

Film Feature: The 10 Best Films of 2011

Submitted by [BrianTT](#) [1] on December 20, 2011 - 11:12am

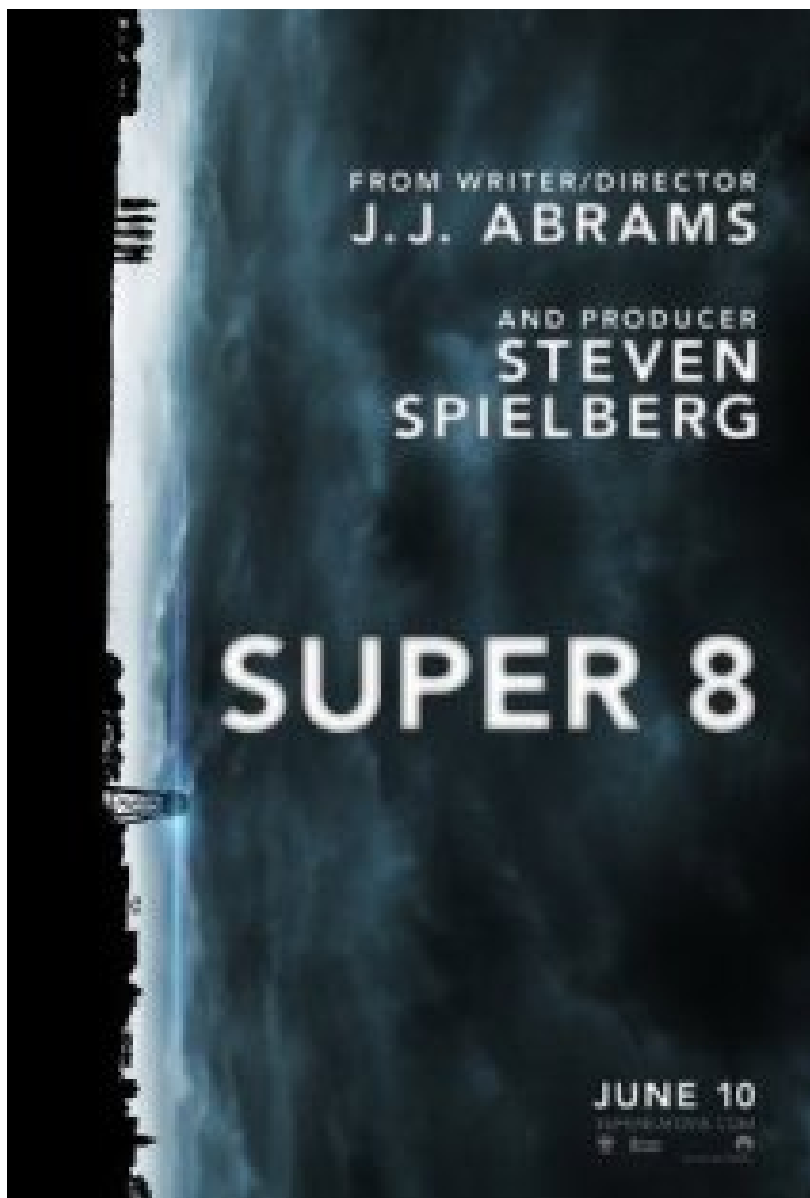
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CHICAGO – We could tell, very early on, that 2011 would be a stellar year for film. As the year opened, great genre product like “Source Code,” “Hanna,” and “The Adjustment Bureau” entertained viewers and critics alike, while art houses unspooled gems like “Certified Copy” and “Meek’s Cutoff.” As the year progressed, the solid blend of quality mainstream films with consistently-interesting independent and foreign fare rarely let up, as we watched some of our best established filmmakers work alongside some daring new voices in cinema. Here are my favorites:

Note: I’ve seen over two hundred films this year, but it is possible that the following films I missed could have made the list. So, upfront, you should know that I didn’t see “A Separation,” “Poetry,” “The Arbor,” “Le Havre,” “Mysteries of Lisbon,” or “Tuesday, After Christmas.” I did see “War Horse,” “We Need to Talk About Kevin,” “Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close,” “Rampart,” “Pariah,” “The Iron Lady,” and a few other 2011 films that have yet to open in Chicago or be reviewed on the site. I only mention that in case you think they didn’t make the cut because they were not seen. Trust me. I did my best to see everything.

Runner-ups: “Certified Copy,” “Hell and Back Again,” “Into the Abyss,” “Martha Marcy May Marlene,” “Meek’s Cutoff,” “The Muppets,” “Rise of the Planet of the Apes,” “Shame,” “Source Code,” and “Win Win.”

10. “Super 8”



Super 8
Photo credit: Paramount

It's ironic that, even with two Steven Spielberg-directed films opening this week, the best Spielberg film of 2011 wasn't directed by the man himself. J.J. Abrams brilliantly grabbed the passed torch from his childhood icon, finding the wonder, joy, and filmmaking glee so prevalent in the master's early works (and so often missing from them now). There's a passionate degree of storytelling and entertainment in "Super 8" that you just can't find in most summer blockbusters (although, it should be noted, that this past warmest season turned out better than any of us could have hoped). With a stellar young cast (including a star-making turn by Elle Fanning), perfect production values, one of the most memorable action scenes of all time (the derailment), and an emotionally-satisfying finale, "Super 8" is an ideal filmmaking homage, in that it doesn't just pay tribute to old-fashioned movie-making but stands alongside it in every way. By making a film essentially based on the works of the man who inspired him, J.J. Abrams did something truly magical — made a film good enough to inspire the next generation.

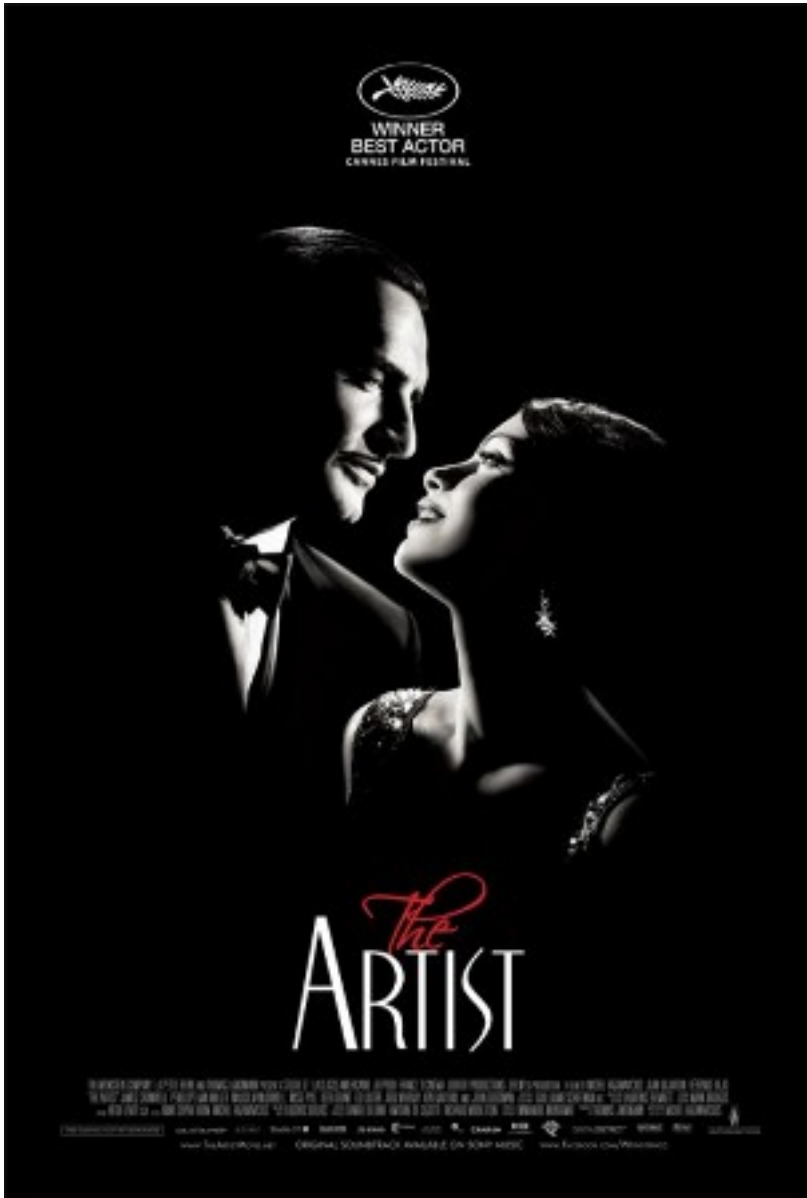
9. "The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo"



The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo
Photo credit: Sony Pictures

One of the most technically-impressive thrillers of all time, David Fincher's take on the Stieg Larsson book finally solved the riddle of how to pace a complex piece of work like this one – just hire the most talented people available to make it and sit back and enjoy the ride. "Dragon Tattoo" is such a perfectly-constructed piece of filmmaking that it mesmerizes with its pure technical expertise. The way cinematographer Jeff Cronenweth shoots through the cold windows of the film's primary setting; the way Atticus Ross & Trent Reznor offer a perfect companion piece to their Oscar-winning work on "The Social Network"; the way Fincher's editing team cut the more-intense sequences to perfectly balance what is seen and what we can only imagine — it all works together like an all-star band in which every instrument seems perfectly in tune. And then there's the performance that everyone will be talking about this Christmas. When the coveted role of Lisbeth Salander went to Rooney Mara, some people questioned Fincher's decision. The result will make people realize that they should never do that again.

8. "The Artist"

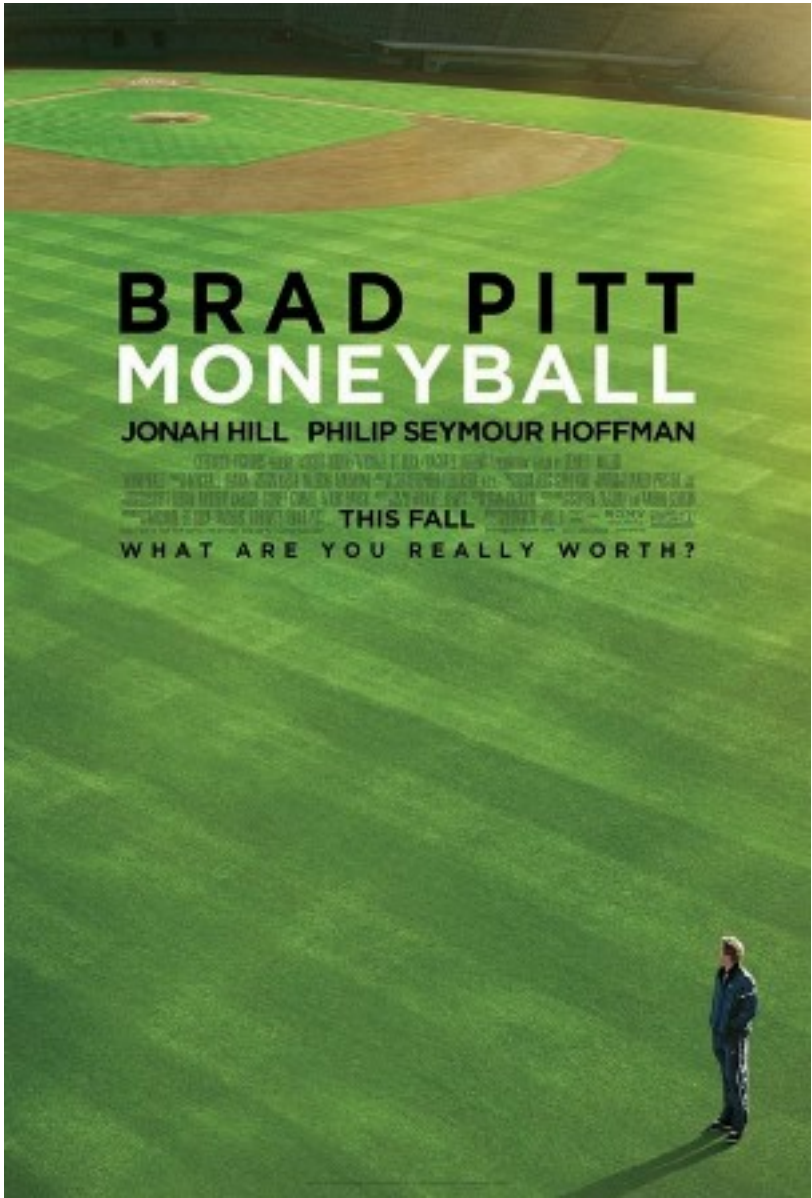


The Artist

Photo credit: The Weinstein Company

As more and more films are released every year, one of the most disheartening aspects of the industry is how many of them use the exact same tools of storytelling. That's why people have fallen in love with Michel Hazanavicius' critically-beloved ode to silent film. It's not like anything else out there. And, as with so many of the best films ever made, it's an amazingly daring film. There's a saying that a creative voice was "swinging for the fences." The fact is that more people strike out when they take that kind of risk. But, when they do hit a home run like this joyful homage to the magic of cinema, it makes the attempt that much more notable. Jean Dujardin and Bérénice Bejo's performances are among the best of the year and, like so many films on this list, "The Artist" is a technical marvel. With no dialogue to fall back on, every decision Hazanavicius had to make — particularly in the world of composition and cinematography — carried that much more weight than average. He really hit this one a long way.

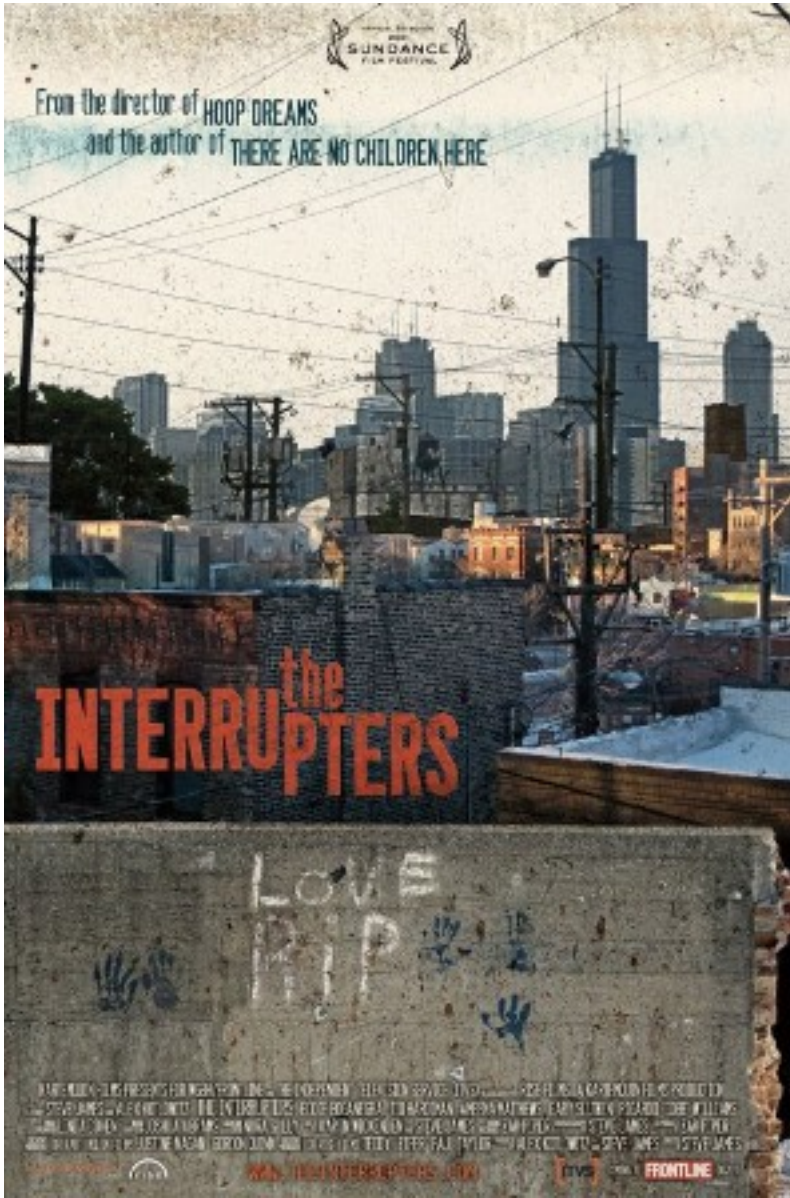
7. "Moneyball"



Moneyball
Photo credit: Sony

When director Bennett Miller was doing press for his highly-anticipated adaptation of Michael Lewis’ bestseller, he said something to the effect that he was drawn to the material because of its presentation of such a complex theme — “It’s more about the journey than the Grail.” In a society that seems to be increasingly unaware of this fact as more and more emphasis is placed on result than attempt, seeing a film that makes it clear that we can lose sight of the joy of the race if we only concern ourselves with the finish line is nearly revelatory. Thematically dense, perfectly performed, and incredibly accomplished on a technical level, Miller’s film is a true adult drama, one that uses the business of baseball to craft a story about so much more. Brad Pitt and Jonah Hill do career-best work here and one can’t under-value the daring decisions made by Miller — the long pauses, the shots of Billy Beane thinking, the way the director pulls out sound during game 20 when most directors would have bombarded the viewer with it, the emotionally complex ending. Like Beane, Miller took risks. And they paid off.

6. “The Interrupters”



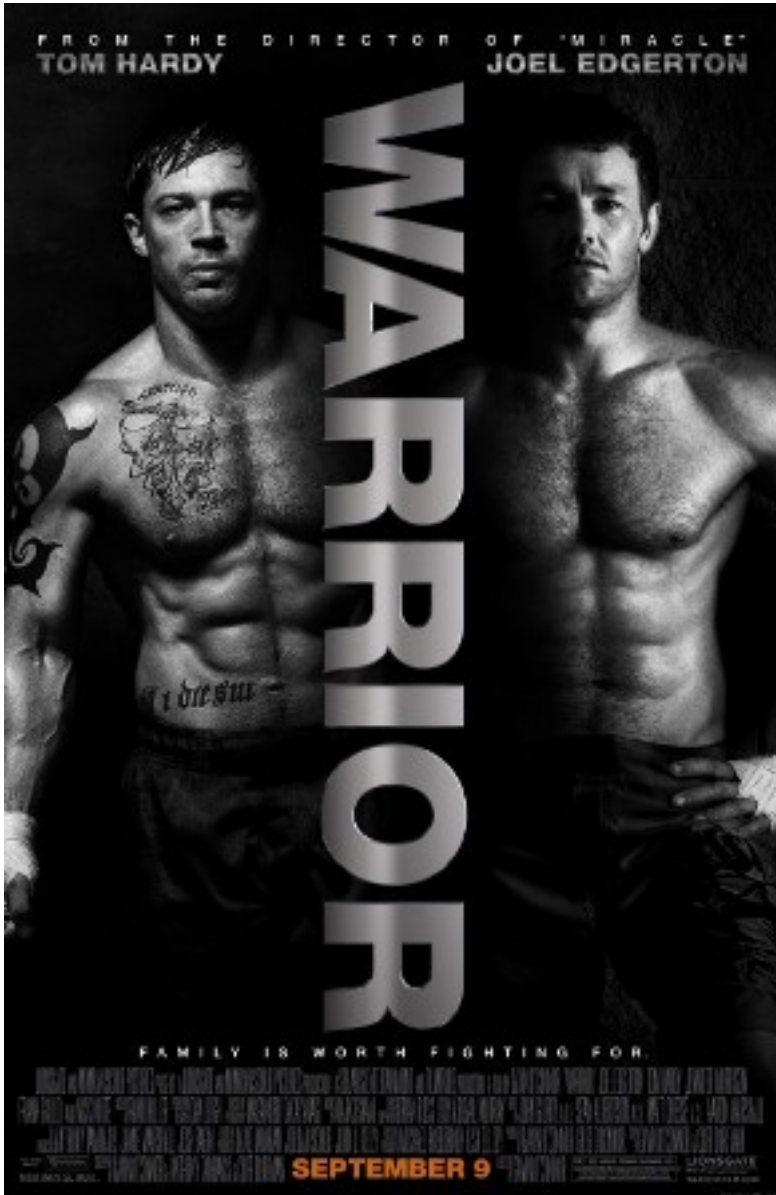
The Interrupters

Photo credit: Frontline

The best documentary of the year also happens to be a Chicago story. And, like most great non-fiction films, it's both a story of which Chicagoans should be proud and one that brings a modicum of shame to the city we love. The south side of our wonderful town has become a war zone of gang violence over the years. And, as in many war zones, traditional tactics to stop the bloodshed have completely failed. Steve James, the director of "Hoop Dreams," chronicles the men and women trying to stop violence through dialogue. Former gang members who make up the title group know that the only way to stop the culture of destruction currently annihilating so much of our youth life in Chicago is to confront it ideologically. I'll never forget the young woman, a former gang member, standing on a corner, preaching about how it is the neighborhood's job to make sure an impressionable youth is guided in the right direction and clearly getting through to a few people in ways that law enforcement simply can't hope to do. And she asks nothing in return. These people are heroes. I'm incredibly proud to live in the same city with them and proud that there's a filmmaker like James so perfectly paying them tribute.

[Click to the next page for the top five films of 2011...](#)

5. "Warrior"

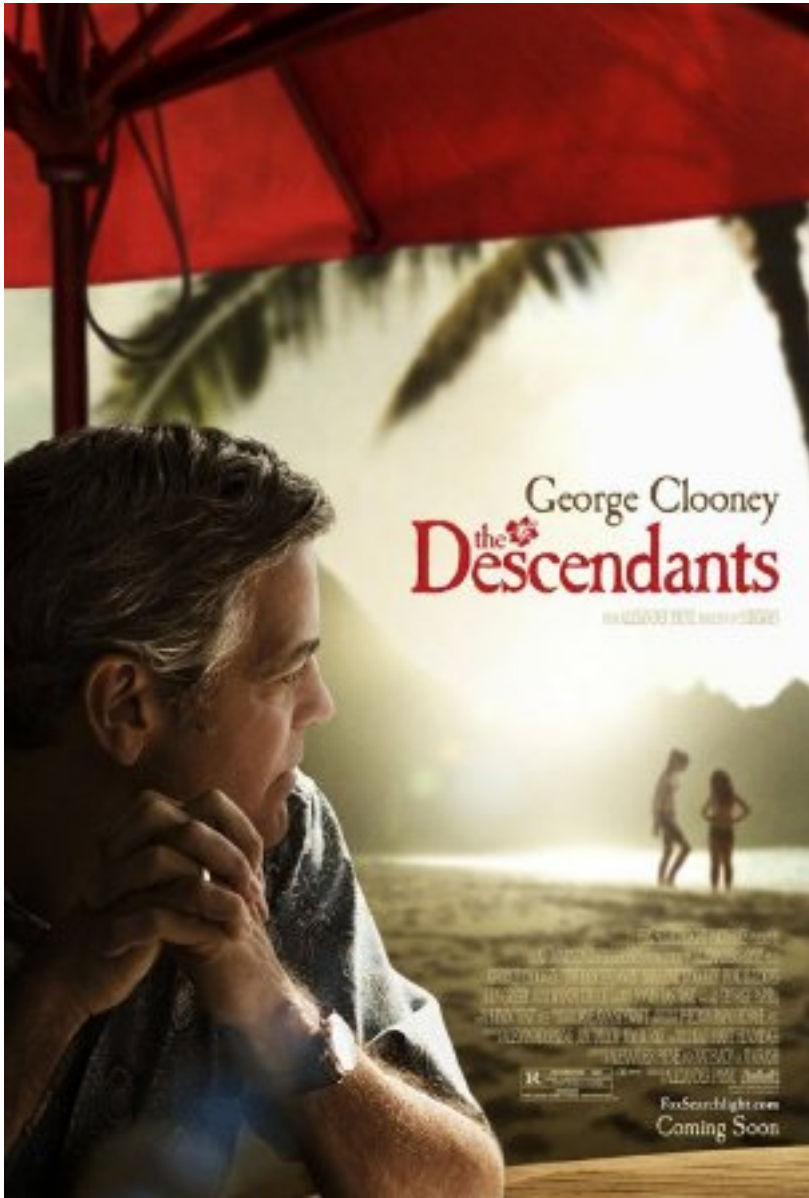


Warrior

Photo credit: Lionsgate

The most painfully misunderstood drama of the year is also one of its most crowd-pleasing, and I have to believe audiences will catch up with a work of this high quality on Blu-ray and DVD (it hits the form today, December 20th, 2011) and turn it into an eventual hit. I think most viewers thought they had seen too much of the final product in the too-long previews, but the joy of Gavin O'Connor's film is the execution of the story, not the twists and turns. This is a character-driven sports movie, a rarity in itself, which challenges viewers to see the genre in a new way. Sports movies don't need to be black and white. We've lived through decades of "Rocky"-esque sports movies in which one downtrodden hero works his way to the final bout/game/match in which he takes down the cut-and-dry villain. "Warrior" dares to tell a story in which both men in the ring are heroes. It features three fully-developed characters, brought to life in three of the best performances of the year by Tom Hardy, Joel Edgerton, and Nick Nolte. Rewarding on every level, this is a film that future viewers will be stunned to learn bombed at the box office. They'll all assume that it was the smash hit it deserved to be.

4. "The Descendants"



The Descendants

Photo credit: Fox Searchlight

Buzz out of Toronto and Telluride was that Alexander Payne's long-awaited follow-up to "Sideways" didn't live up to the Oscar winner's best work. You need no further proof that festival audiences can be a bit off the pulse than to see how the film has done with those of us who saw it under traditional circumstances. Audiences, critics groups, and awards voters have been falling in love with "The Descendants" for good reason. Payne's heartfelt, delicate work perfectly captures a man on the verge of the most impactful time in his adult life. There are moments in our timelines when we are very aware that things are not going to be the same as they used to be, and Clooney's Matt King has been a man used to stasis for some time. After a series of events shake him out of his inertia, he's forced to decide, captured in an allegory about property sale, how to deal with the changing landscape of his life. With one of the best performances of George Clooney's continually impressive career leading one of the year's best ensembles, "The Descendants" is an amazingly rewarding experience. The only complaint one could possibly levy is that Alexander Payne doesn't make films more often.

3. "Melancholia"



Melancholia

Photo credit: Magnolia

Speaking of festival audiences, the Cannes buzz on Lars Von Trier's latest had me excited, but very, very cautiously. As his bad public persona dominated the headlines, the actual quality of his newest film fell below the radar. Consequently, when I saw it, the result was almost like a religious experience (in a way not unlike a similar film even further up this list). Von Trier's best work since "Breaking the Waves" and a return to form after some disappointments is an amazing piece of work on so many levels. It works on one tier as just pure cinema with stunning cinematography, wonderful use of music, and a career-best performance by Kirsten Dunst. But it's also fascinating in light of its filmmaker's well-publicized battles with depression. It is a man working through his own mental issues with his boundless, risk-taking creativity. No one else could have made "Melancholia" and that sense of authorship is too rare in modern cinema.

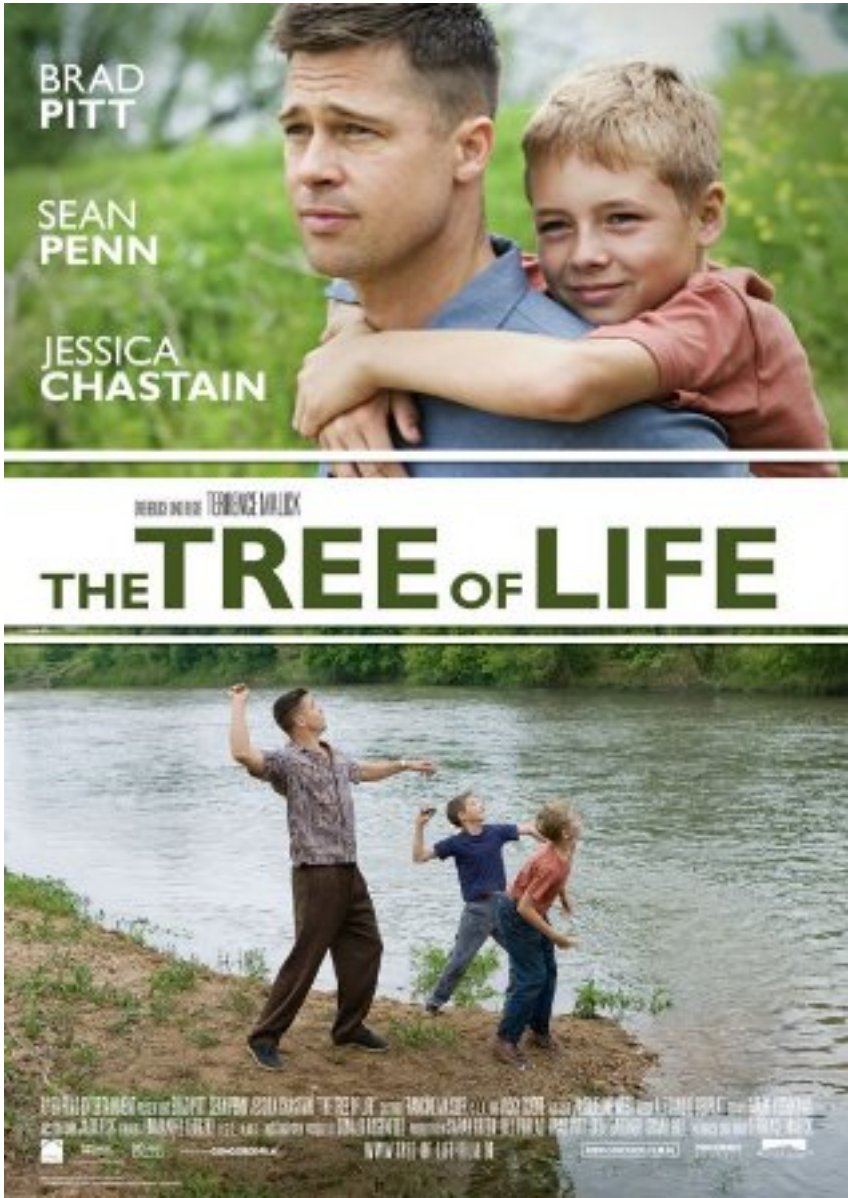
2. "Drive"



Drive
Photo credit: Film District

What is “Drive”? The film defies categorization so completely that the previews that made it look like “The Transporter 4” angered some ticket buyers enough that they tried to sue production company Film District. It’s not fast-paced enough to be called an action film. It’s a bit too stylized to be considered a character piece. It’s not really suspenseful enough to be dubbed a thriller. And yet it has elements of all of these things filtered through a distinctly European style, chased with a Grimm’s Fairy Tale structure, and poured over a rocks of Michael Mann and ’80s action movies. It’s a movie lover’s dream come true and the kind of film that will have legions of fans over the next decade or so. Remember all those college kids who had posters of the guys in “Reservoir Dogs” or Uma in “Pulp Fiction”? Their kids are going to have posters of the Driver on their dorm room walls. But this is much more than purely an exercise in style. Every decision made during the production from the casting of Albert Brooks to the brilliantly reserved performance by Ryan Gosling was the right one. Even the music seems like it comes from an un-categorizable film. But it’s a film that absolutely rules.

1. “The Tree of Life”



The Tree of Life
Photo credit: Fox Searchlight

I've tried to convey the experience of my second viewing of "The Tree of Life," the one in which I let go of the high levels of anticipation and just let Terrence Malick's vision fall over me like a poem, and the one word that I keep coming back to is one I don't use often in any walk of my life, much less in cinema. That word is "religious." I feel inspirational awe when I think about Malick's masterpiece of a film, a deeply personal work that doesn't just emerge from an unusual outline but essentially attempts to capture the breadth of human experience from the formation of the universe to the afterlife in one transcendent experience. It challenges the viewer and is certain to frustrate as many as it enraptures, but the latter group has found Malick's commitment to craft immensely inspirational. The film's themes are timeless: What forms our identity? How do we deal with tragedy? How do we reconcile our upbringing with our current life? "The Tree of Life" asks life-altering questions and it does so with some of the most striking imagery in the history of film. There are moments and montages in Malick's film that will be studied and appreciated as long as the world keeps spinning. Malick attempted to make a drama about the neverending balance of grace and nature in human life and, in doing so, he added something of deep value to the human experience.



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