

Film Feature: The 10 Best Films of 2010

Submitted by [BrianTT](#) [1] on December 20, 2010 - 9:29am

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CHICAGO – When we look back on this past year in cinema, what will we remember? Ironically, a year after “Avatar” was supposed to change the movie paradigm forever, it’s the human faces that I most vividly remember from 2010. Mark Zuckerberg lit by a computer screen, Nina Sayers’ blood-red eyes, the longing look of Mal as she urges Cobb to join her in suicide, Teddy Daniels as the walls of his mental charade come tumbling down, Dean’s realization that his marriage is over, a little boy learning his first girlfriend happens to be a vampire, and so many more memorable, undeniably human moments. It’s the characters of 2010 that feature so prominently whenever I think back about the year in film.

Was it a “good year”? It depends on how you quantify it. At the very top of the year-end list, the quality was remarkable. There were at least four films released this year that I’ll watch again and again and again for years to come. In fact, my top ten, as a whole, is better than in many recent years. But the sheer drop-off in quality beyond that top ten comes pretty quick thereafter. By the time you get into the teens, the films beyond that impressive top ten, the quality slides fast and furious and continues to freefall from there. Having seen over 200 films this year, I’d say only around 25 approached greatness, overall a much lower number than most years. Looking at the quality at the top of the list makes 2010 look like a great year, but, when you take the year as a whole, it was somewhat lackluster.

Note: I’ve seen hundreds of films this year, but it is possible that the following films I missed could have made the list and so you should know that I didn’t see “Last Train Home,” “Lebanon,” “Vincere,” “Ajami,” “Carlos,” and “The Secret in Their Eyes”. I did see “The King’s Speech,” “True Grit,” and “Winter’s Bone” and, while I like all three films to varying degrees, they didn’t make the cut for the top 20 — I only mention them because they have made so many other lists and I wouldn’t want you to think they were not included because they were not seen.

Runner-ups: “127 Hours,” “Exit Through the Gift Shop,” “The Fighter,” “Fish Tank,” “The Good The Bad The Weird,” “The Illusionist,” “Inside Job,” “The Kids Are All Right,” “Mother,” and “The Red Riding Trilogy.”

10. “Let Me In”



Let Me In

Photo credit: Overture Films

If you're one of those souls who believes a remake is never a good idea and have therefore avoided "Let Me In," I'd like to offer a parallel that might persuade you to check out one of the best horror films of the last decade: Bruce Springsteen wrote "Because the Night" and gave it to Patti Smith who added her own lyrics and made it her own. Both versions of the song are brilliant. Both "Let the Right One In" and "Let Me In" are brilliant. This is how a remake should be done: Taking what worked about the first film and refining it, while also adding your own style. Playing up the horror elements of the story and pulling stronger performances from the great Kodi Smit-McPhee and Chloe Grace Moretz, Matt Reeves has made a complex coming-of-age story with some of the most powerful imagery of the year. I love "Let the Right One In." But I can love "Let Me In" too.

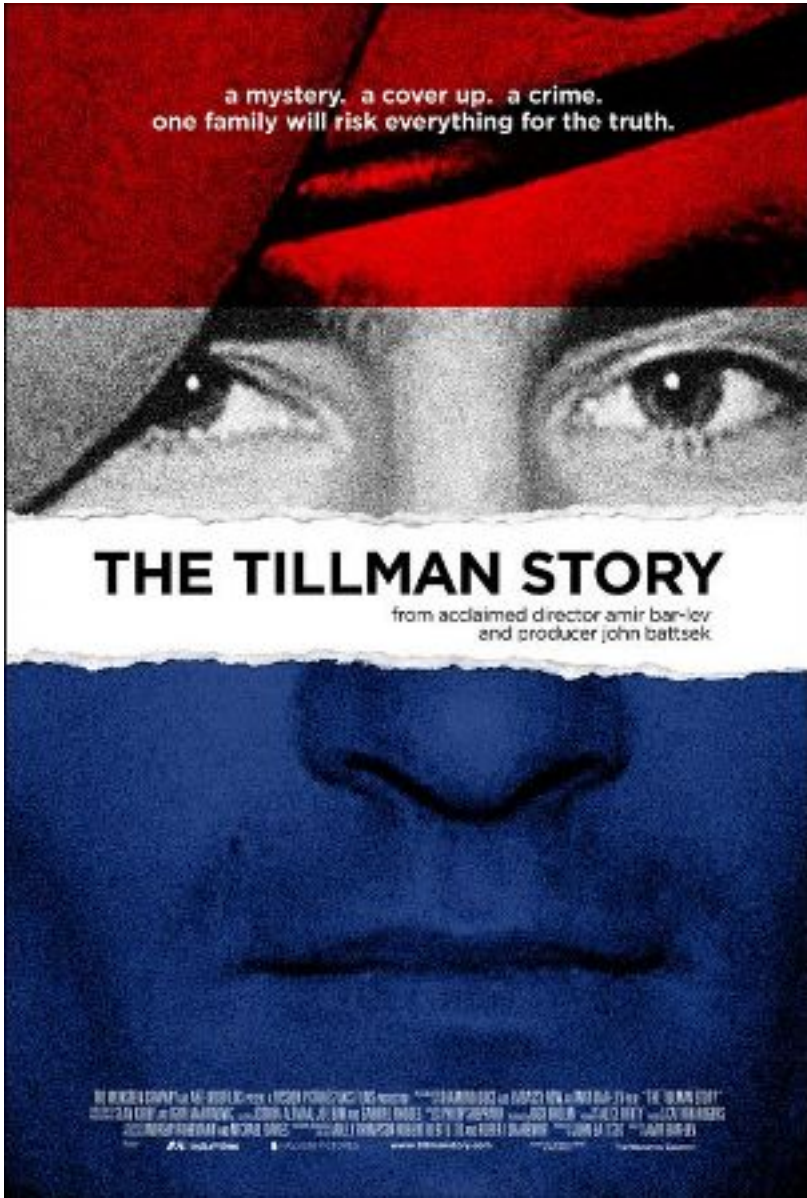
9. "Blue Valentine"



Blue Valentine
Photo credit: The Weinstein Company

The dissolution of a marriage has rarely been more devastatingly captured than in the best debut of the year, Derek Cianfrance’s “Blue Valentine.” With stunning performances by Michelle Williams and Ryan Gosling, “Blue Valentine” tells a very common story. Its dramatic success proves that you don’t need an outrageous hook to make an amazing film. The story of Dean and Cindy is not truly a love story in the traditionally romantic sense, but it is in the sense that young love in the real world is often a product of circumstance more than romance. Cindy and Dean feel almost pushed into their union, and Cianfrance has the nerve to suggest that fate doesn’t always work in favor of love. As he tracks the decline of their relationship, he flashes back to its inception, a move that shades everything in melancholy. We know where Dean and Cindy are going in the not-too-distant future, making the first days of their relationship even sadder than the last ones. With all the high-concept, CGI-driven films of the new millennium, Cianfrance and arguably the two best actors of their generation have proven that there’s no effect more special than amazing acting.

8. “The Tillman Story”



The Tillman Story

Photo credit: The Weinstein Company

Pat Tillman's story is one of the most complex of the year. He never wanted to be a hero. He never wanted to be a martyr or a symbol for the human cost of the war and its importance. He never wanted to be a political pawn. And yet he became all of these things through not just his death but also what happened after it. The brilliance of Amir Bar-Lev's stunning documentary, the best of a very good year for the genre, is that it honors Tillman's wish to not be turned into anything but what he was: a brave, strong young man doing what he thought was right. "The Tillman Story" could have easily become an anti-war diatribe against the men who used Tillman's death as political currency but that would have been just as much of an injustice to Tillman's memory. Instead, Bar-Lev focused on the family that Pat left behind and how much we should all be so lucky to have people like the Tillmans on our side, in life or death.

7. "The Ghost Writer"



The Ghost Writer

Photo credit: Summit

One of the few films of the last few years that deserves the over-used appellation “Hitchcockian,” Roman Polanski’s “The Ghost Writer” proves that the controversial director is still one of our best living filmmakers. While so many of Polanski’s peers from the ’70s have turned their back on the very concept of quality cinema, he continues to make films that are distinctly his own. The paranoia that’s been at the heart of much of his best work fuels this tale of a man, hired to ghost-write the autobiography of a former British Prime Minister, who begins to suspect an international conspiracy and quickly becomes drawn into a web of double-crosses and possible murders. “The Ghost Writer” is a master class in building tension and creating mystery in a way that doesn’t feel forced or clichéd.

6. “Shutter Island”



Shutter Island

Photo credit: Paramount

If Martin Scorsese's latest film had come out in December, it would be widely considered as a top Oscar candidate, vying for nominations in several categories. However, since it came out in February, the film will be lucky to get a couple of well-deserved tech nods for cinematography and possibly art direction. Thus is the insanity of the modern Oscar campaign. Easily one of the best films of the year, "Shutter Island" shares common themes with two other films on this list ("The Ghost Writer" and "Inception") in that it's about a man caught up in a nightmarish maelstrom of paranoia, fear, and, ultimately, denial. It's a trip through the cinematic funhouse with one of the best directors that ever lived serving as tour guide. With perfect technical elements on every level along with an amazing series of supporting performances to bolster one of the best lead actor turns of the year, "Shutter Island" is mesmerizing from first frame to last: a true cinephile's dream come true.

5. "Toy Story 3"

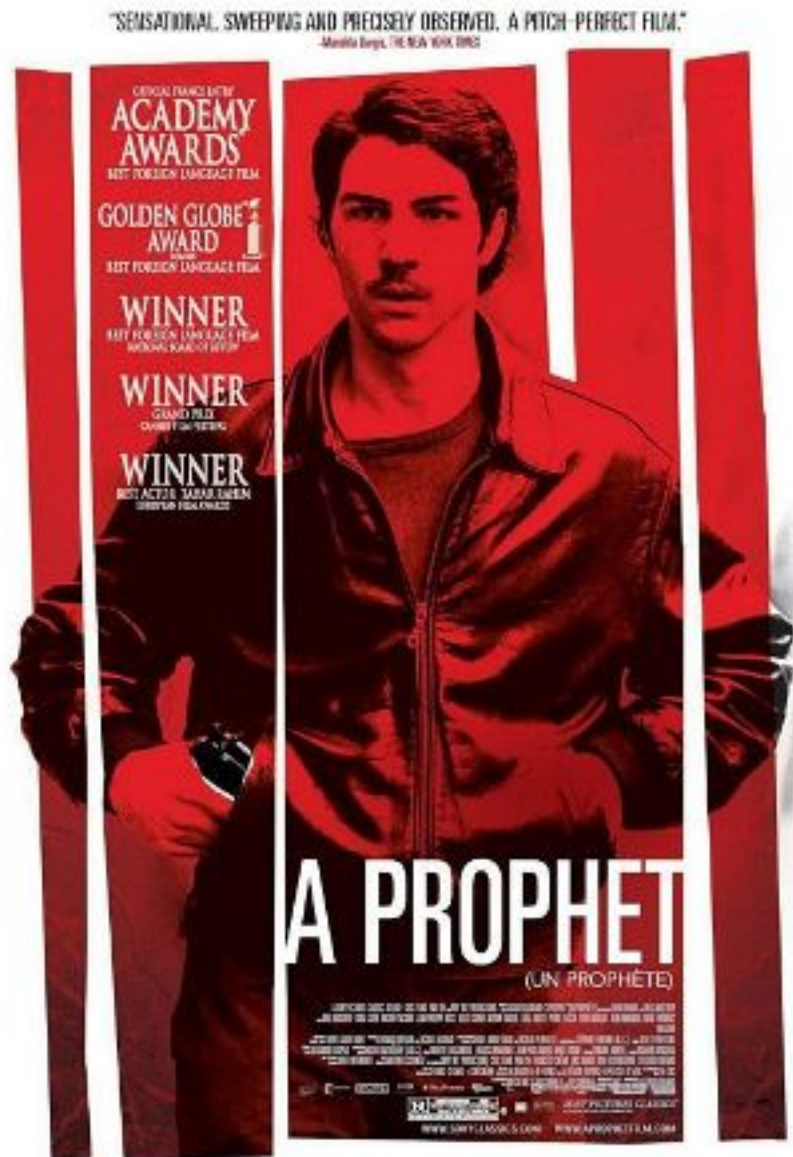


Toy Story 3

Photo credit: Disney

Pixar has done it again and, in some ways, better than ever before. "Toy Story 3" is not just the cap on what now has to be viewed as one of the best trilogies of all time but also, in its amazing final act, really sums up everything that this incredible company has accomplished to date. As Andy prepares to put away childish things and move on with his life, he shares the gift of imagination and play one final time. An entire generation has now grown up with Pixar and there hasn't been a more impressive creative force in recent memory when it comes to the power and art of sharing imagination. We all may not be the same age as Andy, but, along with Woody, Buzz, Nemo, Wall-E, Remy, Mr. Incredible, and so many more indelible characters, we have all learned the same lesson — that nothing is more important than creativity and the gift of sharing it with others.

4. "A Prophet"



A Prophet

Photo credit: Sony Pictures Classics

The great Patrick McDonald, a film critic here at HollywoodChicago.com, handed me the screener of “A Prophet” shortly after watching it and said with hushed awe, “*This changes everything.*” Yes, it does. Modern crime sagas have a new bar with which to be measured now that Jacques Audiard’s stunning tale of a young man’s transformation into a ruthless crime lord has completely redefined the genre. A modern take on a timeless tale of innocence lost and power gained, “A Prophet” is the most remarkable coming-of-age story of the year, a masterfully-directed, written, and performed examination of the adaptability of man. What makes a criminal? The central character of “A Prophet” wouldn’t rise to the rank he does by film’s end without those perpetual intangibles such as fate, circumstance, and situation, but his prophetic character (excuse the pun) both represents the global everyman and the oncoming future, since it’s his very multicultural nature that eventually pushes him to his fate.

3. “Inception”



Inception

Photo credit: Warner Bros.

There has never been a summer blockbuster more ambitious or remarkably creative than Christopher Nolan's trip through the mind; one of the most technically jaw-dropping films ever made. Nolan's incredible cinematic vision evokes everything about why they started making movies in the first place — to show you something that you've never seen before. One of the most amazingly original films in years, what blows me away about "Inception" is the confidence evident in every single frame. Most films made in 2010 felt like they were pandering to as wide a demographic as possible or attempting some loose approximation of entertainment. Most Hollywood films are "trying." "Inception" is "doing." It works because it does what so few American films do — challenges your perception of not just what film can do but also the very power of the imagination.

2. "Black Swan"

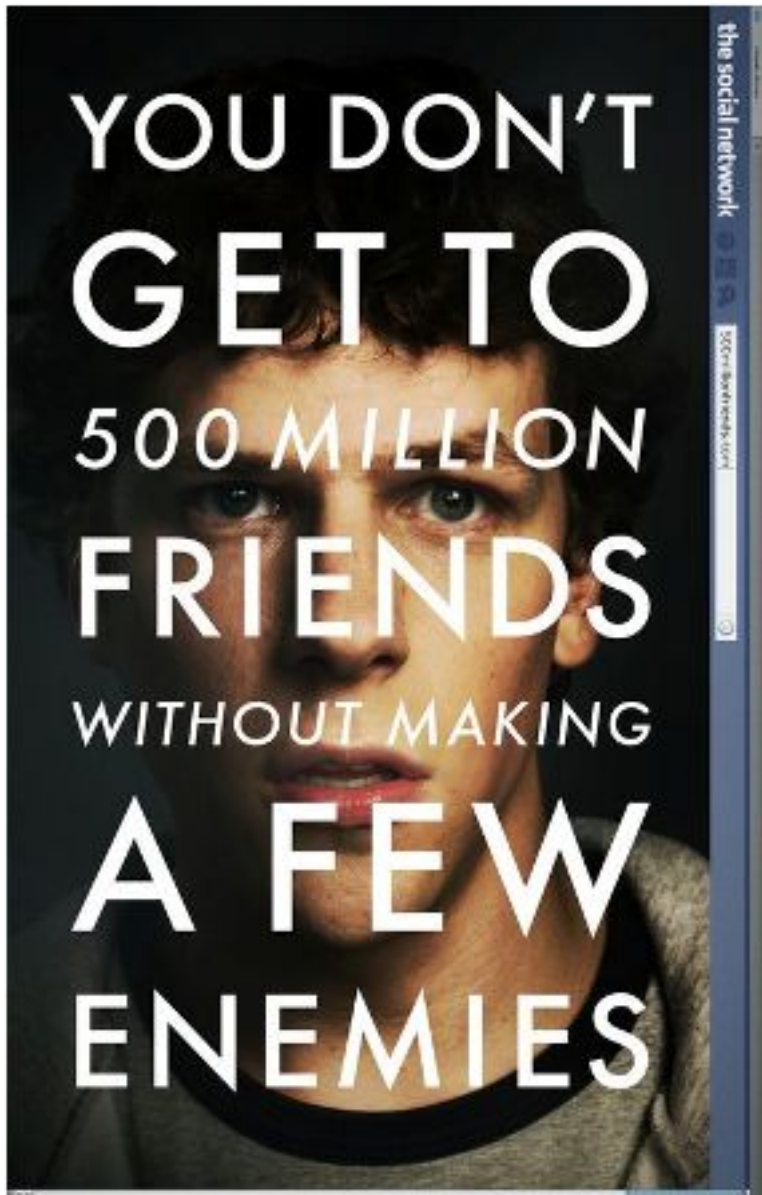


Black Swan

Photo credit: Fox Searchlight

One of the most mesmerizing dramas of the last several years, Darren Aronofsky's "Black Swan" represents a new, confident high for its talented auteur. When I saw "Inception," I thought for sure that I had seen the most creatively ambitious film of 2010. I was wrong. Watching "Black Swan" is like watching a tightrope walk, in that there were so many moments in which Aronofsky's vision could have fallen flat but it never does. From the way he directs the best performance of the year from Natalie Portman to the unbelievable cinematography by Matthew Libatique, it's impossible to take your eyes off the screen. Great movies don't just entertain you, they make you completely forget about everything else going in your life and transfix you. I said a few years ago that my favorite movies had become the ones in which I didn't think about the review I had to write as I was watching them. "Black Swan" forces you to think about nothing else except what's in front of you. It's a masterpiece.

1. "The Social Network"



The Social Network
Photo credit: Sony Pictures

What a surprise, right? And yet those bitching about the consensus choice for the best film of 2010 should realize that it's not merely sheep mentality that's driving it to the top of so many "best of" lists, rather its landslide victory is simply indicative of its undeniable quality. David Fincher's second masterpiece (after "Zodiac") is the most invigorating, alive, vibrant film of the year and, therefore, the best. The filmmaking craft on display in "The Social Network" is so far above average that just the technical elements of the movie would make it one of the best of the year, but Fincher wisely never loses the human story at the center of the piece. Who would have guessed that Aaron Sorkin would be such an ideal writer for Fincher as the director's technical precision marries perfectly with Sorkin's precise way with words? As great as the cinematography, editing, and music choices are in "The Social Network," the film wouldn't work without the believable ensemble highlighted by career-best performances from Jesse Eisenberg and Andrew Garfield. "The Social Network" was wrongly dismissed pre-release as "The Facebook Movie." It's so much more than that. And it's the best movie of the year.

Please come back Thursday, December 23rd, 2010 for Patrick McDonald's Best of the Year and stay tuned for features about the most overlooked films, best television, and best video games of the last twelve months.



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