

Film Feature: The 10 Best Films of 2012

Submitted by [BrianTT](#) [1] on December 17, 2012 - 12:33pm

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CHICAGO – It's that weird time of year where movie fans around the world try to capture different projects from different parts of the world with entirely different motives and compare them as if they were the same. What does a sci-fi instant classic like "Looper" have in common with a personal piece like "Beasts of the Southern Wild"? How can we compare something as epic as "Lincoln" with something as intimate as "The Deep Blue Sea"? How does the escapism of "Skyfall" match up with the personal expression of "Moonrise Kingdom"? As much as we love reading top ten lists, the fact is that they're pretty silly at their core. And it's important to note that these were my favorite films of 2012 as of today. Next month, something in the runner-ups might hit me a different way and move up the list or something in my top ten may not hold up on repeat viewing. Anyone who tells you their list is etched in stone is lying.

Was 2012 a "good year"? It wasn't for a very long time. I didn't give my highest rating to any non-documentary film until September. But then the year exploded in quality and it continues to do so — a few of my favorite films of the year are not even in theaters yet. What attracted me most this year were the filmmakers that went for something that would have terrified most other people. Making a movie about the hunt for Osama Bin Laden included dozens of potential melodramatic pitfalls. The saga of how long it took a film about Abraham Lincoln to get to the big screen only makes how remarkable the final product ended up that much more notable. Films like "Looper," "The Perks of Being a Wallflower," "Safety Not Guaranteed," and "The Cabin in the Woods" that defied genre expectations were wonderful surprises that definitely will stand the test of time.

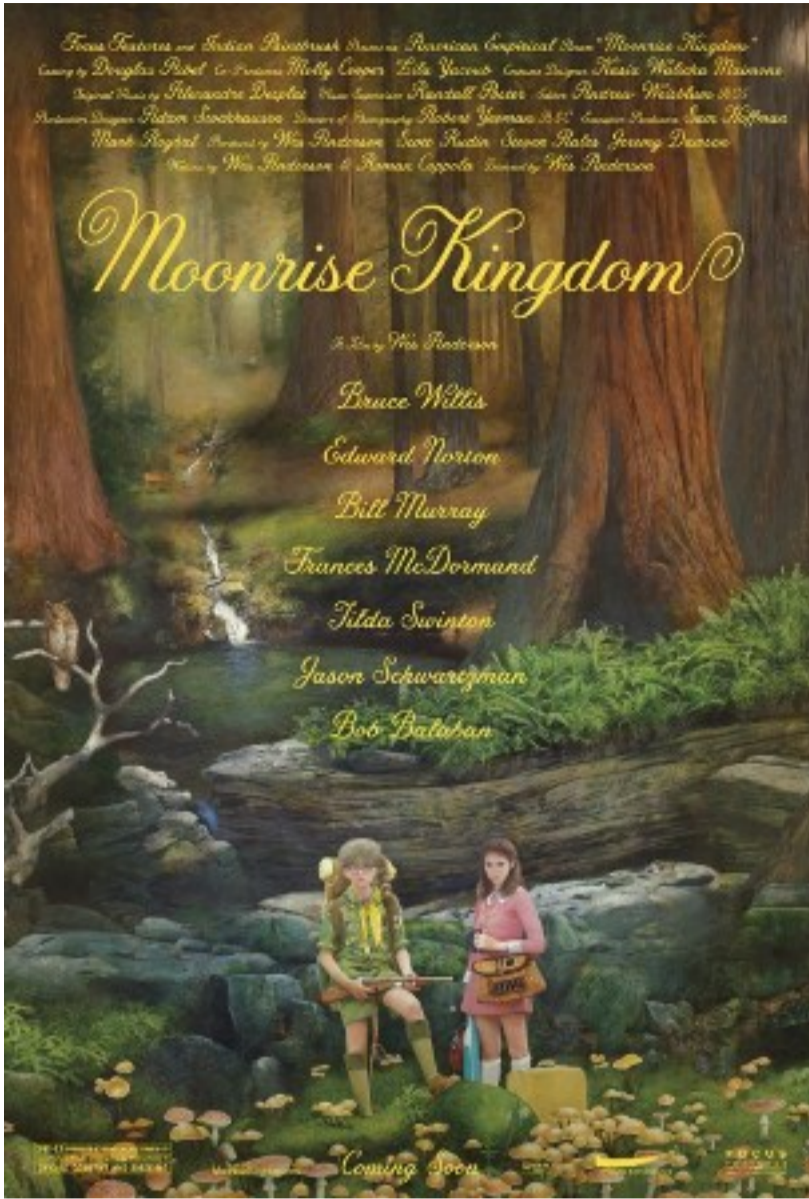
The top films for me displayed an understanding of the craft of filmmaking that is too rare in cinema these days. The way Kathryn Bigelow and Ben Affleck compressed complex stories of Middle Eastern conflict into daring thrillers. The personal expression of films made by Wes Anderson, P.T. Anderson, and Stephen Chbosky. The visual storytelling of Robert Zemeckis, J.A. Bayona, and Sam Mendes. The decisions made by Tom Hooper, Quentin Tarantino, Joss Whedon, and Terence Davies that defy genre rules.

The films I chose for my top ten were more mainstream than most years as I think I longed for Hollywood to find its spectacle again — to give viewers larger than life stories that resonated beyond the multiplex. Cinema can capture events like the hunt for Osama Bin Laden, a deadly tsunami, a plane crash, and a spy who just won't die in ways that no other art form can, and I valued that this year more than most. And, to be fair, I loved several of the films just outside my top ten, especially the personal visions of "Beasts of the Southern Wild" (#11), "The Perks of Being a Wallflower" (#12), "Holy Motors" (#13), and "The Deep Blue Sea" (#14). There were many good-to-great films in 2012. These are just my 20 favorite.

Note: As I have done in some years past, I cheated a bit this year and separated documentary films to another list, which will run next week. The year was so strong for docs that I want to give them their own space. I also just can't wrap my brain around comparing something like "The Invisible War" to something like "Skyfall," given their completely different cinematic goals.

Runner-Ups (in alphabetical order): "Beasts of the Southern Wild," "The Cabin in the Woods," "The Deep Blue Sea," "Django Unchained," "Holy Motors," "Marvel's The Avengers," "Monsieur Lazhar," "Paranorman," "The Perks of Being a Wallflower," and "Safety Not Guaranteed".

10. "Moonrise Kingdom"



Moonrise Kingdom

Photo credit: Focus

Wes is finally back. After spending a bit too much time in his own quirky world with misses like "The Life Aquatic" and "The Darjeeling Limited," Wes Anderson returned to the peak of his abilities, displayed in beloved films like "Rushmore" and "The Royal Tenenbaums," with this lovely tale of young love and the adults impacted by it. Anderson has a singular gift in his ability to channel whimsy through the eyes of children older than their physical age and adults who never grew up. The innocence of his best work returns in the form of Sam Shakusky, a kid willing to do anything for the girl who catches his eye. The biggest surprise of "Moonrise Kingdom" is that it's Anderson's least cynical and affected film to date. He made a kid's movie ("The Fantastic Mr. Fox") and then found his inner child again.

9. "Looper"



Looper

Photo credit: Summit

Just as Wes Anderson was allowed to bring the full creativity of his vision to “Moonrise Kingdom” so was “Looper” made great by the freedom Rian Johnson was given to craft an incredibly daring sci-fi masterpiece without compromise. “Looper” is personal, dark, daring, weird, and refreshingly unique. Like “Blade Runner” and “The Matrix,” films to which it deserves comparison, it is a more than a genre film — it is the vision of a remarkably talented filmmaker. I love the way Johnson stays just ahead of the viewer in terms of storytelling. He gives you just enough road map to stay on the trail, but he’s leading the way the entire time and you don’t know for sure what’s around the next bend. “Looper” is a delight not just in its glorious sense of plotting but also in its character and style.

8. “Flight”

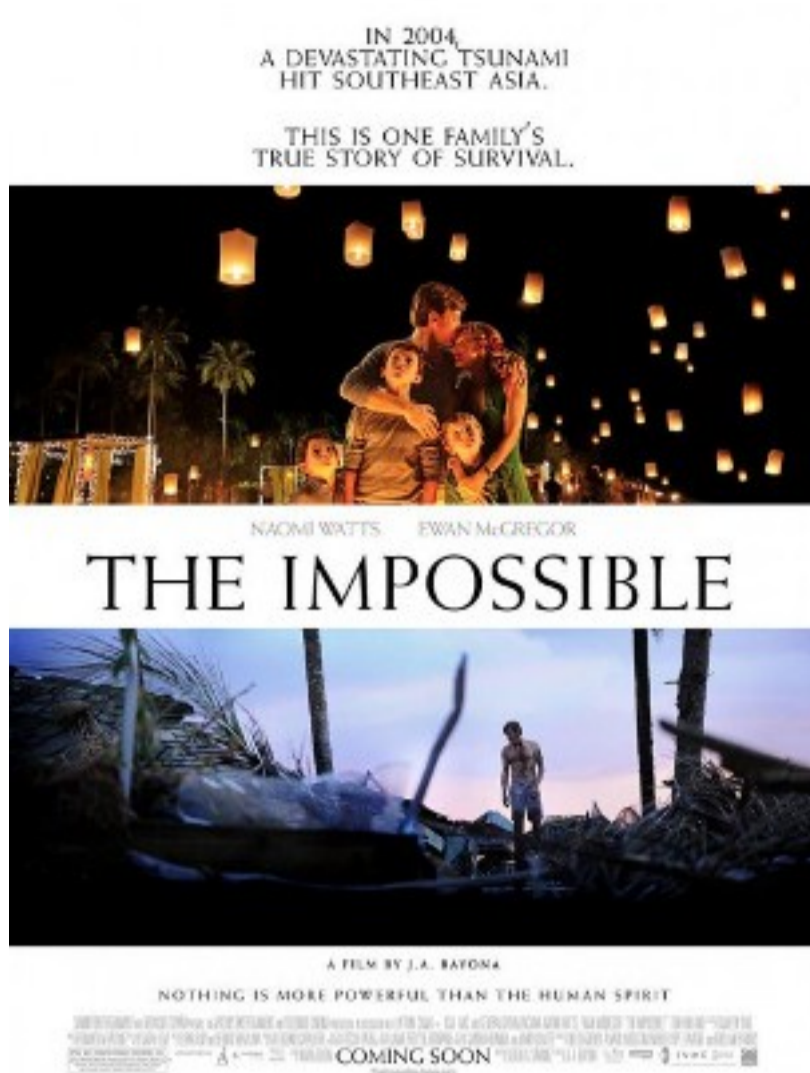


Flight

Photo credit: Paramount

What if a man could crash a plane and still not hit the rock bottom of his addiction? Pilot Whip Whitaker has never thought about the innocent lives he puts at risk every time he gets high and drunk and enters the cockpit, and the fact that he saved dozen of lives in that state just makes him that much more assured that he can manage his addictions. Robert Zemeckis and writer Josh Gatins craft that all-too-rare adult original drama in the riveting “Flight,” a complex character study that weaves personal responsibility, the role of religion in crisis, and addiction into a story that plays like a thriller. And Zemeckis’ eye for visual storytelling has been fortified by his time making motion-capture films, finding ways to tell this story that allow for personal interpretation while also appealing to a mass audience. I have some issues with the final minutes of “Flight,” but what comes before is such assured, confident filmmaking on every level that I think history will regard it as one of the most underrated films of 2012.

7. “The Impossible”



The Impossible

Photo credit: Summit

Cinema has long played an important role in transporting viewers into situations that they would never otherwise appreciate and can barely emotionally comprehend. The tsunami that plays the central role in J.A. Bayona's devastating film about the 2004 disaster is a true cinematic accomplishment, plunging viewers into a life or death situation through the emotional commitment of Bayona's talented actors — particularly the great Naomi Watts and one of the best young performances in years from Tom Holland — and a technical skill that makes the unimaginable feel real. Some of "The Impossible" plays out as a bit routine in terms of this kind of storytelling, but I'd be lying if I didn't say that the heartstring-pulling didn't work on me. I found the truth of Watts, Holland, and Ewan McGregor and their quest to be reunited more powerful than any sociopolitical debate other critics have wanted to have about telling a Thai story versus a white one. It's important that we don't overly intellectualize one of the purest purposes of film — to move us. And, without a doubt, Bayona's film moved me.

6. "Skyfall"

SKYFALL

007[™]

WOLFGANG PETERKIND'S NEW PRODUCTION PRESENTS DANIEL CRAIG AS THE REBORN JAMES BOND 007[™] IN "SKYFALL"
JAMES BOND HAS RETURNED TO HIS MOST VULNERABLE STATE SINCE "CASINO ROYALE" AND NOW HE'S ON A
MISSION TO REDEEM HIMSELF AND HIS ORGANIZATION. WITH THE HELP OF HIS FORMER MENTOR,
AND A NEW ALLY, BOND MUST TAKE DOWN A VILLAIN WHOSE POWER IS UNMATCHED.
CASTING BY JUDY KLEIN. COSTUME DESIGNER: JONATHAN HAYES. EXECUTIVE PRODUCERS: MICHAEL G. WAXEN AND JONATHAN HAYES. PRODUCED BY WOLFGANG PETERKIND. WRITTEN BY JOHN HOOVER AND ROBERT WOODHEAD. DIRECTED BY SAM MENDES.
MGM PICTURES PRESENTS A SONY PICTURES CLASSICS FILM "SKYFALL" STARRING DANIEL CRAIG, JAVIER BARDÉM, JUDI DENCH, RALPH FIENNES, AND BEN WHISHAW. CASTING BY JUDY KLEIN. COSTUME DESIGNER: JONATHAN HAYES. EXECUTIVE PRODUCERS: MICHAEL G. WAXEN AND JONATHAN HAYES. PRODUCED BY WOLFGANG PETERKIND. WRITTEN BY JOHN HOOVER AND ROBERT WOODHEAD. DIRECTED BY SAM MENDES.

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Skyfall

Photo credit: Sony

The best blockbuster of 2012 by some stretch looked like it would surely be Christopher Nolan's "The Dark Knight Rises" or, maybe after people saw it, Joss Whedon's "Marvel's The Avengers." Or perhaps Peter Jackson's return to Middle Earth in "The Hobbit: An Unexpected Journey". All of those films pale when compared to Sam Mendes' well-oiled machine of escapist entertainment in arguably the best James Bond film ever made. From Roger Deakins' Oscar-worthy cinematography to the best supporting cast in 007 history in Judi Dench, Javier Bardem, and Ralph Fiennes, "Skyfall" is a lesson in how to take a typically shallow genre like the action film and make it artistically deep. By looking both to the past and the future of the most famous spy of all time, Mendes and his team delivered a blockbuster that works on so many levels — from pure action adventure to character-driven drama.

5. "Les Misérables"

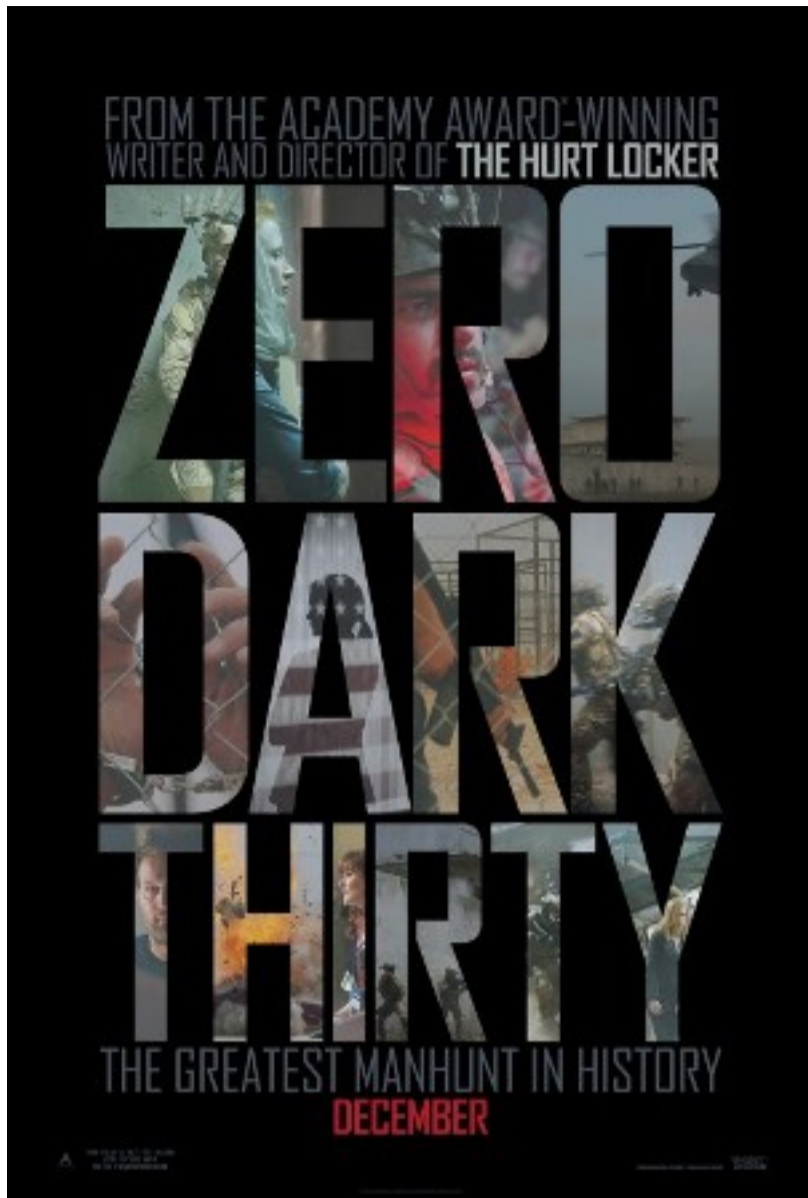


Les Misérables

Photo credit: Universal

Here's where we get back to that theme of my favorite films of 2012 — grand, epic storytelling. Yes, cinema offers plenty of room for intimate, personal films, but there's also a tradition of larger-than-life emotions painted big across a massive movie screen that has been lost by critics and people who watch movies on their iPhones. Tom Hooper's "Les Misérables" is the best musical in over a decade because its director lets the emotion of his beloved source material resonate through his performers instead of technical wizardry. Hugh Jackman, Russell Crowe, Anne Hathaway, Samantha Barks — it's their faces and their voices that convey pain, love, redemption, and loss instead of the lavish costume design, swooping cinematography, or quick-cut editing that typically accompanies a modern musical. It's undeniably cheesy and melodramatic, but sometimes movies, especially musicals, should be those things. They should embrace their emotional arcs instead of muting them for audiences who think anything heartfelt is automatically a cinematic weakness. Let the cynicism fall away, give into the scope of "Les Miz" for nearly three hours, and don't feel guilty about it.

4. "Zero Dark Thirty"

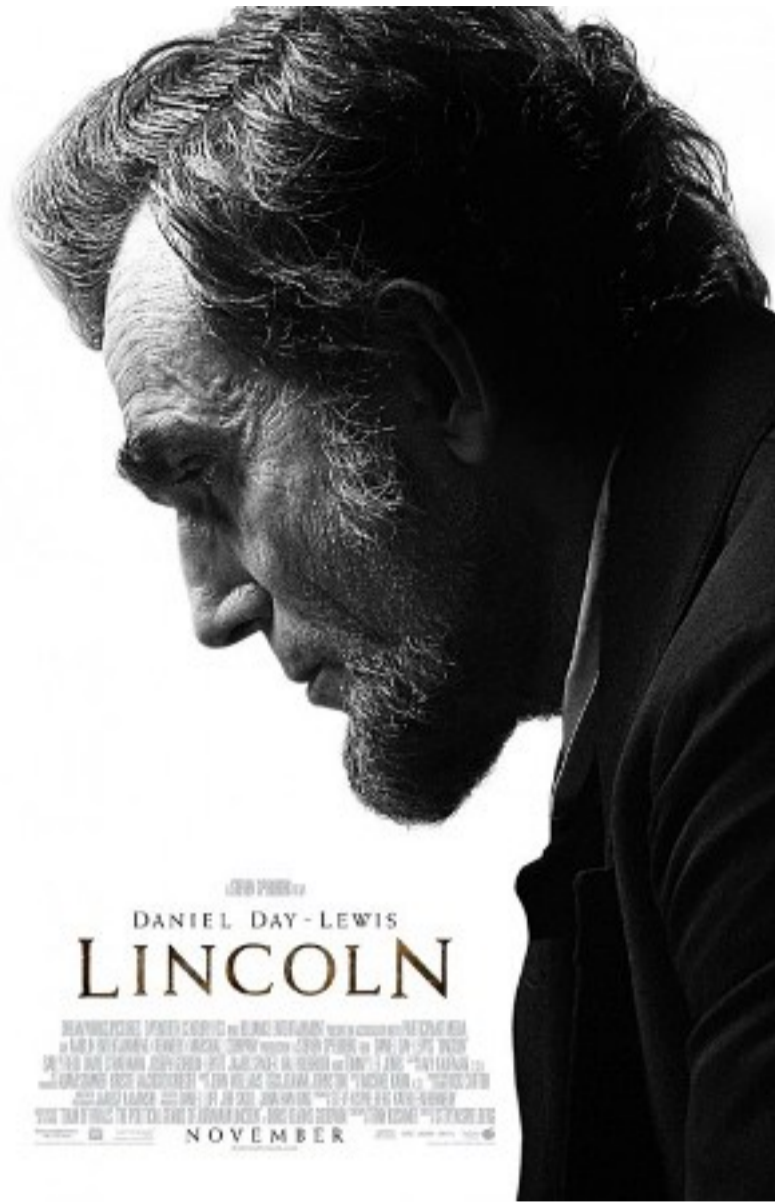


Zero Dark Thirty

Photo credit: Sony

Admittedly, while my #5-15 fluctuated often while considering this list, what was in my #1-4 never did. And so these are truly the four films that I consider to be at a level above the rest from what 2012 had to offer and they're quite interchangeable. These are the four movies that historians will remember from 2012 and this is merely the order they're in today. Let's start with Kathryn Bigelow's stunning accomplishment in capturing an entire decade of the world's war on terror. With Oscar-worthy work from Jessica Chastain to anchor the film as her lead, Bigelow displays such confidence as a director, conveying a scope of storytelling that one can really only appreciate once "ZDT" is over. She opens with 9/11 and takes us through most of the major signposts along the way so that when we get to the final hour, the actual assault on Bin Laden's compound, we know the stakes. We feel the tension. We hold our breath and board the helicopter. It's amazingly transportative filmmaking, what I was clearly looking for all year — something to take me away to a world I would never otherwise understand. Bigelow did that with the war on terror more remarkably than I could have ever imagined.

3. "Lincoln"



Lincoln

Photo credit: Sony

Steven Spielberg's long-delayed film about Abraham Lincoln is the best movie ever made about the intersection of politics and ideology. The political machine that must be built, oiled, and turned to transform belief into action is fascinatingly dissected in Tony Kushner's brilliant screenplay, the best of 2012. And then there's that ensemble, led by Daniel Day-Lewis, Tommy Lee Jones, and Sally Field, but also ably supported by a roster of A-list talent like Michael Stuhlbarg, James Spader, John Hawkes, and David Strathairn. Kushner's intellectual approach and Spielberg's sentimentality perfectly intertwine in a way that amplifies the other's strengths and smooths over their weaknesses. This project went through numerous incarnations over the years and seemed like it would never come to the screen. The wait turned out to be worth it.

2. "Argo"

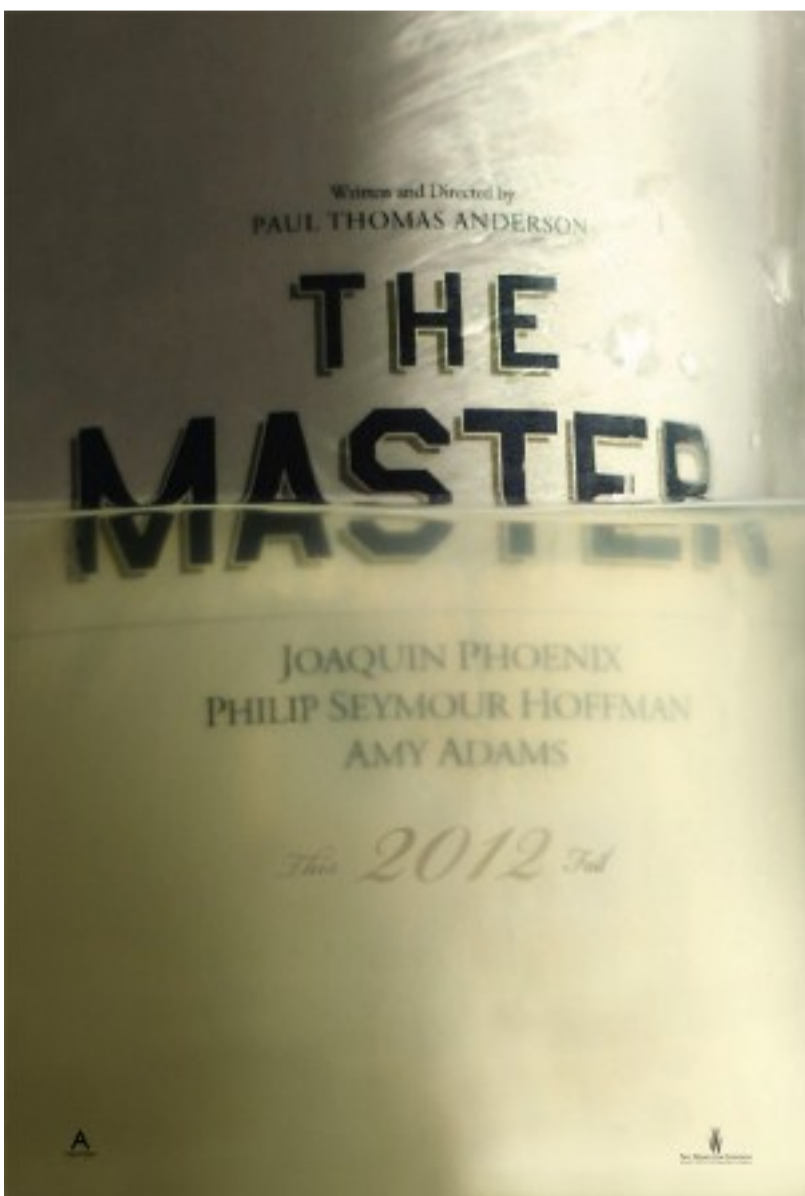


Argo

Photo credit: Warner Bros.

Ben Affleck's crowd-pleasing thriller is a master class in how to tell a story like this — one for which we already know the happy ending but can still somehow feel the tension as if we do not. Like "Zero Dark Thirty" and "Lincoln," the final result here is a known commodity and yet we still feel the risk and danger due to the skill Affleck brings as a director. Every scene, every line, every shot feels both carefully considered by its creator and organic to the action happening on screen. It hums like a perfectly-made car, one we love to drive even if we know where it's going.

1. "The Master"



The Master

Photo credit: The Weinstein Company

When I walked out of "The Master," I was convinced that some of the narrative ambiguities of the final act would keep it from topping my list at the end of the year, a position that a P.T. Anderson film has never held (although many have come close). And yet, when I think back on 2012, it is the images, themes, and performances from Anderson's daring meditation on free will vs. personal freedom that have rattled around my brain more than any other this year. It is the best film of 2012 because it is the least forgettable film of 2012. It dares you to not just experience something but also interpret it in personal ways and allows its ideas to resonate as much as its plot.



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