandon. While many movies celebrate the idea of non-conformity, few of them have *Ghost World's* insight. Those on the outs with the mainstream pay a price in loneliness, in suffering ridicule, and in being stuck with a group of friends they don't really like. With equal parts sympathy and brutal honesty, director and co-writer Terry Zwigoff with co-writer and author of the *Ghost World* comic books Daniel Clowes examine a species of character usually ignored or misrepresented in movies. The hard core record groupies in *Ghost World* will be cranky, badly dressed, and unpopular yesterday, today, and tomorrow, unlike their counterparts in *High Fidelity* who in the end are all redeemed by romantic and or commercial success. This is not to say that nerds cannot find

love and happiness, it just isn't likely to come in the form of record contracts and Nordic knockouts. Nor will Enid and Rebecca continue to play their demeaning games without consequence. As long as they have each other and dwell in an insulated bubble of adolescence, they manage. But that won't last forever. "May we call you 'Weird AI'?" Rebecca haughtily asks a waiter with an unfortunate haircut, little imagining she will soon be on the receiving end of customer abuse. Rebecca also tires of Enid's casual discourtesies. She begins to understand that the price of admission to adulthood is personal responsibility and forbearance, and she's interested in paying.

Or selling out, as Enid sees it. She had grown accustomed to a low-cost partnership—there was no supply of friends for her or Rebecca, so they made no demands upon each other. Seymour changed the



"Go ahead and kill me." (Steve Buscemi in *Ghost World*)

economy. The time Enid spent with him decreased Rebecca's dependence on her and increased his. Enid promised her friends a lot, then wretched on her agreements. Rebecca, who had learned from recent experience not to trust her, pretty much packed away her childhood friendship when she moved into her apartment. Seymour, who rejected a not quite suitable adult relationship to consort with a feckless teenager, snapped back to childhood as a result—jobless, and attended by a hovering mother and learning life lessons in the office of a condescending therapist.

Enid, who rejects the futures and cultures that Rebecca and Seymour represent, wanders into the sunset. She is friendless and alone, and frankly had it coming. But perhaps she has finally graduated from high school era flippancy and selfishness—how totally amazing.

Steven Spielberg is often charged with being a softhearted, fuzzyheaded sentimentalist. Last summer, *AI: Artificial Intelligence* was exhibit A for his detractors. For one thing, the movie's tag line, "His love is real, but he is not," was enough to make some, like the skeptical Lee, skeptically denounce the film sight unseen as a lot of soggy hogwash. But the statement is the lynchpin of a movie that ponders the essentials of sentient existence from an original point of view. While there have been many movies featuring artificial humans, and while the nature of those machines has run the gamut from utter villainy (as in *Terminator*) to the heroic (as in *Terminator 2*), none that I'm aware of has taken the narrative approach Spielberg did here. *AI* is a origin myth, or better yet, a fairy tale for robots.

In *AI*, Professor Allen Hobby proposes the creation of a robot boy with the capacity to imprint upon and unconditionally love his human "parents." But as his name indicates, Hobby has more aptitude than ethics. Within moments of his introduction, Hobby stabs a female robot, or "mecha," with a pin. Then he nonchalantly orders her to undress (stopping her after she demonstrates her willingness to obey him), then presses a series of buttons on her head which causes the flesh like surface of her face to slide away and reveal the mechanism underneath.

It's hard to imagine a more personal series of affronts; but then, she is not a person. As a machine, she has no rights a human is obliged to recognize. That scene ends with her serenely ignoring her surroundings whilst applying make-up. The next scene begins with a human, Monica, serenely ignoring her surroundings whilst applying make-up. The gesture is a small trope of the way humans are programmed to engage in artifice. The overlap between humans, or "orgas," and their mecha inventions is a matter of queasiness and hostility in *AI*. Limited resources have forced the governments of even the most prosperous countries to put strict limits on childbirth. Mechas were originally made to fill labor needs, but as they became more sophisticated, they began to encroach on qualities that had been thought specifically human. "They made us too smart, too quick, and too many," explains Gigolo Joe, a savvy mecha sex provider recently framed for murder by a jealous human. Disused and unlicensed mechas are rounded up and carted away to Flesh Fairs, perverse celebrations of human privilege where displaced and angry orgas brutally destroy their rivals. The spectacles are geared toward the lower classes of orga society, those with routine jobs and a diminishing sense of purpose. The creation of David, a loveable and loving robot child, is the ultimate insult to human uniqueness, and the Flesh Fair impresario is quite right to identify him as such. That the crowd turns on him and votes to preserve David only proves his point. Later in the film, when David's sense of individuality is shattered, he strikes out just like the denizens of the Flesh Fair.

The David line of mechas was first introduced into the home of Henry and Monica. Their son Martin lies dormant in a glass bubble, victim of an as yet incurable virus. He is surrounded by paintings of Tweedle Dee and Tweedle Dum, the Emperor in his new clothes, and other storybook figures. Monica plays Tchaikovsky's "Sleeping Beauty Waltz" for him, and reads him a version Robin Hood's legend, inculcating him in western myth. In fact, the passage she reads mentions the christening of a child named "Martin," as if to emphasize her child's connection to the canon. But for her, the process has become routine. Hardened by bitterness and sorrow, she has lost the capacity to appreciate the power of stories she tells and evokes. Martin, however, awakens from his slumber fluent in the language of fairy tales. He immediately identifies David as a threat to the social order, an interloper like Cinderella's stepsisters, a puppet like Pinocchio. In fact, Martin insists his mother read the story of Pinocchio aloud in order to send David a message—I am a real boy worthy and deserving of love, you are not and never ever will be.

David receives the message, but cannot comprehend its mythic structure. Orga Martin knows Pinocchio is a parable, an instructive story that is as useful as he needs it to be. Mecha David takes it as scripture, an instructive story that is as true as



"Cirrus Socrates Particle Decibel Hurricane Dolphin Tulip Monica David Monica" (Haley Joel Osment & Frances O'Connor in *AI: Artificial Intelligence*)

belatedly realize how she failed in educating David. "I'm sorry," she says as she abandons him in a primeval wood, "I'm sorry I didn't tell you about the world." David's only function is to love and be loved by his mother, Monica, and he is convinced she will only love him if he becomes an orga boy like Martin, or Pinocchio. So he has faith, and he prays to the image of the Blue Fairy (who bears a marked resemblance to the Madonna) to make him real.

The prayer lasts two thousand years, or about the length of time between the making of AI and the birth of the man-God Jesus. The dates are not accidental, AI is suffused with the most potent myth of the western world, that of Judaeo-Christianity. When the morality of introducing a thinking, feeling child doll into a world that already despises less sophisticated models is questioned, Professor Hobby defends his decision by noting God created Adam explicitly to love Him. Hobby the creator proves to be careless narcissist and profiteer, at first reproducing then mass producing his dead son. He allows David to suffer Job-like trials to test the quality of his (Hobby's) workmanship.

Other mechas are framed within a Judaeo-Christian context as well. An older model is crucified at the flesh fair, for instance, to satisfy human rage. The pragmatic Gigolo Joe is converted by David's faith. After he witnesses the David's suicide plunge (the reflection of the boy's body coursing down Joe's face like a teardrop), Joe drives a submergible helicopter in after him, a baptism of sorts. When David tells him he has seen the Blue Fairy, Joe believes him, and believes what the boy says

she can do. "When you become a real boy," he says, "remember me to the ladies when you grow up." Immediately afterwards, as he is levitated upwards toward a police helicopter, Joe tells David, "I am. I was." With the first part, Joe deliberately recalls Exodus 3:14, "And God said unto Moses, I AM THAT I AM, thus shalt thou say unto the children of Israel, I AM hath sent me unto you." This is not to say Joe imagines himself as God or a god. On the contrary, "I was" acknowledges mortality. Rather, he professes his singular existence in a way that is sublime if not divine, and quite a leap in Joe's philosophical development.

After two millennia of prayer, and well into another ice age, David is discovered by robot anthropologists who are curious about their origins and creators. The future robots are exotic creatures, thin and delicate, recalling the aliens from *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*, the logo of the company that build David, and David himself when he is first introduced in the movie, back lit and out of focus. They are self-directed in motive and aesthetic. To them, David is an ancient ancestor, and as interesting as a living, speaking australopithecine would be to Mary Leaky. A mecha Specialist explains they cannot make him real, but that they can bring Monica back for a single day. At the end of that day, however, she will die. David, with the selfish, childish gravity tells the Specialist to give him his mother for that day.

And thus begins the strangest chapter in *AI*, an oedipal fantasy in which all but mother and child are excluded. David is the dominant partner, the one who knows the score and calls the shots. The "resurrected" Monica is vague and uncertain. She doesn't seem even to remember her husband or son—David has her all to himself. His possessiveness borders on the erotic; their day begins and ends in her marriage bed. Together they declare that this is David's birthday, and make a cake which he cannot eat, but with candles he can blow out. "Make a wish," she tells him. "It came true already," he replies.

And all day, David basks in the undivided attention she was created to provide. He began as her toy; she ends up as his. And when the day ends, they close their eyes—for the first and only time in David's case—and the voice of the Specialist notes that Monica sleeps a sleep from which she could never be roused, and that David "went to that place where dreams are born."

It's a strange sort of fairy tale that begins with the destruction of millions of humans of humans due to global warming, and ends with the extinction of all of them—including their robot substitute—in a global freeze. But the humans in this story play the parts that the gods did in human myths. Some are gracious and kind, others arbitrary and cruel, but all have a supernatural essence that cannot be reproduced in mecha. When Gigolo Joe seduces a human client, he tells her, "you are a goddess." Later, the Specialist remarks upon the envy he felt of human beings and "that thing they call 'spirit.'" He continues, "Certainly human beings must be the key to the meaning of existence." The robot descendants have made a cult of humanity. David is a heroic figure to them, having aspects of mecha and orga, just as Hercules, Gilgamesh, and Jesus were part god and part man. The movie itself is a hybrid of two very different filmmaking sensibilities, grossly (though commonly) over generalized as the cold, calculating Stanley Kubrick and the warm, fuzzy Steven Spielberg. So maybe it's not such a surprise that *AI* had difficulty finding a audience and ended up being one of Spielberg's rare box office also rans. That was the price Spielberg paid for demonstrating the artistic integrity so many doubt he has, and for the ingenuity he is almost never given credit for. *AI: Artificial Intelligence*, though the most remarkable film of 2001, may prove to be a movie for the future.



A Brave New World
(Jude Law & Haley Joel
Osment in *AI*)



Nature Boy (Jim Caviezel
in *Angel Eyes*)

At the end of an article about movies and accountability, I feel I have to own up to the unlikeliest movie to win me over in 2001—**ANGEL EYES**.

Yes, that one with Jennifer Lopez, but in my defense, also with Jim Caviezel from *The Thin Red Line* (and my husband in some other, happier version of my life). It was for him I snuck into a matinee of the worst titled, worst advertised major feature in recent memory. Now I can't make a case for *Angel Eyes* being a great film, because it does have some substantial disqualifying flaws. But it is strange and lovely in its own right.

Another confession: romance is not my genre. To my mind, the best ones end with everybody dead or bleeding, like *The English Patient* or *The Fly*. *Angel Eyes* begins with death and bleeding. In the first scene, J-Lo's character Sharon (hey!) Pogue, a police officer, attends an unseen casualty in an ugly multi-car accident. Then, "one year later," there's more carnage! A drive-by shooter targets a café where Sharon and a bevy of cops are eating breakfast. Catch (Caviezel, with a borderline stupid name even after it is explained), who for obscure reasons has been Sharon's part time stalker, witnesses the event and follows when Sharon chases the shooter into an empty stadium corridor. The shooter fires at her, hitting her in the shoulder, but when he takes fatal aim at her head, Catch tackles him and saves her life. Between this occurrence and the earlier car accident (surprise! Sharon later realizes it was Catch she comforted in the aftermath), *Angel Eyes* does a number on the "meeting cute" business. Even when the movie is predictable, and it often is, it is rescued by moments of emotional impact as great as that gunshot Sharon takes to the shoulder.

Dressed like one of the angels from *Wings of Desire* (or its American version *City of Angels*), Catch roams the city doing good deeds with a smile and manner so beatific he seems positively retarded (in a glamorous, movie star kind of way). But he can't seem to close doors, and is prone to outbursts of anger and regret. In his first scene, Catch turns off the lights in a parked car. The car's owner emerges from a club, and starts pushing Catch, demanding to know what he stole. After a few weak and unheeded attempts at an explanation, Catch slaps the man and shouts, "Wake up! Wake up! I helped you. I helped you." He walks away, then turns back and says, "I'm sorry."

As a child, Sharon blew the whistle on her abusive father, and, by God, she will stop her brother from going down that road, too. But though what she does likely saves her family, they hate her for it. So she spends her time going on miserable dates, cracking wise with her fellow officers, and looking for excuses to beat the tar out of perps. There is violence in her blood as suffocating as his sorrow, and they both struggle mightily to keep from succumbing. Finally, they have to say goodbye to their families to reclaim their lives, and the movie has an uncommonly deep respect for the pain in that choice.

Movies are something like blind dates. You let the various marketing departments set you up with likely candidates and hope for the best. Frankly, there are a lot of movie equivalents of players and juvenile jerks out there. But sometimes, a dark horse comes a long and really sweeps you off your feet. So even if none of the movies above seem like your type, maybe you could give them a spin anyway. It could be *AI* or *Angel Eyes*, but you may just make a love connection.

(Written by Sharon McGovern)