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CHICAGO – Hot on the heels of the wondrous 10 Most Overlooked Films of 2012 [17] and the illustrious first look at The 10 Best Films of 2012 [18] comes "The 10 Best Films of 2012, Part Two," as rendered by Patrick McDonald of HollywoodChicago.com.

The best films of 2012 are a mixed bag, but there was incredible experiences in all of them, brought forth from a mix of old veterans, new voices and even debut filmmakers. There is less of the end-of-the-world theme of 2011 as if the end is near, let's have a celebration. It continues to amaze me, now in my fifth year as a professional film critic, that the creative landscape continues to astound the senses and deliver the goods.

Of course there are several films that could have occupied the 10th spot on the list. They include the 2011 stragglers – "We Have a Pope" and "Footnote." The notable documentaries - "The Central Park Five," "Ai WeiWei: Never Sorry" and "Samsara." The provocative independent films - "Smashed," "Lola Versus," "Being Flynn," "Compliance" and "Sleepwalk with Me." And the more mainstream projects featuring name actors - "Gone," "The Late Quartet," "End of Watch," "Killing Them Softly," "Arbitrage," "Bernie," "Argo" and "Flight." It was a very good year.

Sometimes, even after five years, plus years before that doing a film blog, I feel as I'm still an amateur in this business. It has to do with the aspect of opinion, as in which ones carry the weigh and which are more valuable than the other. As I tell all my fellow travelers on the Chicago Film Tour bus, everyone's opinion is valid when it comes to film, the most democratic and accessible of the arts. With that in mind, I give you "The 10 Best Films of 2012," as opined by Patrick McDonald...





Published on HollywoodChicago.com (http://www.hollywoodchicago.com)



This Must Be the Place

Photo credit: The Weinstein Company

Initially, I gave this the middling recommendation of 3-1/2 out of 5 stars, but afterward I couldn't shake the film for weeks. Sean Penn plays an annoying rock star named Cheyenne, supposedly patterned after Robert Smith of "The Cure," but also with elements of Boy George and Michael Jackson in the portrayal, intended to be off-putting. It is the journey that Cheyenne takes which becomes important and unforgettable, forging a trail to search for an ex-Nazi that tortured his recently dead father in a concentration camp during WWII. The combination of bizarre rocker and Nazis pretty much symbolizes the second half of the 20th century, and director Paolo Sorrentino adds stunning visuals in Cheyenne's path, which is a reminder of Michelangelo Antonioni's "The Passenger." The ending is perplexing, but also brings the curtain down, and allows the player to bow in front.

HIGHLIGHT: Great use of unexpected casting including Judd Hirsch as a saucy Nazi hunter for hire, and TV character actress Joyce Van Patten as a history teacher who can't remember history (thus doomed to repeat it).



9. "The Sessions"

Published on HollywoodChicago.com (http://www.hollywoodchicago.com)



The Sessions Photo credit: Fox Searchlight Pictures

What sounds like a cheap, exploitative TV Movie of the Week – handicapped man hires sex surrogate to experience carnal knowledge – becomes something so much more under the guidance of writer/director Ben Lewin and lead actors John Hawkes (as the handicapped man), Helen Hunt (the sex surrogate) and William H. Macy (a befuddled priest). This film uses humor and a delicate sensibility to communicate the often difficult co-mingling of the two souls. Another bonus is that it highlights the nature of human sexuality, how we as a species have the tricky balancing act between our emotions and our biology. Those two distinct traits come into play at different levels of importance, depending on experience, circumstance and partner. Tremendous portrayals are the icing on this cake, with John Hawkes intricately playing a polio victim with nothing but his acting and Helen Hunt going full exposure in both a physical and emotional sense.

HIGHLIGHT: What seems like sappy poetry from the John Hawkes character becomes deep and abiding fulfillment by the end. And Helen Hunt's brother Mike makes a surprising cameo.



💢 8. "Not Fade Away"

Published on HollywoodChicago.com (http://www.hollywoodchicago.com)



Not Fade Away

Photo credit: Paramount Vantage

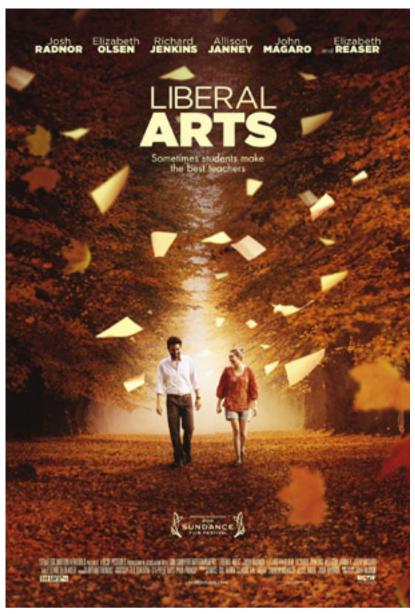
If there's a rock 'n roll heaven, they'll be showing this movie at the the multiplex. The stalwart David Chase, the creator of "The Sopranos," wrote and directed this homage to his youth, at a time of explosive evolution in rock 'n roll. The setting is the mid-1960s in New Jersey, and the music is the British invasion, particularly the Rolling Stones. Douglas (John Magaro) is going through the motions of participation in the era, which includes starting a band, much to the chagrin of his angry Dad (James Gandolfini). The film is episodic, as we see Douglas grow from an awkward 18 year old to a Bob Dylan-esque young adult. The film is actually narrated by Douglas's sister (Meg Guzulescu), who portrays a detached observer that becomes tantamount to expressing the spirit of the music. For those who lived the 1960s, or those who simply love the music that spawned a revolution, this cinematic valentine from David Chase awaits you.

HIGHLIGHT: As the weird and wonderful sound of "I Wanna Hold Your Hand" comes from a tinny AM radio in 1964, a mesmerized character in the film walks toward the sonic receiver and simply asks, "What's that?"





Published on HollywoodChicago.com (http://www.hollywoodchicago.com)



Liberal Arts

Photo credit: IFC Films

The smaller, independent film was written and directed by sitcom star Josh Radnor ("How I Met Your Mother") and it highlights the deep reflection of his own spirit and an ability to have his characters suffer the consequences of their decisions. It is a story of endings, and the beginnings that come after those endings, symbolized through a retiring college professor named Hoberg (Richard Jenkins), his lost-in-New-York protegé Jesse (Radnor) – who returns to his Ohio college to honor Holberg – and a young co-ed on the campus (Elizabeth Olsen) who falls for Jesse. Part you-can't-go-home-again and part Lolita, the laughs and the passionate dialogue all flow naturally from the narrative. The mature reflections that generate the comedy is a reminder of Woody Allen, but Radnor is a 21st century man, presumably coddled by helicopter parents and academia, and wearied by a world that doesn't cue up to his favorite literature. It's an fresh new voice in film, and a filmmaker to look forward to.

HIGHLIGHT: Proving there is no such thing as small parts, only small actors, Zac Efron and Allison Janney make the most of their screen time.



Published on HollywoodChicago.com (http://www.hollywoodchicago.com)



The Master

Photo credit: The Weinstein Company

Another film I couldn't shake for weeks after experiencing, despite a glacial pacing and soft narrative. Writer/director Paul Thomas Anderson really goes to the dark side of the American Dream in this one, or most likely the American Dream of "there's a sucker born every minute." This veiled origin of Scientology in the postwar 1940s in America features Philip Seymour Hoffman as Lancaster Dodd (Frank Capra would be proud of that moniker), the leader of a cultish society that implies to possess the meaning of life – through absurd hypnotic techniques. Joaquin Phoenix is Freddie Quill, an aimless, sexually immature WWII veteran who is a perfect candidate to be under Dodd's spell. The key to the proceedings is the era in America, with post war wealth and susceptibility all collapsing into the new movement. Amy Adams, as Dodd's wife, does less with a potential nuanced character than Laura Dern does in the only five minutes she has in the film.

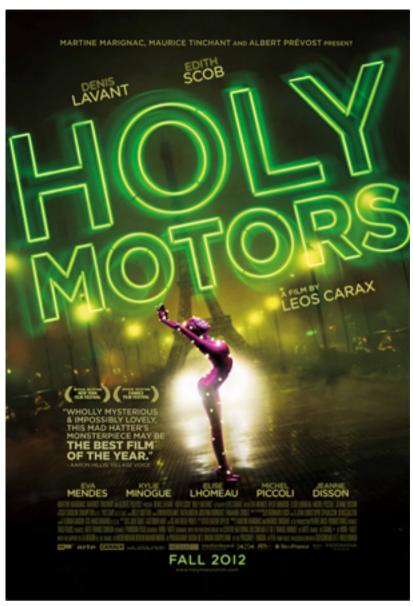
HIGHLIGHT: Even though Phoenix overplays Quill to an exasperating level, there is something spellbinding and unsettling about his long touch-the-window-and-the-wall sequence.



5. "Holy Motors"



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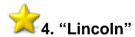


Holy Motors

Photo credit: Indomina Group

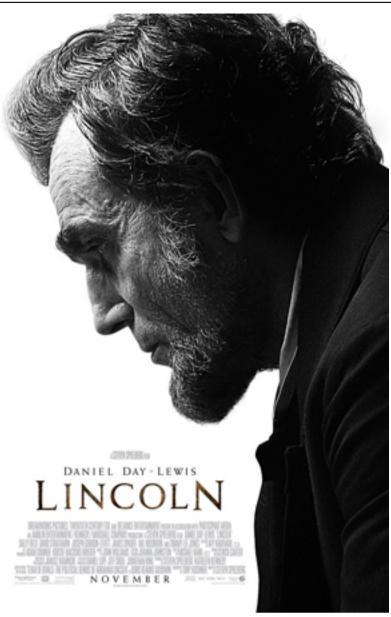
This film is everything that "Cirque Du Soleil: Worlds Away" promises but can't possibly deliver. It's a top drawer visual spectacle and metaphor for morality, wrapped in a creative vision that is exceptionally spectacular. Writer/director Leos Carax teams with Chapin-esque actor Denis Levant (in the best performance of the year) to realize a new universe of distinct characters, all determined while traveling in a lengthy, old fashioned limousine (think gaudy wedding style) before taking on their "assignments" in Paris. There are surprises in the film in virtually every frame, and with each new character a genre of film is lionized, even the modern technique of computer generation (woo-hoo, virtual pornography). Everyone involves delivers, even the lighter actress Eva Mendes and singer Kylie Minoque (in a brisk "The Umbrellas of Cherbourg" take-off). This is indescribably essential viewing, a must-see of the highest order for cinephiles and everybody else.

HIGHLIGHT: Will drive film classes crazy for generations attempting to interpret the various layers. Did I mention virtual porn?





Published on HollywoodChicago.com (http://www.hollywoodchicago.com)



Lincoln

Photo credit: Touchstone Pictures

The fact that director Stephen Spielberg, screenwriter Tony Kushner and actor Daniel Day-Lewis could both humanize and lionize the iconic 16th President of the United States is an achievement in itself. The film "Lincoln" can be viewed as a talky, overreaching shorthand of a not-well-known incident of Abraham Lincoln's administration, but for all the flaws possible it is all those elements that forge into the movie's strength. The detail is impeccable, the dialogue is necessary to tell the complex story and the direction of the master Spielberg is a career attainment that is a diamond in a jewel encrusted movie life. The performances from Sally Field, Tommy Lee Jones, Joseph Gordon-Levitt and James Spader (of all people) are exceptional within a huge ensemble cast, punctuated and supported by the magnificent, accessible portrayal of the man himself by Daniel Day-Lewis.

HIGHLIGHT: The way Spielberg chose to handle Lincoln's assassination, in a background announcement that brought the tragedy of the event home.



₹3. "Moonrise Kingdom"



Published on HollywoodChicago.com (http://www.hollywoodchicago.com)



Moonrise Kingdom

Photo credit: Focus Features

Having grown up in the era portrayed in this movie, it was as delightfully nostalgic as it was intuitive regarding adolescent transitions. Co-writer (with Roman Coppola) and director Wes Anderson weave a allegory that is so unique and special in its formation, with perfectly cast characters and situations, that it is a pleasure from beginning to end. It is a reminder of Anderson's earlier works, especially "The Royal Tennenbaums," but it also stands up by itself. Auteur-oriented filmmakers like WA always want to push the envelope further, and present redemptive tales that can inspire at any time, past or present. The hall-of-fame cast includes Bruce Willis, Edward Norton, Francis McDormand, Tilda Swinton, Jason Schwarzman, Bill Murray, Bob Balaban and Jared Gilman/Kara Hayward, paired forever on celluloid as intertwined young lovers.

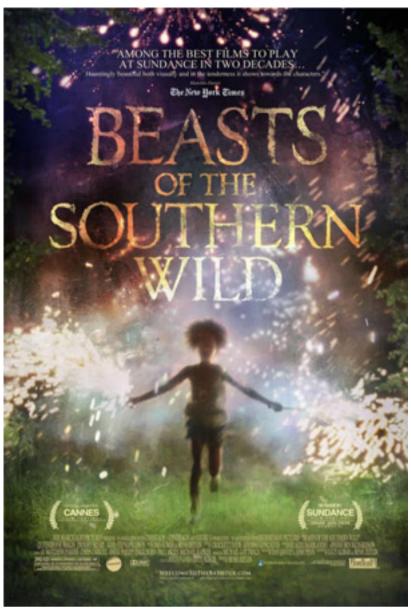
HIGHLIGHT: The politically incorrect sign of the times (mid-1960s) such as scoutmasters with alcohol and cigarettes, plus a kid with a patch for a lazy eye condition accepting his nickname – expressed by adults and kids – of "Lazy Eye."



2. "Beasts of the Southern Wild"



Published on HollywoodChicago.com (http://www.hollywoodchicago.com)



Beasts of the Southern Wild Photo credit: Fox Searchlight Pictures

A stunning debut by director Benh Zeitlin, formulating a creationist fantasy, expressed through modern poverty and outsider societies, and capped by a unbelievable performance by an African American child actor as Hushpuppy. The metaphor of the film is Nobel prize worthy, and touches the core animal within all of us. On the surface it can also be a tale of bayou politics in Louisiana, as Wink (Dwight Henry) and Hushpuppy (Quvenzhané Wallis) live as father and daughter survivalists on the flood plane side of the levee. As the water rises, and the "beasts" converge, modern forces tries to intervene, but the nature of the dwellers in the stubborn kingdom – including "Walrus," "Little Jo" and "Miss Bathsheba" – overcome the invading tide, and the remarkable Hushpuppy is resilient to the end. This is an emotional, ardent and must-see bedtime story.

HIGHLIGHT: Any exchange of dialogue between Wink and Hushpuppy.



Number One. "The Dark Knight Rises"



Published on HollywoodChicago.com (http://www.hollywoodchicago.com)



The Dark Knight Rises

Photo credit: Warner Bros.

Whodathunk the comic book film would encapsulate the 2012 joy at the movies. This brilliant conclusion to The Batman/Dark Knight Trilogy contained the essence of everything that fully redeems and memorializes the elusive hero. Director Christopher Nolan (the creative driver of the whole series) wisely decides to use a minor, rather frightening Batman villain to full capacity, allowing this "Bane" to take the Dark Knight (Christian Bale) to his final reward. The supporting cast gets its place in the sun – more so than any of the other two films – as Anne Hathaway (in a more appropriate take on Catwoman), Gary Oldman, Joseph Gordon-Levitt, Tom Hardy, Morgan Freeman, Matthew Modine, Marion Cotillard and old pro Michael Caine bring their characters to opulent levels of grace. This is high art and a tribute to the little boy dreams of the comic books that become the men of influence in our popular culture. I loved the feverish beauty of this event.

HIGHLIGHT: The grand opera-like conclusion, uplifting to the point of soul elevation. Rise, rise, rise, indeed.

Click the links to read Patrick McDonald's long form reviews of This Must Be the Place [19], Not Fade Away [20], The Master [21], Lincoln [22] and The Dark Knight Rises, [23] plus interviews with David Chase [24] of "Not Fade Away," Ben Lewin and John Hawkes [25] of "The Sessions."



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By <u>PATRICK McDONALD</u> [27] Senior Staff Writer HollywoodChicago.com pat@hollywoodchicago.com [26]

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