Best films of 2010

David Walsh
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Here we are again in the waning days of the year and obliged to submit lists of interesting films that appeared on movie screens, or were shown at film festivals, over the past twelve months.

Among the efforts of the US film industry, still the most powerful and influential in the world, the pickings remain shamefully thin.

Wealth and social insularity, as well as a lack of historical knowledge and perspective and other ideological impediments, continue to hold back even the more interesting figures in both Hollywood and independent film circles from seriously looking at reality in their own country, or anywhere else for that matter. It is difficult to think of a precedent.

You would hardly know it by what shows up in movie theaters, but genuine drama and comedy continue to exist in American life—on streets, in cars and buses, in workplaces, in kitchens and bedrooms, in diners and motels, on beaches and basketball courts. Life is there, if one wants to find and make it the basis of one's work. The writer or director, of course, has to be oriented toward that and not career, image, status …

We are not insisting on any particular aspect of life, although the virtual absence from American films of anyone but the economically comfortable and socially complacent skews and damages the pictures presented. Ordinary people, as far as we know, still laugh and talk, cry, love, betray and make sacrifices. They do wonderful and terrible things to one another.

The saintly and heroic are not perhaps the best subjects for filmmaking, nor is thoroughly destroyed humanity, but people as they are for the most part, struggling, complicated, flexible, capable of almost anything.

Although it remains largely inarticulate, moreover, there is vast anger and discontent with the present state of things. What people in America say every day, politely or otherwise, about the banks and corporations and politicians finds almost no artistic reflection.

One can count on one's fingers the recent fiction films, including the artistically flawed, that showed something about life in the US, and that requires marking on the curve in some cases: *Frozen River*, *Wendy and Lucy*, *Ballast*, *Don't Let Me Drown*, *Chop Shop*, *Winter's Bone*, *Conviction*, perhaps *The Fighter*, perhaps *Night Catches Us*. There may be others we've overlooked or slighted, but not a great many.

Money, class and social pressure remain significant questions, one would think, but we barely feel their presence in contemporary movies, far less than in Hollywood films of the 1930s, 1940s and early 1950s. A social and psychic urgency was present in the better films of those decades that is largely lacking today. The images, the performances, the drama mattered, even in many relatively minor works.

The impasse in American films is not unrelated to a more general, social and political impasse. It is worth noting, for example, that 2010 did not offer one major, artistically successful film on the subject of either the Iraq or Afghan war, although the criminal character of these neo-colonial occupations has only deepened, along with the suffering of the peoples in the area. Writers and directors in previous years perhaps felt that their films could serve to protest against and shift government policy, undermining, for instance, support for the Bush administration.

Those not choosing to be taken in any longer by Barack Obama and the Democrats, and that would exclude a great many Hollywood figures, may have grown discouraged for the moment. However, the end

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of illusions in the usefulness of pressuring existing institutions and parties might herald a change in thinking and a serious radicalization. Time will tell. Much depends on the emergence of open social struggle in America.

This is a list of what seemed to us to be the best films that played in movie theaters in the US in 2010 (with the collaboration of Joanne Laurier and Hiram Lee):

The Ghost Writer, Roman Polanski
Ajami, Scandar Copti, Yaron Shani
Winter's Bone, Debra Granik
Life During Wartime, Todd Solondz
Conviction, Tony Goldwyn
Lebanon, Samuel Maoz
Vincere, Marco Bellocchio
No One Knows About Persian Cats, Bahman Ghobadi
It's Kind of a Funny Story, Anna Boden, Ryan Fleck
Another Year, Mike Leigh

There were also a number of documentaries worthy of note:

Last Train Home, Lixin Fan
Inside Job, Charles Ferguson
The Most Dangerous Man in America: Daniel Ellsberg and the Pentagon Papers, Judith Ehrlich, Rick Goldsmith
The Tillman Story, Amir Bar-Lev
The Genius Within: The Inner Life of Glenn Gould, Michèle Hozer, Peter Raymont

At various film festivals, we saw some valuable and even beautiful works. This is a list of such films, which have not yet been released in North America:

The Light Thief (*Svet-Ake*), Aktan Abdykalykov (Kyrgyzstan)
Tears of Gaza, Vibeke Løkkeberg (Norway-Palestine)
Even the Rain (*Tambien la lluvia*), Icíar Bollaín (Spain-UK)
The Housemaid (*Hanyo*), Im Sang-soo (South Korea)
Susa, Rusudan Pirveli (Georgia)
Moloch Tropical, Raoul Peck (Haiti-France)
Inside America, Barbara Eder (Austria-US)
ANPO: Art X War, Linda Hoaglund (US-Japan)
Miral, Julian Schnabel (US-Palestine)
The Hunter (*Shekarchi*), Rafi Pitts (Iran)
Outbound (*Periferic*), Bogdan George Apetri (Romania)
Cirkus Columbia, Danis Tanovic (Bosnia)
Essential Killing, Jerzy Skolimowski (Poland-US)
Route Irish, Ken Loach (UK-Iraq)
Woman on Fire Looks for Water, Woo Ming-jin (Malaysia)
Port of Memory, Kamal Aljafari (Palestine)

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WSWS writer Richard Phillips contributed this comment, and these films:

My list of worthwhile films watched in 2010 is rather short—partly a product of seeing fewer features this year, but also another indication of the debilitated state of contemporary cinema.

Best features in order of preference are:

Moloch Tropical, Raoul Peck
The Ghost Writer, Roman Polanski
Winter's Bone, Debra Granick
Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives, Apichatpong Weerasethakul

My favourites also include two particularly noteworthy documentaries—*The Last Train Home* by Lixin Fan and *The Most Dangerous Man in America: Daniel Ellsberg and the Pentagon Papers* by Judith Ehrlich and Rick Goldsmith—and two re-released significant classics: Luchino Visconti's *Senso* (1957) and Leo McCarey's *Make Way for Tomorrow* (1937).

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