

Movie Titles that begin with "V"

V For Vendetta * Val * Valentine's Day * Valentino: The Last Emperor * The Valet * Valkyrie * Vanilla Sky * Vanity Fair * Vantage Point * Venus * Vera Drake * A Very Long Engagement * Vice * Vicky Christina Barcelona * The Village * The Virgin Suicides * The Visiter * Vito * Volver

V FOR VENDETTA: Since I wanted to see this film more than Barbara, I agreed to write the review. We both liked it more than we expected. Although there is no shortage of bloody action, I think the overall effect will have a better influence on young people, who will make up the large majority of the film's audience, than most of the action flicks they flock to. It is an Orwellian tale inspired by a twenty year old graphic novel. Set in 2020 London, it won't take an astute viewer to see the resemblance to our current political environment. A beautiful and mild mannered Evey (Natalie Portman) is rescued from a horrible fate at the hands of the government's henchmen by a masked vigilante known only as V. V wants citizens to rise up against the fascist dictator (played by John Hurt) and the tyranny and oppression his regime have forced upon people by promising them security at the price of freedom. It sounds corny and this didn't escape the pens of many critics, but it played pretty well. Critics evaluations range from C to A, but Barbara and I settled on a grade of B+.

(Barb's comments: *I particularly liked Stephen Rea (The Crying Game) as the sympathetic chief inspector—the only official who was suspicious of the government. Plus, Natalie Portman is gorgeous—even more so with a shaved head!*) **GRADE B+**

VAL 2021 (Streamed on Prime): I have a strong memory of Val Kilmer in only one movie—**Tombstone**. His Doc Holiday in that 1993 film blew us away. For us, it was the definitive Doc Holiday. Gary says it was the best thing he ever did, although it is remarkable that we have only seen a few of the many of the movies he has made since. This documentary is the artistic creation of Kilmer who was the cinematographer. It is filled with videos taken by Kilmer over the years, from his boyhood when he and his brothers used to make movies, up to the present time. He attended Julliard as a young man, and he was headed for a career on stage, but Hollywood called. He first was noticed playing Iceman in **Top Gun** (1986), but it wasn't until his astonishingly believable performance as Jim Morrison in Oliver Stone's **The Doors** (1991) that the world sat up and took notice. To quote from my daughter, Martha, in her comments in this month's Readers' Views: "He was diagnosed with throat cancer in 2015 and surgeries and radiation have taken a terrible toll on him physically. He has a breathing tube and has to cover an air hole to speak." It is very sad to see him now, but some critics believe that the movie is an attempt to rehab his career. He was always known as a "difficult" actor. Kilmer so infuriated director John Frankenheimer on the set of **The Island of Dr. Moreau** that Frankenheimer later vowed to never work with Kilmer again. Kilmer explains that away by focusing the documentary on his commitment to the craft of acting. After his throat cancer, he turned to art as a way to express his creativity. This movie is the result. I admire Kilmer desire to communicate artistically, but I thought the film was a bit disjointed and too long, and Gary agrees. However, it didn't dim our memory of his Doc Holiday! I would grade it higher than would Gary. **GRADE B/C+**

VALENTINE'S DAY: Apparently Gary Marshall is not familiar with the phrase "Less is more." He tried to make another **Love Actually**, but made the mistake of thinking that if he added more actors and more stories he could make a better movie. He didn't. His movie with intertwining vignettes about Los Angeles couples and singles on Valentine's Day has some enjoyable moments, but there are so many different stories that most of them aren't given enough time for us to care about the people. And having so many different scenes makes some of the transitions awkward and some of the intertwining forced. Most time is spent on two friends, Ashton Kutcher and Jennifer Garner, and both actors are quite appealing. The airplane scene between Julia Roberts and Bradley Cooper was good and their stories had satisfying endings. Anne Hathaway was amusing as she provided telephone sex for her clients. Most of the rest were forgettable. Here's a partial list of some of the other actors: Jessica Alba, Kathy Bates, Jessica Biel, Erik Dane, Patrick Dempsey, Hector Elizondo, Jamie Foxx, Tophér Grace, George Lopez, Queen Latifah, Taylor Lautner, Shirley McClaine, Taylor Swift (OK in her first movie role), and Larry Miller in a cameo as an airline ticket agent. The highest grade I've seen from critics was a "B" from the *San Francisco Chronicle*. Their reviewer said it had no cohesive story, "but kinda fun nonetheless." Lou Lumenick, of the *New York Post*, gave it an "F" saying that it was "Less funny or romantic than your average colonoscopy..." We could go along with the "kinda fun" comment, but our grade would be C+. **GRADE C+**

VALENTINO: THE LAST EMPEROR: (2008 Release seen on DD) This documentary is about the legendary fashion designer Valentino Garavani and his longtime business and life partner Giancarlo Giammetti. The story begins with the preparation for the 2006 Spring/Summer Collection in Paris, and end with the July 2007 retrospective and extravagant celebration of Valentino's 45-year career as a fashion icon. The resulting film is a portrait of an extraordinary partnership and love affair, and a dramatic story about a master confronting the final act of his celebrated career. **THUMBS UP**

THE VALET: (2006 release seen on DVD) Spurned by the woman he loves, a young Parisian, working as a valet at a posh restaurant, is despondent. Inadvertently photographed along with a wealthy tycoon and his beautiful supermodel mistress, he gets caught up in the tycoon's infidelities. In an attempt to avoid a costly divorce with his wife, the industrialist pays the valet and his mistress to pretend to be a couple. On a whim, I recorded this delightful and most amusing French film from one of our cable channels and I'm so glad it did. We thoroughly enjoyed it. Daniel Auteuil, who you will recognize if you've seen any French films, plays the tycoon and Kristen Scott Thomas is his wife. If you rent this one, be sure you get the French version, titled **La Doublure**. **ENTHUSIASTIC THUMBS UP**

VALKYRIE: (2008 release seen on DVD) Tom Cruise is quite good as Colonel Claus von Stauffenberg, the mastermind of a plot to kill Adolph Hitler. The Colonel and others believed that they had to save Germany from inevitable defeat at the hands of the Allies, and that the only way to do that was to assassinate the Fuhrer and take over the government. Bill Nighy, Tom Wilkinson, Kenneth Branagh, Terence Stamp and Eddie Izzard also appear. In spite of the fact that we know the attempt failed, the film is able to build some suspense. Those interested in WWII history will enjoy this one. **THUMBS UP**

VANILLA SKY: David Aames (Tom Cruise) is living the good life--he's handsome and rich--until a spurned lover (Cameron Diaz) takes her revenge by plunging her car over a bridge railing with both of them in it. After that point, we aren't sure what is real and what is

fantasy; what is a dream and what is a nightmare. Is David horribly disfigured? Do plastic surgeon's restore his face? Does he kill the woman he loves? Who knows. This is another one of those "try-to-figure-it-out-after-you-see-it movies that seems to be every where these days. I think there are two possible explanations:

1. After the accident, everything that happens takes place in David's mind as he lies in a comma.

2. You can accept the science fiction explanation of a "lucid dream" that is expounded at the end of the film. Most of the critics seem to buy the science fiction aspect. I subscribe to the coma theory. The 2 hour and 15 minutes running time does seem a bit long, and, for me, there were some slow spots. Cruise, facially disfigured for more than half of the film, proves that he can act even without his killer smile. Penelope Cruz reprises the same role she played in the Spanish film *Abre los Ojos* upon which Cameron Crowe based this film. Gary thinks that this is the film Cruise wanted to make with Kubrik. It is much better than ***Eyes Wide Shut***. He also commented that if Kubrik had done this film it would be considered his final masterpiece. If Kubrik had directed the film, I would be tempted to go with the Science Fiction ending. But Kubrik didn't make this movie, and Gary can only give it a B. I have to say B-. **GRADE B/B-**

VANITY FAIR: When I heard the following exchange of dialogue between Becky Sharp and her husband-- "In my own way, I have loved you." "That is your misfortune, my dear."--I thought it could have been Rhett Butler talking to Scarlett O'Hara. Becky certainly comes off like a British Scarlett. I wasn't surprised to read later that Thackeray's novel did, indeed, influence Margaret Mitchell's *Gone With The Wind*. You can certainly see the parallels: Becky uses her beauty, charm, and wit to flirt and scheme her way into British society, much as Scarlett did in Atlanta. Thackeray's novel is huge and sprawling and it's always difficult to condense such a work into two hours of film. Director Mira Nair (***Monsoon Wedding***) was more or less successful. Reese Witherspoon does a fine job bringing Thackeray's heroine to life and she is engaging in the role. But, good as she is, I thought she lacked the edge that Becky Sharp needs. Witherspoon just looks too sweet. The film often seemed to plod along without generating much excitement. It never quite came to life for us. Although it held our attention, it never fired our imaginations. The actors all acquit themselves well. We particularly liked James Purefoy, who plays Becky's husband, Rawdon Crawley. Nair has said that she portrayed the adventuress as an opportunist who did to London what England was doing to India. To complete the comparison between colonial power and the colonized, she used a color palette that looks more like India than 17th Century London. It is, however, quite lovely to look at. We met some Movie Viewer friends, Diane and Lee U., at the theater and they had much the same reaction to the film. **GRADE B-**

VANTAGE POINT: We had not seen it in the theatre because of lukewarm reviews from most of the critics. This Rashomom-like tale of a Presidential assassination certainly held our attention, especially for the first half of the film. We tend to agree with Owen Gleiberman of *Entertainment Weekly* who wrote, "...a gripping premise that, for a while, at least, is grippingly executed." The first half of the movie shows the events in Spain from various vantage points, and that was quite interesting. Dennis Quaid and Forrest Whitaker were fine, as was William Hurt playing the U.S. President. However, the final interminable car chase strained our credulity. **THUMBS UP**

VENUS: Gary and I jotted down our thoughts after seeing this film. I'll print Gary's first, followed by my reaction.

Gary: Peter O'Toole plays an aging actor who takes a slightly lecherous interest in the grandniece of one of his acting buddies. His performance has earned him an Oscar nomination and I am sure many Academy members will cast a sentimental vote for the still brilliant actor. For Barbara and me it was not an Oscar worthy performance based on this film alone. Certainly he has given Oscar worthy performances in the past. His Lawrence of Arabia still stands out in my mind as one of the best performances in film history. I have to say it was a little troubling to see a man approximately my age playing a doddering old man at the end of his life. Vanessa Redgrave has a small role playing O'Toole's estranged wife, but when the two veteran actors play a short scene together it is electrifying. Playing the title role, Jodie Whittaker is excellent as a manipulative young country girl who needs some understanding and direction. The film is funny at times, but also poignant with an ending that rips at your heart.

Barb: It made me sad to see Peter O'Toole, so gorgeous in the past, playing an actor at the end of his life. Especially since he's about my age! And I had a hard time separating the character from the actor. He plays a famous actor who, although doddering, is not without charm. In his comments, Gary has discussed O'Toole's relationship with the young girl, and I must confess that a couple of the scenes between them make me a bit uncomfortable. I agree with Gary that the best scenes are those between O'Toole and Vanessa Redgrave. At the Oscar ceremony three years ago, O'Tool received an honorary Oscar. He expressed some dismay, saying he was "still in the game, and might win the lovely bugger outright." I think this movie proves that he is, definitely, still in the game. We agree on a grade of B. **GRADE B**

VERA DRAKE: If you're looking for a movie to cheer you up, this isn't the one. However, if you're looking for a movie with superior acting and a strong social message, this is the one. Vera Drake (Imelda Staunton) is sweet, loving, nurturing woman whose role in life seems to be that of a helper. She cleans other people's houses for a living, cares for her own family, and, in her spare time, visits people who are sick and housebound. She also helps out poor women who have unwanted pregnancies, and that is her eventual undoing. In ***Vera Drake***, director/writer Mike Leigh shows us that when abortion is illegal poor women suffer while rich women find a way out of their trouble. Leigh spends a lot of time letting us get to know Vera, her husband Stan (Phil Davis) and her son and daughter. This makes for a slow start, but Leigh obviously felt it was important for us to really understand Vera and the people in her life. Leigh (***Secrets & Lies*** --1996, ***Topsy Turvy***--1999) has an unusual approach to film directing. He brings his cast together for many weeks of improvisation so that they can create and explore their characters. The result is people who are achingly real. We feel we know them intimately and are privileged to spend a couple of hours with them. Staunton is certain to get an Oscar nomination for her portrayal. All the characters in the film are beautifully played: the brash young son, the shy, inarticulate daughter, the caring brother-in-law and his bitchy wife. Even the police officers are sympathetic and real people. There are no stereotypes here. We thought the film was overly long (125 minutes), but we were impressed with Staunton. Her performance deserves an A but we give the movie a B. **GRADE B**

A VERY LONG ENGAGEMENT: (2004 release seen on Video) A gorgeous movie and a beautiful love story about Mathilde's relentless search for her fiancée, who has disappeared from the trenches of the Somme during World War One. Audrey Tautou is a lovely and touching heroine. It's a bit difficult to keep all the soldiers' story lines straight, but that doesn't substantially interfere with the movie's charm. **THUMBS UP**

VICE (2018) This is a biographical comedy-drama starring Christian Bale as Dick Cheney. It is the story of how a bureaucratic Washington insider quietly became the most powerful man in the world as Vice-President to George W. Bush. It received mixed reviews from critics. One critic opined that viewers would either love it or hate it. Barbara and I have to disagree. We didn't hate it, but fell far short of loving it. The film was written and directed by Adam McKay perhaps best known as writer/director of *The Big Short*, a movie that managed to entertain you while forcing you to focus on the dark underbelly of banking and Wall Street. Barbara and I liked that movie more than *Vice*, but there were elements of *Vice* that were outstanding. Christian Bale's transformation into Cheney is nothing short of amazing. He shaved his head, bleached his eyebrows, gained 40 pounds and even did specific exercises to thicken his neck to look more like Cheney. He even sounded like the former vice president. Excellent performances also came from the supporting cast. Three of the most recognizable A-listers are Steve Carell playing Donald Rumsfeld, Sam Rockwell playing George W. Bush, and Amy Adams playing Lynne Cheney. Although the movie had its moments, it at times bordered on boring. **GRADE C+**

VICKI CRISTINA BARCELONA: In the past, we preferred Woody Allen's comedies to his attempts at more serious films. However, that has changed. We now prefer his more serious films. This is one of them. In *Vickie Christina Barcelona*, Woody examines love in all its complexities and ambiguities. Two young Americans (Rebecca Hall & Scarlett Johansen) spend the summer in Barcelona and meet a very sexy artist (Javier Bardem). They are very different in their attitudes toward love, but each is forever affected by her involvement with the artist, Juan Antonio, and his psychotic ex-wife, magnificently played by Penelope Cruz. We have never seen Johansen look lovelier or seem more comfortable in her role, but we were especially impressed with Hall who was less familiar to us. Allen certainly knows how the work with actresses! They are both excellent, and Cruz delivers an Oscar-worthy performance. Bardem continues to impress. Whether playing an openly gay author forced into exile from Cuba in *Before Night Falls* (2001), a quadriplegic fighting for his right to die in *The Sea Inside* (2004), or a psychotic killer flipping coins for people's lives in *No Country For Old Men* (2007), he is always terrific. (And he has a much better haircut here.) Bardem originally wanted to be a painter and that may be why he brings such authenticity to his role as Juan Antonio. Not traditionally handsome, he is incredibly sexy in this film. It is the dialogue that shines in this new Allen film. The man clearly knows how intelligent people talk. We were interested in all the characters, and were intrigued by the exploration of love and being "in love," always punctuated by Woody's cynicism. Allen once commented that cynicism was just an alternate spelling of reality. Gary was so impressed with the intelligent and clever dialogue, that he thought the film deserves an A-. I can agree with that. **GRADE A-**

THE VILLAGE: Grandson Nathan and I went to see this latest M. Night Shyamalan film. We agreed that it was interesting, but not as frightening as we had expected. We also thought that the surprise ending wasn't all that surprising. The village of the title is surrounded by woods that harbor frightening creatures. The villagers exist in an uneasy peace with the creatures: They never venture into the woods, and the creatures leave the village alone. At least up until the events of the film. Beyond the woods lie "the towns." The elders of the village left the towns behind to seek a simpler, safer life, and they have made the village self-sufficient. I can't relate much of the plot because that would take away what surprise there is. I can say that both Nathan and I liked the performances of Joaquin Phoenix as Lucius Hunt and Bryce Dallas Howard (Ron Howard's daughter) as Ivy Walker. Ivy is blind, but she is the wisest and most perceptive person in the village. This is a striking debut performance and I predict great things for Howard. Adrien Brody, William Hurt, and Sigourney Weaver also appear. Gary and I both liked Shyamalan's first film, *The Sixth Sense*, but we have been less enthusiastic about his subsequent endeavors. Roeper loved *The Village*, and Ebert hated it. I must quote the San Francisco Chronicle critic, Mick LaSalle, who obviously agrees with Ebert. He opened his review by saying, *M. Night Shyamalan has nothing to say, but he's going to keep right on saying it until people make him stop.* Our evaluation of *The Village* is somewhere in the middle. Nathan and I both think the film is worth a grade somewhere between C+ and B-. **GRADE C+/B-**

THE VIRGIN SUICIDES: No one knows why the five Lisbon sisters committed suicide, and this movie provides no answers. The adolescent boys who were fascinated with the beautiful and inaccessible sisters in high school are never able to forget them. Even in adulthood, they yearn to understand the girls and the reasons for their suicide. It is set in Detroit in the early seventies when the automobile industry is dying because of foreign imports and the elm trees are dying from an imported disease-Dutch Elm Disease. Jaynes Woods is Mr. Lisbon, a high school English teacher, and Kathleen Turner is his wife. Both parents seem as bewildered by their beautiful daughters as are the boys who stand in front of the Lisbon house hoping for a glimpse of the sisters. Sophia Coppola, whose acting was savaged by the critics in *The Godfather III*, directed this film with a skillful and sensitive touch. She may someday prove to be in a league with famous father. **GRADE B**

THE VISITOR: This excellent film was shown at the recent film festival we attended. It's lead actor, Richard Jenkins, won the festival's best actor award. We saw it at a local theatre and completely agree with Jenkins' award. Jenkins, who is most recently remembered as the dead father on HBO's *Six Feet Under*, is outstanding as Walter Vale a depressed, widowed professor whose life takes an unexpected turn. He teaches at a college in Connecticut, but reluctantly travels to NYC to present a paper at an Economics Conference. When he enters his NY apartment—a place he hasn't used in years—he finds two people living there: Tarek, a musician from Syria, and his Senegalese girlfriend, Zainab. They had no idea the apartment belonged to someone. Walter uncharacteristically offers to let them stay until they can find lodging somewhere else, and gradually he and Tarek become friends. Tarek plays the African drum and begins to teach it to Walter. Soon the question of Tarek and Zainab's status in this country is called into question, and Walter finds himself confronted by the harsh immigration laws adopted in the US since 9/11. The cast of four is rounded out by an Israeli actress who plays Tarek's mother. The script is beautifully written and the performances by all four could serve as a master class in acting. All the characters are touching and real and our hearts went out to them. This is writer/director Tom McCarthy's second film; his first was *The Station Agent*. A.O. Scott of the *NY Times* said in his review that even though *The Visitor* goes more or less where you think it will, "it still manages to surprise you along the way." If, however, you are someone who believes that all illegal aliens should be immediately deported, you probably shouldn't see this film. It might make you question your position. Gary says B+, but I say A-. **GRADE A-/B+**

VITO: This HBO Documentary recounts the life of Vito Russo, one of the founding fathers of the gay liberation movement. VITO paints a touching portrait of this outspoken activist in the LGBT community's struggle for equal rights. Vito was one of the co-founders of GLAAD (Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation), which was formed to ensure that media representation of gays and lesbians was

accurate. Towards the end of his life, he was one of the founders of ACT UP (AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power), a guerilla activist group whose goal was to bring legislation, medical research, treatment and policies to ultimately eradicate the AIDS epidemic. Vito's love of movies and his research into gay characters depicted in early films, led to *The Celluloid Closet*, an entertaining and informative lecture and clip show that combined his love of show business and radical gay politics. In 1981, his book of the same name was published and was later adapted into the 1995 HBO Peabody Award-winning documentary *The Celluloid Closet*. The documentary is a moving tribute to Vito's influence on gay politics. It features archival interviews with Vito, as well as insights from gay rights activists, including Larry Kramer; film scholars, and journalists/writers. It also offers personal accounts from his many friends, including Lily Tomlin and Bruce Vilanch, and his family members, including brother Charles Russo and cousin Phyllis Antonellis. **GRADE B**

VOLVER: Pedro Almodóvar always tells an interesting story, although in this case, he takes a while getting into it. For the first 15 or 20 minutes both Gary and I had some difficulty staying attentive. Eventually, however, we became absorbed in this story of two sisters and their dead mother—a dead mother that seems to have returned as a ghost. Almodovar's stories are always full of dramatic events which, in less skillful hands, would be melodramatic. But Almodóvar is a master at telling his stories, so full of emotion and feeling, in such a matter-of-fact way that they seem completely real. Tragic events are told with realism, simplicity, and even humor. Penelope Cruz is one of the director's favorite actresses, and she is wonderful here. She's gorgeous, of course, but also totally believable as a working-class mother. We first remember seeing her in Almodóvar's 1999 film, *All About My Mother*. Other films of his that we have enjoyed include, *Women On The Verge of a Nervous Breakdown*, *Talk To Her*, and *Bad Education*. *Volver* is in Spanish with English subtitles and that may keep some people away. For those that do see it, don't give up if you find your attention flagging at the beginning. The story is worth waiting for. Gary says B-, but I think it's a B. **GRADE B/B-**