

Best films of 2013

David Walsh, Joanne Laurier
31 December 2013

A year ago, we commented that the film world presented a sharper contradiction than ever. On the one hand, negligible and bloated blockbusters; on the other, thoughtful and socially critical film work. Those contradictions have hardly disappeared or lessened in intensity, nor are they likely to any time in the near future.

The past twelve months began unpromisingly with the porno-sadistic *Django Unchained* (directed by Quentin Tarantino and released the last week of 2012) and ended with the porno-parasitic *The Wolf of Wall Street* (directed by Martin Scorsese and released the last week of 2013).

The commercial cinema still shows virtually no interest in the lives and conditions of some 95 percent of the world's population, thus condemning itself for the most part to artistic and social irrelevance. It matters terribly to the super-wealthy handful at the top of the entertainment conglomerates and their hangers-on who turns out what and how much it takes in—it does not, however, have any much larger or more enduring significance.

At the same time, more interesting and compelling work also makes an appearance: for example, *Nebraska* (Alexander Payne), *Great Expectations* (Mike Newell), *The We and the I* (Michel Gondry), *The Selfish Giant* (Clio Barnard), *Museum Hours* (Jem Cohen) and *Detroit Unleaded* (Rola Nashef). None of these is an earthshaking work, but each reveals an interest in how people who are not rich live and act toward one another.

Our list of the best films that played in a movie theater in North America in 2013 includes these works:

Great Expectations Mike Newell
Nebraska Alexander Payne
Museum Hours Jem Cohen
The Artist and the Model Fernando Trueba
Detroit Unleaded Rola Nashef
The Selfish Giant Clio Barnard
The We and the I Michel Gondry
A Touch of Sin Jia Zhangke
Closed Circuit John Crowley
Capital Costa-Gavras

Our list of the best films we saw in 2013, primarily at film festivals, that have not yet been distributed in North America:

Omar Hany Abu-Assad
Standing Aside, Watching Yorgos Servetas
An Episode in the Life of an Iron Picker Danis Tanovi?
Under the Starry Sky Dyana Gaye
Salvation Army Abdellah Taïa
The Kill Team Dan Krauss
Sofia's Last Ambulance Ilian Metev
Giraffada Rani Massalha
Qissa Anup Singh
Let the Fire Burn Jason Osder

The following is a selection of comments we made on the WSWs this year about the current state of filmmaking and related questions.

Writing in early January 2013 about Tarantino's *Django Unchained*, David Walsh observed that the film "is a miserable work, implausible and

unconvincing from beginning to end (unlike the best 'spaghetti Westerns' Tarantino claims to admire). ...

"The violence in the film is stupid and pointless, not too far removed from—or perhaps a sub-category of—the porno-sadism genre. ...

"I found *Django Unchained* at two and three quarter hours nearly unendurable. (I confess that I slipped out of the theater for eight to ten minutes somewhere in the middle, as a form of self-protection.) Anecdotaly, I did not sense that the audience members at the showing I attended, mostly college aged, were especially thrilled with the time spent. No doubt they have been led to believe, and may believe it themselves, that Tarantino is 'anti-establishment' and his films are not to be missed, but the actual experience may be something else again. ...

"Tarantino is something of a cultural huckster, with a minor talent for pastiche, reworking genres and creating blackly comic moments. Under healthier circumstances, no one would have paid much notice. The flippant tone and cynicism of his crude efforts, however, accorded with a developing mood in sections of the upper middle class, who, in response to threatening global affairs and the social situation in the US, felt less and less sympathy for democratic niceties. Tarantino's characters, in their amused, nonchalant, punishment-free lurching from one sadistic act to another, increasingly represented a fantasized version of how such people wished they (and the interests of the American elite generally) could navigate the world."

In February, Joanne Laurier wrote a comment on Steven Soderbergh's *Side Effects*, the announcement of his retirement and the problems of independent cinema:

"*Side Effects* speaks to bigger problems not only in Soderbergh's career, but in the current cinema as a whole and its 'independent' branch in particular. ...

"Soderbergh's valid dissatisfaction with both his Hollywood and independent-cinema sides and the impasse he has reached are not his personal quandary. Making art has never been easy. It is always hard to get at something important. But added to the inevitable problems of working in the for-profit film industry in recent years has been a loss of perspective and orientation. The present state of things does not inspire the artists, but confidence in the possibility of an alternative has been dealt serious blows. The majority of films lack purpose and inspiration. Many writers and directors continue to go through the motions. Soderbergh is smart enough and honest enough with himself not to be able to do that.

"His own career represents something of a vicious circle. He began 20 years ago directing films that struck a certain chord, but the initial, somewhat limited impetus for his work eventually exhausted itself. Soderbergh 'reinvented' himself as a commercial director in the late 1990s, but found that success on this score didn't eliminate his dissatisfaction. He tried to make both 'blockbusters' and 'personal' films, but the latter were glancing blows that did not make a deep impression. The less of an impression they made with the public, the less he put into subsequent films. And, of course, deservedly, those works had even less of an impact. And now he throws his hands up in the air."

Stefan Steinberg at the 2013 Berlin film festival noted: "The international jury at this year's Berlinale, as was the case in 2012,

awarded several of the festival's main prizes to significant films that adopt a critical stance towards contemporary social life. ...

"Unfortunately, it would be a mistake to conclude that such films were characteristic of the festival selection as a whole. There was in fact a remarkable paucity of works on show in Berlin dealing with the social (and psychological) changes that have taken place since the eruption of the international finance crisis in 2008."

Early 2013 was dominated by the debate over the relative merits of Kathryn Bigelow's pro-CIA, pro-torture *Zero Dark Thirty* (2012) and Tarantino's *Django Unchained*, on the one side, and Steven Spielberg's *Lincoln* (2012), on the other. Later in February, David Walsh argued:

"Art requires abstraction, condensation and exaggeration. This is not what Tarantino or Bigelow are about. Their representations of life are false not because they are trying through such means to get at essential realities, but because, in the end, they want to cover those up. By painting pictures, in the one case, not of an economic order that must be overthrown, but of a country and a population that implicitly deserve to be incinerated (*Django Unchained*) and, in the other, of a military-intelligence apparatus engaged and occasionally 'crossing a moral line' in the battle with unfathomable, alien evil (*Zero Dark Thirty*), Tarantino and Bigelow are coming to the ideological and moral defense of the American status quo.

"What is it that the global pseudo-left in particular objects to about *Lincoln* and so values in *Django Unchained*?

"This well-heeled social layer, conditioned by decades of academic anti-Marxism, identity politics and self-absorption, rejects the notion of progress, the appeal of reason, the ability to learn anything from history, the impact of ideas on the population, mass mobilizations and centralized force. It responds strongly to irrationality, mythologizing, the 'carnavalesque,' petty bourgeois individualism, racialism, gender politics, vulgarity and social backwardness."

A terribly poor, terribly misguided adaptation of F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, directed by Baz Luhrmann, with a screenplay by Craig Pearce, was released in May, eliciting this comment:

"It may be that Luhrmann, Pearce and their collaborators genuinely admire the novel and only mean to make it accessible to a youthful, contemporary audience. If so, in my view, they have badly misstepped. Their pandering to what they conceive to be the current level of understanding and culture would be enough of a mistake, but, worse than that, in the confused, pointless process the filmmakers have cut out the film's core. ...

"Fitzgerald has something else in mind. Like his fictional contemporary Clyde Griffiths (in Dreiser's *An American Tragedy*, also published in 1925, although coming from a different generation and artistic tradition), Gatsby is in love less with an actual woman (whom he hardly knows, after all) than with a way of life—identified with luxury, elegance, ease, good taste, refinement—that finds individual human expression in Daisy."

Documentary filmmaker Alex Gibney came out this past summer with *We Steal Secrets: The Story of WikiLeaks*, an attempt to discredit Julian Assange and WikiLeaks and, by implication, anyone (like Edward Snowden) who exposes the conspiracies of the various capitalist powers. The film failed miserably with global audiences, as did Bill Condon's *The Fifth Estate*, another smear of Assange, later in the year.

Writing about Gibney's film, Richard Phillips observed, "The 130-minute feature is a political hatchet job against Julian Assange and dovetails with the media and US government campaign against the WikiLeaks web site. Whether Gibney has shifted to the right or simply revealed the fatal limitations of his liberal 'oppositional' views is a matter for a separate discussion. In any event, his newest work is an effort at disinformation."

German television broadcast a significant mini-series about World War II in 2013, *Unsere Mütter, unsere Väter* (whose English-language title is

Generation War). Bernd Reinhardt commented in the WWSW:

"The World War II television mini-series ... reached a record audience in Germany when it was broadcast in March of this year. Each of the three episodes was watched by an estimated seven million people, or some 10 percent of the adult population. The mini-series generated an almost unprecedented public discussion in Germany. ...

"The stories are told concurrently, so that a kind of cinematic mosaic is created. The personal experiences of former war veterans also flow into the film. The rapid and direct focus of director Philipp Kadelbach is influenced by American cinema, without falling into the Hollywood tendency to stage one bloody orgy of violence after another. The trilogy is clearly an anti-war work, which—in a realistic and nuanced way—shows the overwhelming consequences of the war for young people at the time and how it changed their lives and thinking."

Writer-director Ryan Coogler's *Fruitvale Station*, the story of the final day in the life of Oscar Grant, murdered by a Bay Area Rapid Transit (BART) officer in 2009, prompted this comment from Christine Schofelt:

"Taking on the story of Oscar Grant was a bold move by the filmmaker. It could have descended quickly into polemic or romanticism. Ryan Coogler, only 27 years old, is to be congratulated on avoiding these pitfalls. What he has written and produced is a moving and powerful portrayal of the contradictions of Oscar Grant and the challenges he faced. Coogler has shed light not only on Oscar's life, but also on the lives of millions of others.

"The performance of Michael B. Jordan as Oscar is understated and natural. He's a man who on the one hand has served prison time, lost his job over punctuality issues, and, in an outburst born of frustration, threatened his ex-boss for not rehiring him. He also loves his daughter, tries to make a fresh start even when things are bleakest, and treats his family well, even when doing so means digging himself deeper into a financial hole. The mistakes he makes are not given short shrift in the film, and one can see the pressures he faces as he moves through his final day."

This year's Toronto film festival, the 20th we have covered, provoked these initial thoughts:

"In the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis and in particular with the outbreak of mass struggles in Tunisia and Egypt in 2011, the political tide has turned. A new era of social revolution has opened up. This has not and cannot instantaneously change the atmosphere in art and filmmaking, but change it, it will. The problems remain, but the movement of hundreds of millions will dramatically alter the conditions under which those problems can be approached and overcome.

"We saw a number of striking films this year, including *Omar* (directed by Palestinian filmmaker Hany Abu-Assad), *Standing Aside, Watching* (Greek director Yorgos Servetas), *An Episode in the Life of an Iron Picker* (from Bosnian filmmaker Danis Tanovi?, which we reviewed at the Berlinale earlier this year), *The Selfish Giant* (directed by Clio Barnard from the UK), *Under the Starry Sky* (Franco-Senegalese filmmaker Dyana Gaye), *A Touch of Sin* (from well-known Chinese director Jia Zhangke in something of a return to form), *Salvation Army* (Moroccan filmmaker and author Abdellah Taïa), *Ida* (from Polish director Pawel Pawlikowski), *Giraffada* (another Palestinian work, directed by Rani Massalha) and *Qissa* (Indian filmmaker Anup Singh)."

Joanne Laurier wrote the following on the WWSW about one of the most discussed (and praised) films at the Toronto festival, which later opened in movie theaters, British filmmaker Steve McQueen's *12 Years a Slave*:

"Director McQueen is known for his 'brutal' and 'unflinching' style. His first feature movie, *Hunger* (2008), depicts the hunger strike led by Irish republican Bobby Sands in a Northern Irish prison. This was followed by *Shame* (2011) about a New York City 'sex addict.' Both previous films employ McQueen's signature gratuitousness.

"Likewise, with a deafening soundtrack and visually suffocating camera

work, *12 Years a Slave* goes from one hideous detail to another, with an eye towards maximum exploitation of each episode. ...

"This conception of the artist, as someone who subjects his audience to suffering, is distinctly postmodernist and distinctly false. It is an evasion of the artist's central responsibility, which is not to *inflict* a given experience, but to *arrive at its truth*. Unfortunately, those two undertakings are confused by many artists today, not only filmmakers."

A new adaptation of Charles Dickens' classic novel, *Great Expectations*, directed by veteran British filmmaker Mike Newell, seemed to us one of the most honest and sincere productions of the year:

"It is a very humane work. Newell has an eclectic filmography. Like so many British writers and directors, he began his career in television drama (*Play for Today*), which had a generally left-wing orientation, in the 1970s. *Dance With a Stranger* (1985), with Miranda Richardson, remains a high point in his career. He has also directed *Enchanted April* (1991), *Four Weddings and a Funeral* (1994), *Donnie Brasco* (1997) and one of the Harry Potter franchise (*Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*, 2005). The new film is a major addition to his body of work.

"Overall, I prefer this new version of *Great Expectations* to the Lean film. Although the latter obviously benefits from strong performances by Finlay Currie (Magwitch), Francis L. Sullivan (Jaggers), Alec Guinness (Herbert), Jean Simmons (young Estella) and Martita Hunt (Miss Havisham), among others, it is a somewhat stiff and, in my opinion, overrated work. It is a film to be appreciated, but not deeply felt. I was more moved by Newell's version, which, again, may have something to do with our present social situation and its impact on artists...and audiences."

In early December, Alexander Payne's *Nebraska*, with Bruce Dern as an aging Midwesterner, was released. Payne has done some interesting, intelligent work in the past, including *Election* (1999) and *About Schmidt* (2002), and the new film seems something of a development. Joanne Laurier wrote:

"[Alexander] Payne's *Nebraska* exhibits a genuine (and unusual) interest in real people and real places. It concerns itself with the bleak lives of decent people without prospects, who fill in the gaps with fantasies about striking it rich, stubbornly clinging to a belief in what remains of the tattered American Dream. Everyone in the film is waiting in quiet desperation for some external force or process to change his or her life.

"Phedon Papamichael's beautiful black and white cinematography starkly captures the decomposing social fabric of vast stretches of the American Midwest, conveying a Depression-era feel reminiscent of iconic photographs of that period. A sense of economic and cultural decline pervades *Nebraska*. It is worth noting that the vast majority of critics, both those who approve and those who disapprove of the film, make no comment about this aspect of the work. The miserable and ever-deteriorating conditions of life for millions and millions of Americans are taken almost entirely for granted and arouse no particular uneasiness within the upper-middle-class layers that pass currently for an 'intelligentsia.'"

The Coen brothers' *Inside Llewyn Davis*, loosely inspired by the life and work of folk singer-musician Dave Van Ronk, appeared in movie theaters the same day as *Nebraska*, at first in a limited release. Fred Mazelis commented on the WSWs:

"In important respects, however, [the fictional] Llewyn is nearly the opposite of Van Ronk. He seems to have little of Van Ronk's zest for life, sociability or leadership qualities. The Coens have created a general atmosphere of gloom, one that is quite different from the combative and lively tone of [Van Ronk's memoir] *The Mayor of MacDougal Street*...

"This is also bound up with the fact that the Coen brothers, in this and most of their films, appear almost entirely uninterested in social and historical context..."

"Van Ronk was a member of the Workers League, the predecessor organization to the Socialist Equality Party, during this period and remained generally sympathetic to socialism for the rest of his life..."

"There is no question but that Van Ronk's 'sense of history' influenced his approach to his musical efforts. His wide knowledge, research and broad understanding of the history and development of all the sources of music that interested him, including jazz, blues and folk, was connected to his political outlook, and in turn to his ability to teach and to become the 'gatekeeper' that [T Bone] Burnett describes. Certainly his interest (and the interest of others) in various folk-popular forms in the early 1960s was connected to an effort to make some type of contact with the experience and reality of workers and oppressed layers of the population."

This is what we thought of 2013's films. We await what 2014 holds in store with great interest.



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact