

Best films of 2011

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If anything, the gap between social life and its artistic representation widened in 2011. Three years into the worst economic crisis in more than half a century, with social misery afflicting ever broader layers of the global population, and the beginnings of a mass social response, in Egypt and the Middle East, as well as Greece and the US, filmmakers largely remain insulated from—or perhaps overwhelmed by—these realities.

The wealth and complacency of portions of the film industry no doubt account for some of the problems. Executives in Hollywood continue to rake in unfathomable amounts of money, even as they turn out mostly negligible entertainment, or worse.

Total compensation paid to Disney CEO Robert Iger, for example, increased 24 percent in fiscal year 2010, to \$29.6 million. The *Hollywood Reporter* notes that Iger “also racked up more than \$754,000 in fees associated with security and personal air travel.” Time Warner’s Jeff Bewkes took in \$26.3 million in total compensation in 2010, “up more than 34 percent from the \$19.6 million recorded for 2009. His base salary rose from \$1.75 million to \$2 million, while his performance-based bonus payments increased from \$12.1 million to \$14.4 million. Bewkes also saw the value of his stock and options awards rise.” (*Hollywood Reporter*)

Commercially successful producers, directors and actors earned in some cases even more fabulous sums. *Vanity Fair* estimates producer-director James Cameron’s 2010 income, primarily for *Avatar*, at \$257 million. Steven Spielberg made only \$80 million last year, based on his work on *War Horse*, theme park royalties and older film revenue. The magazine places actor Johnny Depp’s earnings in 2010 at around \$100 million, Leonardo DiCaprio’s at some \$62 million and director Christopher Nolan’s at \$71.5 million (*Inception*, the *Batman* films), etc.

Meanwhile, Hollywood studios are extremely concerned by the continued decline in attendance. The *New York Times* reported December 25 that North American movie ticket sales are down \$500 million from a year ago, a 4.5 percent decline. However, notes the *Times*, “the real picture is worse than the raw revenue numbers suggest,” because of steadily increasing ticket prices. “Attendance for 2011 is expected to drop 5.3 percent, to 1.27 billion, continuing a slide. Attendance declined 6 percent in 2010.”

Depressed economic conditions, especially for the young, are a major factor. But a spate of films that have failed to ignite the public’s imagination undoubtedly plays a role in the decline at the box office—a thoroughly deserved decline, one might add. Doubly tedious sequels of tedious originals, bombastic 3-D spectacles, superhero cartoons and thoroughly predictable “action” movies make up a large portion of the film industry’s menu.

At the same time, it would be a grievous error to imagine that the economic crisis and growing political radicalization have had no impact on filmmakers and others in the entertainment industry. Public statements of support from actors, singers and musicians for the Occupy movement were not in short supply, and there is no reason to doubt their sincerity.

The translation of social concerns into serious works, within an ideologically ossified, market-driven, profit-mad industry, remains a challenge. After decades of intellectual and artistic stagnation, the creation of rich and complicated pictures of life is no small undertaking. Such efforts will require knowledge, sensitivity and courage. However, we are confident

that the production of such works, which will electrify audiences with their social truth and dramatic force, is not so far off. The widening and deepening of the popular radicalization, both encouraging artists and reassuring them of support, is critical in this process.

That being said, it was no easy matter to come up with 10 “best” films that showed in a movie theater in the US in 2011. It required all too much marking on the curve. Nonetheless, here is our list of such films (only a handful of them made by American studios), followed by a list of works we saw at film festivals that are as yet undistributed in the US.

Best films that showed at a movie theater (sometimes not for very long!) in the US in 2011:

Even the Rain, Icíar Bollaín
The Time That Remains, Elia Suleiman
The Housemaid, Im Sang-soo
Miral, Julian Schnabel
Margin Call, J.C. Chandor
Win Win, Tom McCarthy
Take Shelter, Jeff Nichols
Pina, Wim Wenders (documentary)
Paradise Lost 3: Purgatory, Joe Berlinger & Bruce Sinofsky (documentary)
A Screaming Man, Mahamat-Saleh Haroun

Best undistributed films:

Omar Killed Me, Roschdy Zem
Think of Me, Bryan Wizemann
Rebellion (L'ordre et la morale), Mathieu Kassovitz
Future Lasts Forever, Özcan Alper
Habibi, Susan Youssef
The Tall Man, Tony Krawitz (documentary)
11 Flowers, Xiaoshuai Wang
Free Men, Ismaël Ferroukhi
Beauty, Oliver Hermanus
Edwin Boyd, Nathan Morlando

Best performances in a leading role:

Luis Tosar, *Even the Rain*
Brad Pitt, *Moneyball*
Michael Shannon, *Take Shelter*
Freida Pinto, *Miral*
Demián Bichir, *A Better Life*

Best performances in a supporting role:

Jeremy Irons, *Margin Call*

Amy Ryan, *Win Win*

Yoon Yeo-jeong, *The Housemaid*

Helen Mirren, *Brighton Rock*

Shailene Woodley, *The Descendants*

Best director: Icíar Bollaín, *Even the Rain*

Best first feature: J.C. Chandor, *Margin Call*

Best screenplay: Paul Laverty, *Even the Rain*

Best cinematography: Emmanuel Lubezki, *Tree of Life*

Best ensemble: *Even the Rain*

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WSWS arts writer Richard Phillips contributed the following list:

Features:

The Princess of Montpensier, Bertrand Tavernier
Norwegian Wood, Tran Anh Hung
A Separation, Asghar Farhadi
Jane Eyre, Cary Fukunaga

Documentaries:

Le Quattro Volte, Michelangelo Frammartino
Passione, John Turturro

Hiram Lee, WSWS film and music reviewer, contributed these remarks and film list:

This list is somewhat limited by my lack of access to some of the more intriguing works that debuted at film festivals this year, but which have not yet received a release in North American theaters. But of the films available to me, these seemed the most serious and moving:

Even the Rain, Icíar Bollaín
Margin Call, J.C. Chandor
Mildred Pierce, Todd Haynes (HBO series)
Pina, Wim Wenders
Win Win, Thomas McCarthy
Miral, Julian Schnabel

(*Even the Rain* and *Miral* first appeared at film festivals in 2010, but were not released to North American theaters until this year)



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