

David Walsh selects his favorite films of 2008

David Walsh
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2008 will be remembered as the year of a global economic crash and a turning point in modern history. It will not be recalled as a great year in filmmaking, despite a few bright spots. How, when and through whose efforts the consequences of the unfolding economic calamity for masses of people worldwide will find artistic expression is still impossible to say.

In the long run, to ignore such events and the physical and psychic conditions of millions is to condemn oneself to artistic and social insignificance. This remains the condition of much of international moviemaking, engaged, at best, in trivial and self-involved exercises. People in the future may well be amazed by the activities of so many film "artists" at what proved to be such an advanced state of the economic and social crisis.

The US film and television industry has witnessed its share of turmoil over the past 12 months, including the lengthy writers' strike and the ongoing battle between the screen actors and the media conglomerates, but little urgency has yet to find expression in American movies. Hollywood, home to many talented people, remains at the vanguard of and all too often synonymous with so much of the gossip-mongering, celebrity worship and other forms of stupidity.

In any event, these are objective problems of social and cultural development. Frustration and impatience are of very little value. It is unthinkable that serious artists will remain indifferent to contemporary convulsions. The new art of importance will be created by those who are more closely aligned with the new situation. As for the rest, they will simply have less and less to say, and, ultimately, less and less of an audience who will listen or watch.

As usual, I include two lists. The first contains what were, in my opinion, the best films shown in movie theaters in the US this year (although, in some cases, this might only have amounted to a brief run in one or more major city). The second comprises the best films I saw at film festivals in the past 12 months, none of which has yet been released in the US.

Best films released in the US in 2008 (in no particular order):

Waltz With Bashir: Ari Folman's haunting account of how he recovered his memory of the bloody 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon, in which he participated as a soldier.

Happy-Go-Lucky: From veteran filmmaker Mike Leigh, the story of an irrepressible teacher in north London and, more generally, the story of teachers and teaching.

Battle for Haditha: A moving and painful dramatization of the US massacre of Iraqi civilians in Haditha, directed by Nick Broomfield.

Chop Shop: In Queens, New York, a young boy and his sister, on their own, navigate life's vicissitudes in Iranian-American Ramin Bahrani's work.

It's a Free World: British filmmaker Ken Loach takes a look at the fate of a working class woman who sets up her own temporary (and exploitive) employment agency.

Boy A: A compassionate movie about a young man released from detention after many years, based loosely on the Jamie Bulger case, directed by John Crowley.

The Other Half: Written and directed by youthful filmmaker Ying Liang, the work is an amusing and dark critique of current Chinese values. (His *Taking Father Home* also screened in the US this year.)

Be Kind Rewind: Sometimes foolish, but occasionally quite funny and humane, Michel Gondry's film about two video store employees and their misadventures.

Frozen River: Melissa Leo and Misty Upham are remarkable in Courtney Hunt's film about trying to survive on the US-Canadian border.

Wendy & Lucy: Kelly Reichardt's movie is flawed, but shows rare glimpses of American life, and Michele Williams gives a strong performance as a girl in difficulty.

Other films worth mentioning: Alex Gibney's *Taxi to the Dark Side*, Jia Zhang Ke's *Still Life*, Kimberly Peirce's *Stop-Loss* and Jonathan Demme's *Rachel Getting Married*.

Best films that have not yet been released in the US (in no particular order). We have commented on all of these movies on the WSWS:

Good Cats — Ying Liang (China)

Dernier Maquis — Rabah Ameur-Zaïmeche (France)

Mutum — Sandra Kogut (Brazil)

This Longing — Azharr Rudin (Malaysia)

Linha de Passe — Walter Salles and Daniela Thomas (Brazil)

Under the Bombs — Philippe Aractingi (Lebanon)

The Infinite Border — Juan Manuel Sepúlveda (Mexico)

Sell Out! — Yeo Joon Han (Malaysia)

El Camino — Ishtar Yasin (Nicaragua)

Paper Cannot Wrap Up Embers — Rithy Panh (Cambodia)



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