

Film Feature: The Top Overlooked Films of 2010

Submitted by [BrianTT](#) [1] on December 28, 2010 - 10:55am

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CHICAGO – Some films never get a fair shot with audiences. They open in a handful of art house theaters scattered throughout the country before inconspicuously landing on DVD. Passionate movie lovers are left with the task of championing these unjustly obscure titles and helping them to acquire the audience they deserve. Before I reveal my picks for the top five films of 2010 that you probably didn't see, here are the 10 runners-up.

“Agora”



Agora

Photo credit: Lionsgate

The feisty, ever-questioning spirit of Carl Sagan is alive and well in Alejandro Amenabar's fascinating and haunting historical epic. "Agora" functions as somewhat of an antithesis to "Passion of the Christ," portraying the ancient ideological battles between Pagans and Christians with complexity, intelligence and a refusal to exploit its inherent violence. Rachel Weisz is at the peak of her radiance as Hypatia, a female scholar specializing in astronomy, philosophy and common sense. Yet she's far from a saint. The theme of altering one's perception to achieve growth is highlighted in every aspect of the production, which is in the great tradition of provocative spiritual cinema such as

Scorsese’s “The Last Temptation of Christ.”

“Carlos”



Carlos
Photo credit: IFC

Here’s the film that Soderbergh’s “Che” wanted to be. As Ilich Ramírez Sánchez, the monstrosly egocentric Venezuelan revolutionary who famously raided the 1975 OPEC meeting in Vienna, Édgar Ramírez delivers one of the year’s most electrifying performances. With a running time of five-and-a-half hours, Olivier Assayas’s magnificent epic was broadcast on the Sundance Channel in three installments, thus making it eligible for the award season’s miniseries categories. That’s somewhat of a shame, since the film is exuberantly cinematic, and should ideally be played on the biggest screen possible. Though the pacing does lag, particularly during its final act, Assayas and Ramírez brilliantly illuminate the psyche of a self-righteous narcissist.

“Cyrus”



Cyrus
Photo credit: Fox Searchlight

In the same year mumblecore queen Greta Gerwig was cast in the Ben Stiller comedy “Greenberg,” a quartet of Hollywood stars were cast in the Duplass brothers’ latest mumblecore comedy. Both films were wonderful and swiftly overlooked by audiences, but at least “Greenberg” garnered some major nominations at the Indie Spirit Awards. Mark and Jay Duplass have always been the most accessible of mumble– oh heck, let’s just call them character-driven microbudget filmmakers. “Cyrus” is a masterwork of uncomfortable silence and awkward laughter, as John (the sublime John C. Reilly) becomes engaged in a battle of wits with his girlfriend’s grown son (Jonah Hill, in a revelatory performance).

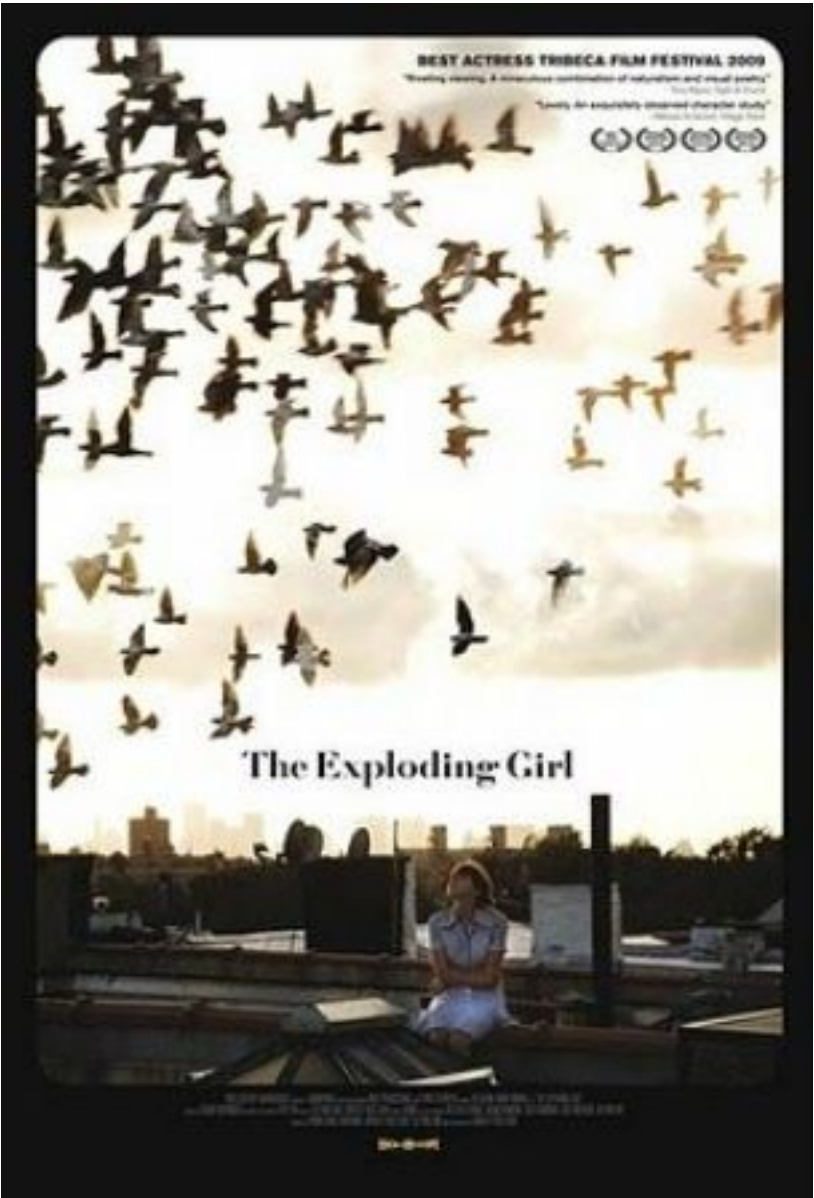
“The Eclipse”



The Eclipse
Photo credit: Magnolia

Conor McPherson’s remarkable character study recaptures some of the “Sixth Sense”-style magic that M. Night Shyamalan lost a decade ago. Blending insightful drama with supernatural elements, the story revolved around a haunted widower (Ciarán Hinds), a ghost-obsessed author (Iben Hjejle), and a spirit-consuming alcoholic (Aidan Quinn). McPherson portrays the unpredictability and occasional sloppiness of human behavior with a raw authenticity that is strikingly juxtaposed with the picturesque Irish surroundings. Some momentary jolts of grotesque horror tilt the film dangerously close toward Sam Raimi territory, but other sequences prove to be as ominous and chilling as anything in “Paranormal Activity.” Like “Sense,” this film remembers that the most interesting characters in a ghost story are not the ghosts themselves, but the mortals who encounter them.

“The Exploding Girl”



The Exploding Girl
Photo credit: Oscilloscope

Oscilloscope Pictures continues its golden streak of unmissable indie gems with Bradley Rust Gray’s quietly captivating extended vignette. It provides an ideal showcase for Zoe Kazan (granddaughter of Elia), whose face serves as a hypnotic canvas for Gray’s visual poetry. Kazan plays Ivy, an epileptic college student struggling to remain connected with her increasingly distant boyfriend, while her longtime pal Al (Mark Rendall) gradually admits to having deeper feelings for her. Despite her internal demons, Ivy exudes great strength, maintaining an external calm even while a storm rages beneath. Few films have observed more impeccably how a heart can be broken or mended merely by the vibration of a cell phone.

“Four Lions”

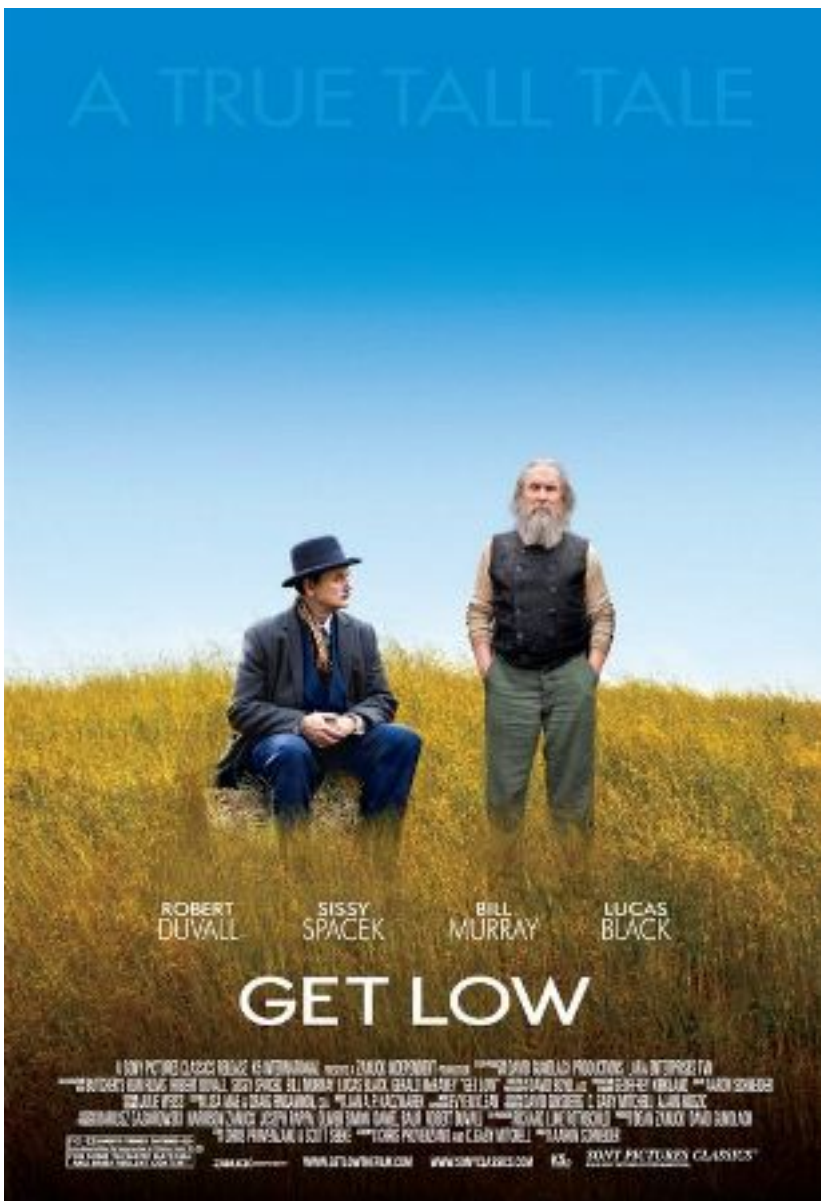


Four Lions

Photo credit: Film4

Chris Morris' scathing black satire isn't quite the masterpiece that "In the Loop" was, but it's easily funnier than any other film released in 2010, and perhaps the only film worthy of being nominated in the Best Musical or Comedy category (take that Golden Globes!). After researching the widespread ineptitude of terrorists, Morris decided to become the first serious filmmaker to mine their fundamental absurdity onscreen. The results are profoundly squirm-inducing to say the least, but also rather cathartic. Some of the exchanges between British jihadist Omar (Riz Ahmed) and his bumbling band of brothers could've easily been performed by Ricky Gervais and Karl Pilkington. Like Dan Reed's 2009 documentary "Terror in Mumbai," this film illustrates how terrorists must become entirely dependent on others to think for them in order to be a "success."

"Get Low"



Get Low

Photo credit: Sony Pictures Classics

Robert Duvall may not have many lines in Aaron Schneider's slight yet splendid mystery, but he leaves an impact on the viewer that words can't adequately express. He plays aging hermit Felix Bush as a prisoner of his own circumstances. It's clear that something inside of him

died a long time ago, but it's unclear what or how until the end. That's when Duvall is truly allowed to shine, and his climactic monologue is among this year's most powerful and unforgettable moments in screen acting. The rest of the picture isn't quite up to Duvall's level, but it has a certain whimsical charm. As the local funeral director desperate for business, Bill Murray is looser, funnier and more playful than he's been since...well, "Zombieland."

"The Ghost Writer"

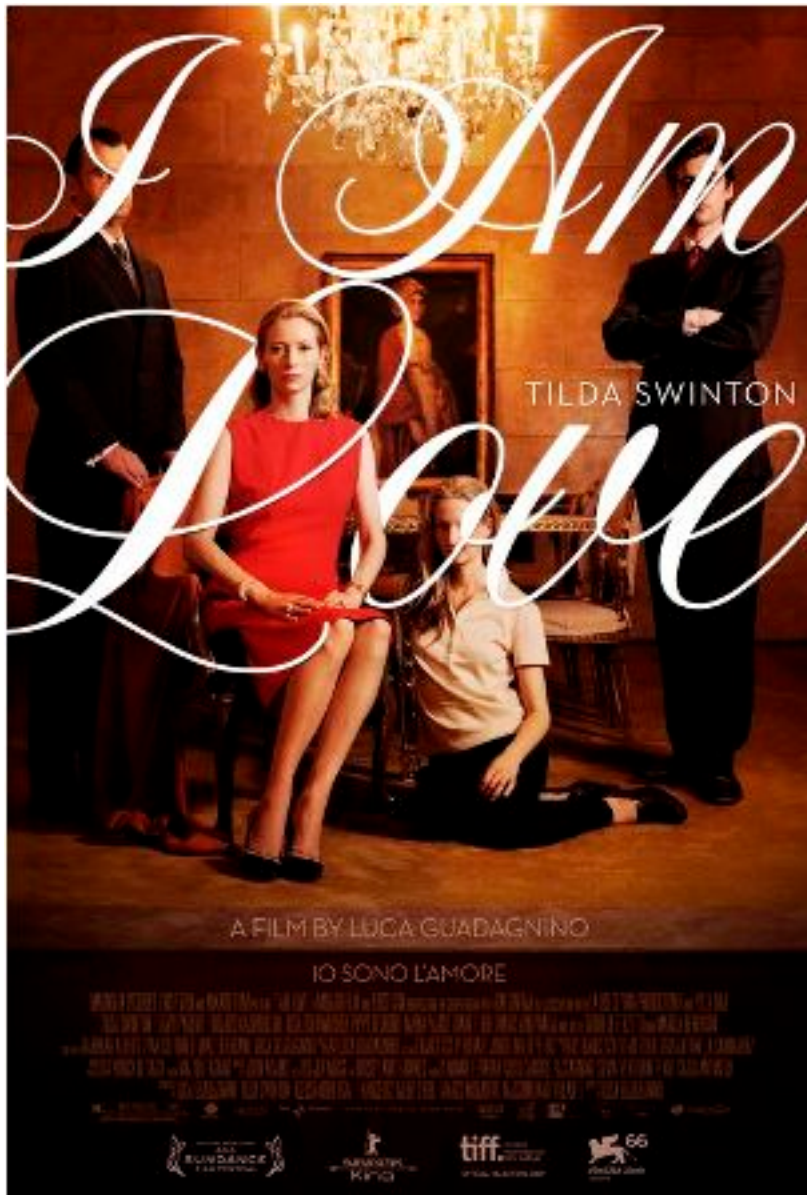


The Ghost Writer

Photo credit: Summit

In what I dearly hope will not be the final film directed by the great Roman Polanski, Ewan McGregor delivers his best work in years as the skeptical ghostwriter of a former Prime Minister (Pierce Brosnan) harboring fatal secrets. There's nothing particularly profound or innovative about this twisty thriller. It's just one hell of an entertaining ride. Spectacular suspense scenes are peppered with Polanski's signature brand of gleefully dark humor usually aimed at the luckless protagonist, who can't ride a bike without it getting stuck in gravel. Brosnan is excellent as the ruthless politician whose benign façade becomes an object of morbid fascination, while Olivia Williams provides delicious intrigue as his wife. And let's not forget the stellar work of composer Alexandre Desplat, whose score evokes the brooding spirit of Bernard Herrmann.

"I Am Love"

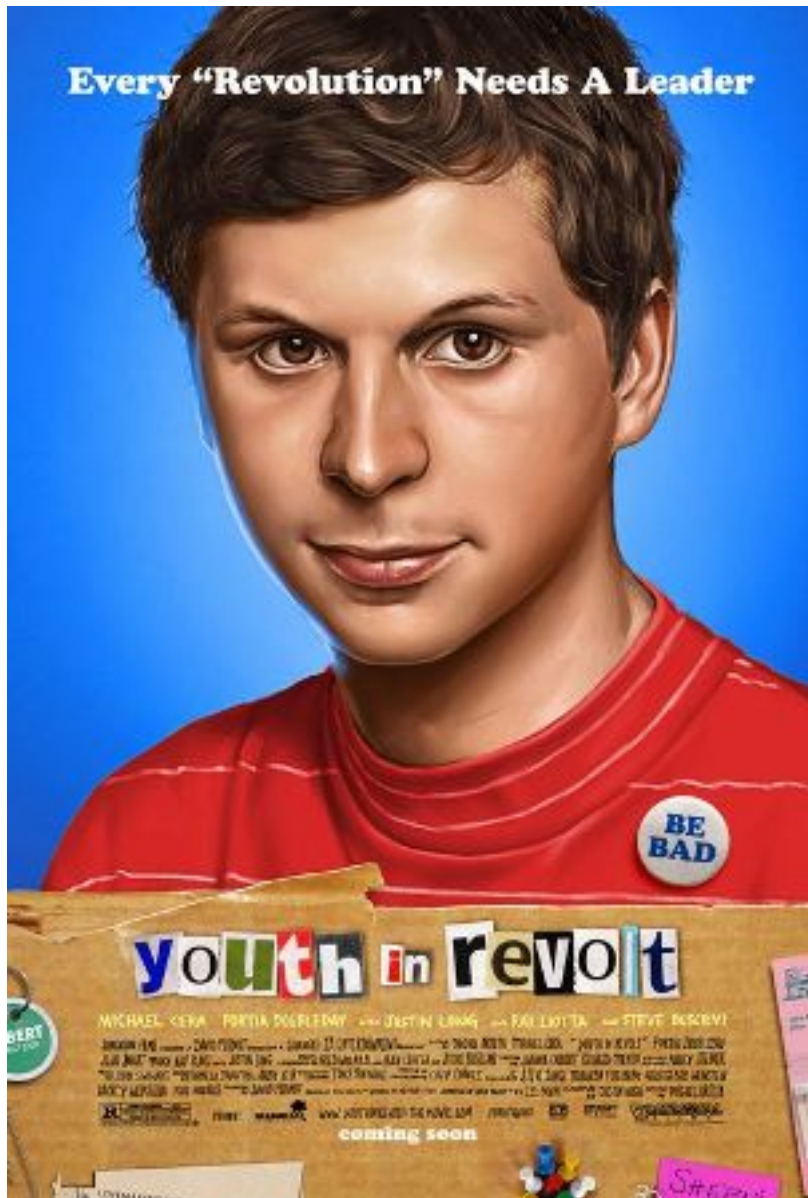


I Am Love

Photo credit: Magnolia

Though Luca Guadagnino's unabashed melodrama was not overlooked by critics, its leading lady has been repeatedly snubbed in the Best Actress race. That's somewhat of a travesty, considering the fact that Tilda Swinton has rarely been more ravishing than she is here, playing the role of a Russian immigrant straining to the perfect wife of a rich textile owner in Milan, when she begins to fall for her son's friend, the gifted chef Antonio (Edoardo Gabbriellini). Like Aronofsky's "Black Swan," this film transcends its rather contrived script, thanks to spellbinding acting, direction and cinematography (courtesy of Yorick Le Saux). Paying affectionate homage to the Sirkian theme of forbidden love between classes, as well as Visconti's portrayal of the upper-crust Milanese, "I Am Love" moves with the ebb and flow of a rapturous fever dream, as its characters become intoxicated by the allure of sudden passion.

"Youth in Revolt"



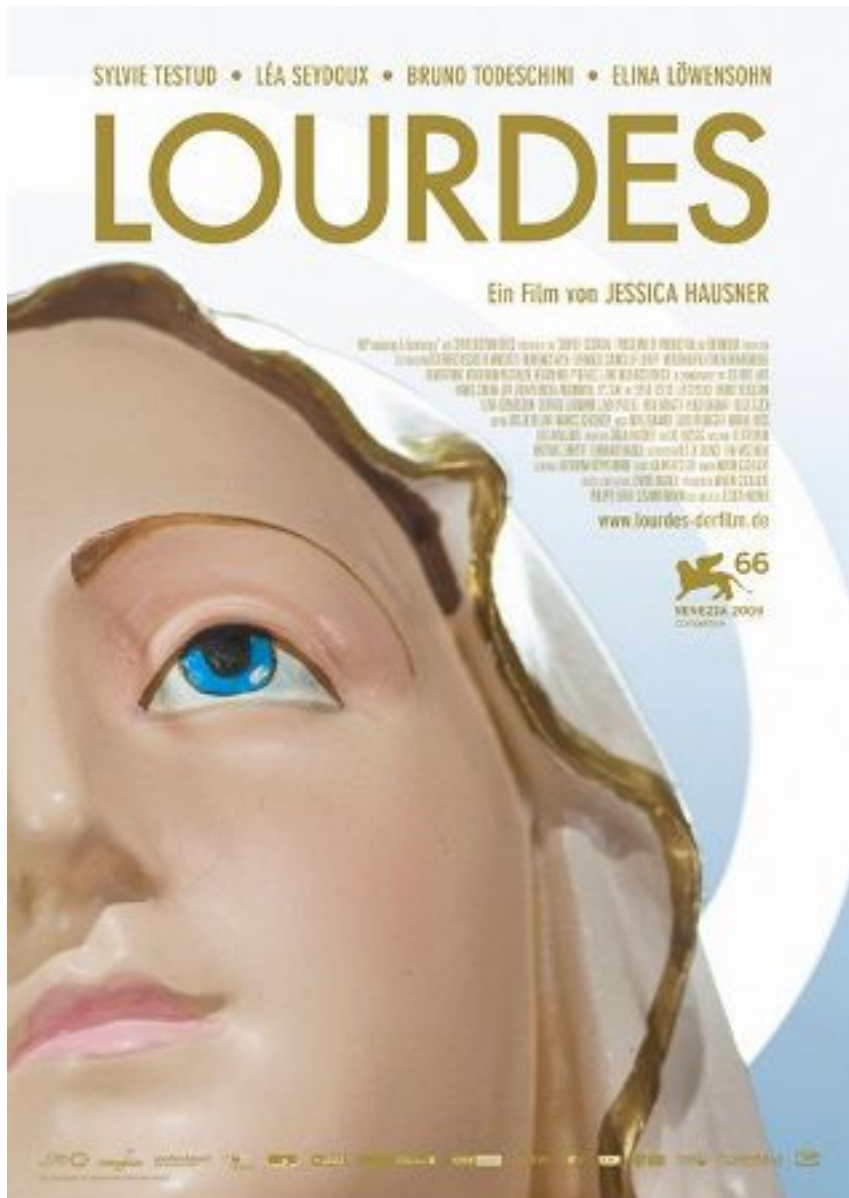
Youth in Revolt

Photo credit: The Weinstein Company

Michael Cera may have been the wrong choice for Scott Pilgrim, but he was at the peak of his comic genius in Miguel Artera's problematic yet riotously hilarious adaptation of C.D. Payne's book series. His teenage characters speak with an eloquence beyond their years, while their minds (and hormones) remain fixed in adolescence. Think Charlie Brown meets "Superbad." As horny hero Nick Twisp, Cera is finally granted the opportunity to stretch outside of the neurotic comic persona that he's mastered, particularly when Nick adopts the alter-ego of mustached chain-smoker Francois in a desperate attempt to win the girl of his wet dreams, Sheeni Saunders (Portia Doubleday). His character's newfound assertiveness provoked applause and guffaws at the advanced screening I attended, and is sure to delight Cera fans on DVD.

Move on to page three for...drum roll please...The Top 5 Overlooked Films of 2010...

5. "Lourdes"



Lourdes

Photo credit: Palisades Tartan

Jessica Hausner is a filmmaker uninterested in spoonfeeding superficial enlightenment to her audience. She also has no intention of mocking organized religion with self-congratulatory satire or blasphemous put-downs. Her film is about a spiritual transformation that takes place within the soul of Christine (Sylvie Testud), a lonely wheelchair-bound woman with multiple sclerosis. To escape her isolated existence, she makes a pilgrimage to the titular town in the Pyrenees Mountains where the Virgin Mary is said to have appeared and healed faithful mortals since the mid-1800s. Though Christine is considerably less pious than her fellow ailing travelers, she begins to show signs of physical improvement. Thus, the film's central question emerges: how does one become worthy of a miracle? Testud, looking like a grown-up Saoirse Ronan, has a hypnotically subdued face that makes every subtle expression seem as intricate and open-ended as Mona Lisa's smile. Cinematographer Martin Gschlacht makes excellent use of the archaic locations, capturing memorable images of countless pilgrims making their way past motionless statues as ancient as the land itself. Hausner is less interested in the validity of miracles so much as she is with the importance of a faith in miracles, and how it effects the souls of the afflicted.

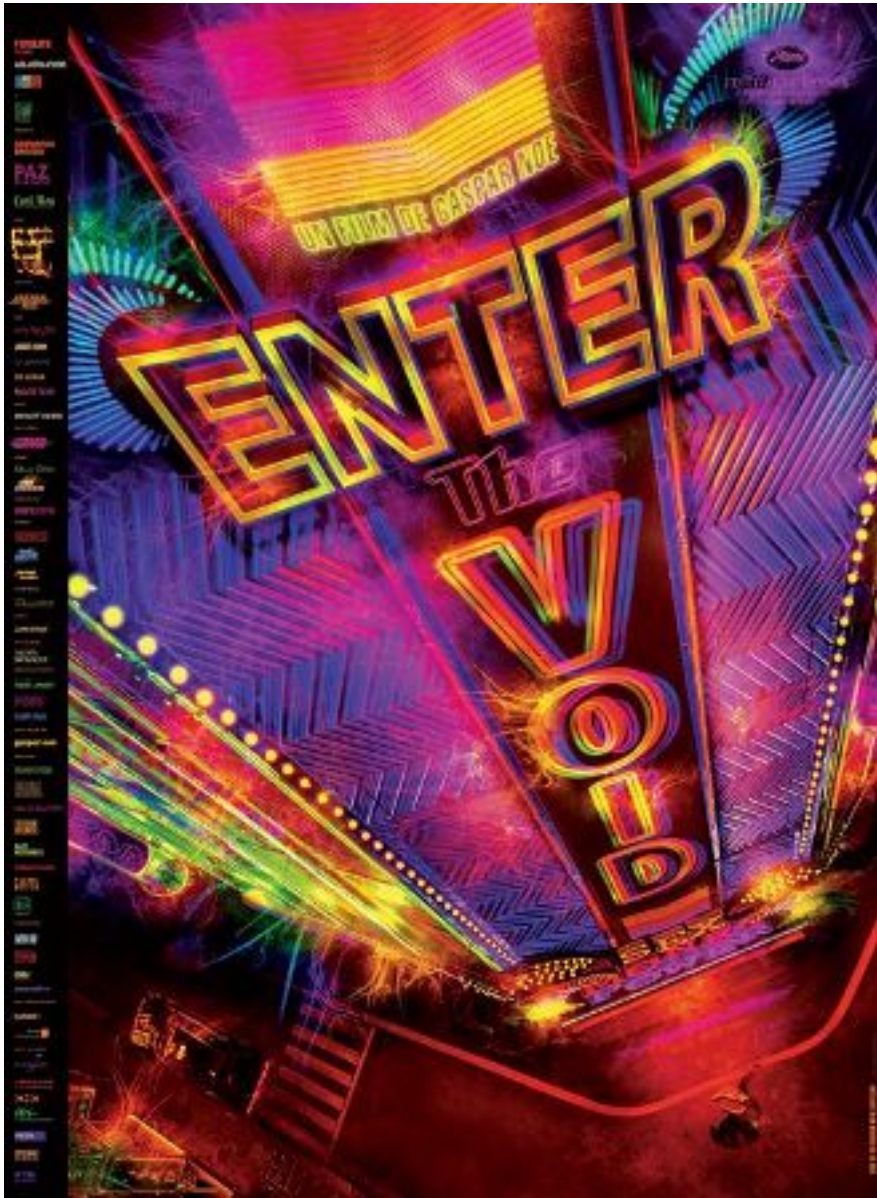
4. "Cairo Time"



Cairo Time
Photo credit: MPI

A lovely little morsel with a rich aftertaste, Ruba Nadda’s romance easily bested this year’s numerous blockbusters about women finding enlightenment overseas. It’s basically “Leap Year” made by and for thinking people. Patricia Clarkson is utterly beguiling as Juliette, the wife of a U.N. official, who finds herself with plenty of time on her hands while waiting for her husband in Cairo. As she begins to develop an interest in his friend, a retired cop named Tareq (Alexander Siddig), the two cordial strangers begin to gently subvert the preconceptions they have about their respective backgrounds. The plot unfolds more or less in the way one would expect, yet Nadda’s deft and subtle approach to the material is what makes it resonate more than the countless lesser pictures made from the same familiar elements. She is smart enough to know that the most erotic and haunting scenes are less about action and all about feeling. When Juliette finally decides to invite Tareq into her room, the moment plays out in silence, and is a miniature masterpiece of acting, timing and choreography, expressing the repressed passion thundering beneath the wordless angst.

3. “Enter the Void”



Enter the Void

Photo credit: MPI

Dying is truly the ultimate trip in Gaspar Noé’s extraordinary, wildly ambitious new film, billed as a “psychedelic melodrama.” Taking his cue from the opening moments of Kathryn Bigelow’s “Strange Days,” Noé comes closer than any director in the history of cinema to recreating human perception in all of its nuance and complexity. As the film opens, we are peering at the vibrant landscape of Tokyo through the hazy eyes of Oscar (Nathaniel Brown), a small-time drug dealer scrounging to get ahead. He’s recently been reunited with his adoring sister Linda (Paz de la Huerta), who’s just moved in to his apartment. After Oscar is gunned down in a police raid, we continue to view the world from the perspective of his disembodied spirit as it floats through space, desperately attempting to stay connected to the sister whom he promised never to leave. While Noé’s “Irreversible” was about the nature of man, “Void” tackles the nature of existence itself. The director has forged a brilliant collaboration with cinematographer Benoit Debie, key grip Akira Kanno and visual effects artistic director Pierre Buffin in creating a world so deliriously chaotic and yet so beautifully organic that it literally seems within reach.

2. “Let Me In”



Let Me In

Photo credit: Overture Films

It has been a great year for young female performers breaking into the big time, from Jennifer Lawrence in “Winter’s Bone” and Hailee Steinfeld in “True Grit” to Lena Dunham in “Tiny Furniture.” Yet the one fresh-faced actress conspicuously left out of this year’s awards season is Chloe Moretz, the formidably charismatic and remarkably natural youngster who not only stole scenes from her fellow co-stars in “Kick-Ass,” but took ownership of the entire film. Her portrayal of the foul-mouthed Hit Girl brought the film a kinetic thrill worthy of the greatest exploitation classics. Yet Moretz proved to be the real deal by taking a 180 degree turn in her next film, Matt Reeves’s masterful remake of Tomas Alfredson’s 2008 Swedish gem, “Let the Right One In.” It’s the first modern American horror film to truly grapple with the inherent tragedy of vampirism. As the bloodthirsty creature living inside the body of a 12-year-old girl, Moretz is thoroughly convincing. She quietly conveys the sadness of a life lived at the expense of others, while making the first hesitant movements toward embracing a budding friendship with a lonesome boy (played by the astonishing Kodi Smit-McPhee). When Moretz says, “I’ve been 12 for a very long time,” you believe her.

1. “Plastic Bag”



Plastic Bag

Photo credit: Gigantic Pictures

One of the very best films I’ve seen all year is an 18-minute short subject by the acclaimed young director Ramin Bahrani (“Chop Shop”). It won raves on the festival circuit before ending up as an extra on the Werner Herzog curiosity “My Son My Son What Have Ye Done.” Bahrani’s “Bag” casts Herzog as the voice of a plastic bag that floats through the world after being abandoned by its owner. Baring more than

a passing resemblance to Spielberg’s “A.I.,” Bahrani pays off on the promise of Kubrick’s blueprint, delivering a film of unforgettable visual and verbal poetry. Herzog proves to be the best possible choice for the role, since his iconic voice has a knack for simultaneously sounding darkly satirical and gravely profound. It’s amazing how many nuances can be evoked by the movements of the bag as it drifts from one place to the next, like the red balloon in search of its human companion. Credit cinematographer Michael Simmonds and editor Bahrani for pulling off such a staggering feat. The film works as both a wondrous yet melancholy fable and a galvanizing call to arms for environmental activists that manages to be wholly devoid of preachy treacle. While this season’s must-see cinematic programming promises to drain moviegoers of both time and money, here’s one small masterpiece that can be viewed for free online. Don’t miss it.



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