

Best films of 2009 and the decade

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Three years ago, I suggested “a case could be made that the years 1995-2005 were the weakest in cinema history.” Unfortunately, there doesn’t seem to be any convincing reason not to extend that characterization to the end of the first decade of the new century.

A deep cultural malaise is still with us. Talented and innovative individuals are at work in many media, but a lack of both perspective and deep artistic or social purposefulness predominates.

In the aftermath of World War I, André Breton and his colleagues asked established literary figures in France, in part to put them on the spot, “Why do you write?” The vast majority of contemporary movie writers and directors would not be able to provide a satisfying response to the equivalent question. Honest replies might include: “out of inertia,” “to have a career,” “to impress,” “because it’s lucrative,” etc.

These are historically determined problems, not individual weaknesses. The social and political difficulties of the last half-century or more have discouraged the kind of investigation and commitment that produces lasting work. Many artists were inspired in the first part of the twentieth century by the prospect of society’s and humanity’s transformation, however conceived.

The triumph of fascism in Germany and the crimes and betrayals of Stalinism in the Soviet Union in the 1930s set in motion a process of disillusionment and disappointment that continues to have consequences. The purge of left-wing ideas from the culture in postwar America played its own part in suppressing critical and creative thought. The recent decades of reaction have completed a certain process.

Skepticism and pessimism (facile and widely available, including in “left” flavors), lack of historical and social knowledge, and the wealth accumulated by sections of the cultural and academic elite...all this continues to play a pernicious role.

A vast monopolization of the media and entertainment industry has taken place. Decisions on what tens of millions will hear and see are made by a handful of corporate philistines whose entire being is hostile to art, criticism, political opposition. Stupidity and shortsightedness here vie with cynicism and greed.

For the film artists, carrying on along the present path should be unthinkable. Hardly anything could be more dispiriting than the current arrangements and resulting “products.”

All sorts of new technological possibilities emerged in the first decade of the twenty-first century. Digital video makes it possible for a single human being, or a small unit, to dream up, shoot and edit a film (although mass distribution remains the rub). However,

one must still have something to say to audiences, and that generally remains an insurmountable obstacle for even the most “independent” of filmmakers.

The rise of Asian and specifically Chinese filmmaking to prominence in the last decade is a fact of cultural and social significance. Given recent global economic trends, and the tumultuous state of affairs in China itself, this should come as no great surprise. In response to a request for a list of best Chinese-language films of the decade (see below), I made the following point:

“Incidentally, I didn’t add to my comments what seems to me fairly obvious, that China produced the greatest number of interesting films in the past decade, probably by far.

“The qualification to that, unfortunately, which makes it a rather backhanded compliment, is that I think the 2000s, along with the 1990s (when Taiwan and Iran generated the most compelling work), was the bleakest decade for international filmmaking (for definite social-historical reasons) since the invention of the medium.”

In our view, film and art generally will emerge out of their present crisis only when they begin to orient toward social opposition. All talk to the effect that “at all costs, art must not be political” ignores the reality that all art is political anyway, one way or another, and amounts to arguing that “at all costs, art must not rock the boat.” Those who think like that are incapable of creating anything that matters.

It is not likely, moreover, that art will find its own way out of the current predicament. A great deal depends on the state of the class struggle. The first battles in which the working class, and the American working class in particular, engages as an independent and active force, whatever their immediate outcome, will have a galvanizing effect. Such struggles, as Trotsky forecast, will scatter “the clouds of skepticism and of pessimism which cover the horizon of mankind.”

I thought 2009 in particular was a very poor year for filmmaking, especially American filmmaking. In the face of the greatest economic crisis and most widespread social misery since the 1930s, American writers and directors had strikingly little to contribute.

In the case of the more conscientious figures, there may be the element of inevitable artistic lagging behind. For others, it is a matter of social indifference and the complacency of the well-heeled and insulated. At any rate, the contemporary world will have to be examined seriously by moviemakers at some point.

That being said...

Best films of 2009 (with the collaboration of Joanne Laurier

and Hiram Lee)

I felt strongly about only two of the films I saw (or had seen previously) and that played in North American movie theaters this year:

Maria Larssons eviga ögonblick (Everlasting Moments), Jan Troell

Of Time and the City, Terence Davies

Then there were others that were intelligent, with interesting moments:

Venkovsky ucitel (The Country Teacher), Bohdan Sláma

Eid milad Laila (Laila's Birthday), Rashid Masharawi

Where the Wild Things Are, Spike Jonze

Serbis, Brillante Mendoza

And there were decent or only partially successful efforts that are needed to round out a list of 10:

The Men Who Stare at Goats, Grant Heslov

Er shi si cheng ji (24 City), Jia Zhangke

A Serious Man, Ethan and Joel Coen

Bright Star, Jane Campion

Some performances worth noting:

Jason Bateman, *State of Play*

Emily Blunt, *Sunshine Cleaning*

Bill Nighy,

The best films we saw this year that have not yet been released in North America:

How To Fold a Flag, Michael Tucker and Petra Epperlein

Vincere, Marco Bellocchio

Jean Charles, Henrique Goldman

Life During Wartime, Todd Solondz

Köprüdekiler (Men on the Bridge), Asli Özge

The Unloved, Samantha Morton

Shirley Adams, Oliver Hermanus

Ajami, Yaron Shani and Scandar Copti

The Time That Remains, Elia Suleiman

River People, He Jianjun

Don't Let Me Drown, Cruz Angeles

Z32, Avi Mograbi

El olvido (Oblivion), Heddy Honigmann

Billy the Kid, Jennifer Venditti

The best films (or directorial bodies of work) this decade:

Mike Leigh, *All or Nothing*, *Vera Drake* and *Happy-Go-Lucky*

Terence Davies, *House of Mirth* and *Of Time and the City*

Jia Zhangke, () and ()

Wim Wenders,

Best Chinese-language films of the decade

I'm not an expert, and there are many things I haven't seen, but since I was asked by one publication, these are the best Chinese-language films or directorial bodies of work (my preferred category) that I saw this decade:

Platform, Jia Zhangke (China—but also, *Unknown Pleasures*, *The World*)

Good Cats, Ying Liang (China—but also *Taking Father Home*, *The Other Half*)

Little Moth, Peng Tao (China)

Blind Shaft, Lang Yi (China)

Cry Woman, Liu Bingjian (China)

Bing Ai, Feng Yan (China)

Durian, Durian, Fruit Chan (Hong Kong—but also, *Little Cheung*, 1999—I saw it in 2000!)

River People, He Jianjun (China)

Grain in Ear, Zhang Lu (China)

The Orphan of Anyang, Wang Chao (China)

An eleventh would be *Yi Yi*, Edward Yang (Taiwan.)

And a twelfth, *Bundled*, Singing Chen (Taiwan)

Wang Bing deserves mention, if not a more exacting editor, for *West of the Tracks* (China) and *Fengming: A Chinese Memoir* (China)

Richard Phillips of the WSWS contributed this comment, and these films:

This was not a great decade, or year, but here's a best of the decade list—the first seven are particular favourites:

Yi Yi (Edward Yang)

Land of Plenty (Wim Wenders)

Good-bye Lenin (Wolfgang Becker)

Turtles Can Fly (Bahman Ghobadi)

Gosford Park (Robert Altman)

The New World (Terrence Malick)

The Quiet American (Phillip Noyce)

Blind Shaft (Li Yang)

Legends of Rita (Volker Schlöndorff)

The Insider (Michael Mann)

Letters from Iwo Jima (Clint Eastwood)

Battle for Haditha (Nick Broomfield)

Pan's Labyrinth (Guillermo del Toro)

Best documentaries of the last decade:

Capturing the Friedmans (Andrew Jarecki)

Fahrenheit 9/11 (Michael Moore)

Molly & Mobarak (Tom Zubrycki)

Roman Polanski: Wanted and Desired (Marina Zenovich)

And the best of 2009:

Everlasting Moments (Jan Troell)

Vincere (Marco Bellocchio)

Of Time and the City (Terence Davies)

Tulpan (Sergei Dvortsevov)

Samson and Delilah (Warwick Thornton)

The Missing Star (although released in 2007) (Gianni Amelio)



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