

Film Feature: The 10 Best Films of 2013, Part Two

Submitted by [PatrickMcD](#) [1] on December 30, 2013 - 10:51am

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CHICAGO – The year caught up with me. 2013 was characterized by a soft start and a strong finish, but overall there were impressive contenders throughout the year and some fine examples of great storytelling and filmmaking. Risks were taken, some truth emerged and even in more “mainstream” films, there were flashes of promise.

This is the second set of top ten 2013 films on HollywoodChicago.com, as offered by film critic Patrick McDonald. Please also sample my colleague Brian Tallerico's [Top Ten](#). [19] The following films are a testament to the experiences they gave me, what they made me think about afterward and how they fulfilled that feeling – for me – of what makes a movie great.

For every film in those ten spots, there are a number of other films coming in tied at number 11 – Joe Swanberg's sublime “Drinking Buddies” and the anarchy of “Escape From Tomorrow”; the gutsy honesty of “42,” “Will You Still Love Me Tomorrow?” and “Before Midnight”; the more independent film expression of “Some Velvet Morning,” “C.O.G.,” “What Maisie Knew” and “Disconnect”; and the ensemble spectacles of “August Osage County,” “American Hustle” and the Shakespearian “Place Beyond the Pines.”

With that, here are The 10 Best Films of 2013, through the critic's filter of Patrick McDonald, HollywoodChicago.com...

★ 10. “Be Good”



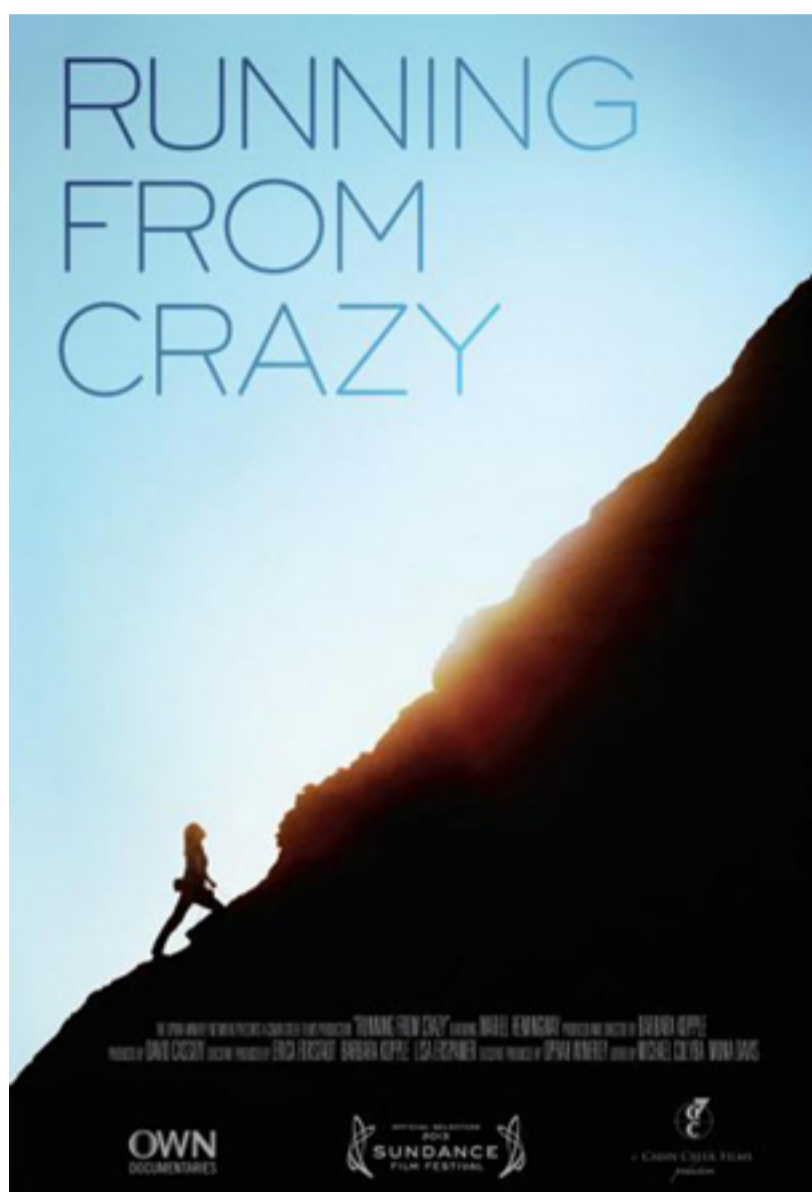
Be Good

Photo credit: [ObrigadoProductions.com](#)

This is from writer/director Todd Looby, a local filmmaker who I've admired throughout his career. What is remarkable about the film is that it's "ripped from the headlines" of Looby's own life. In an expressive fictional treatment of his first months as a new, first-time father, Looby created a simple story about that process and the changes that occur behind the scenes. There is such longing in the film, both from the mother Mary (portrayed by the breakout actress Amy Seimetz), who is stuck going back to work soon after her delivery, and the father Paul (Thomas J. Madden), who is upset that he now cannot give all his attention to his budding film career. And in a nice twist, Looby himself plays the clueless best friend who interacts with and observes the couple. This micro-budget gem is a perfect example of what can be accomplished with a great idea.

HIGHLIGHT: The "Daddy Cameo" from the King of Chicago Independent Film, director Joe Swanberg.

★ 9. "Running from Crazy"



Running from Crazy

Photo credit: OWN

This documentary snuck in at the end of the year, with little notice or acclaim, even though it took on the mental illness history of one of the most famous names in the 20th Century – Hemingway. This film isn't specifically about legendary writer Ernest, it's more about his bloodline and the struggle through the subsequent generations with their genetic bipolar disorders. Director Barbara Kopple focuses on the trials of actress Mariel Hemingway, as she forthrightly relates a harrowing tale of family dysfunction, mental incapacity and suicides – including the suicide of her sister, supermodel and actress Margaux Hemingway. The title is ironic, Mariel runs toward the crazy and frees herself through the truth, by confronting the darkness associated with the Hemingway history.

HIGHLIGHT: Kopple used several scenes from an unfinished documentary that Margaux Hemingway had begun regarding her famous grandfather, and the clips painfully revealed more about the state of Margaux.

★ 8. "Don Jon"



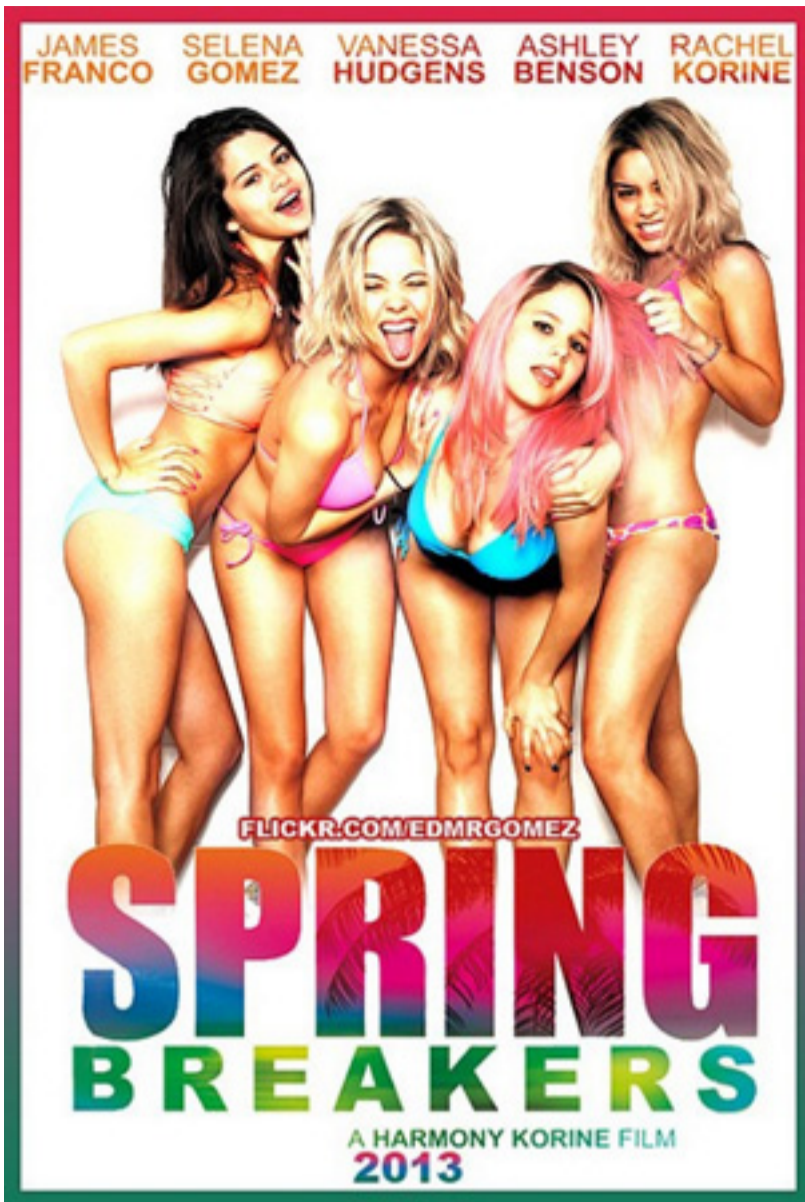
Don Jon

Photo credit: Relativity Media

This is the case of a film sticking with me after the credits rolled. This directorial debut from rising star Joseph Gordon-Levitt, who also wrote the story and portrayed the title character, is remarkable for its reflective maturity. What seems like an examination of an online porn addict – and a Jersey Shore-style mook nicknamed Don Jon – is more about the journey of transition from extended adolescence to adulthood. Significant performances from Scarlett Johansson, Julianne Moore and Glenn Headly (as Don Jon’s mother) spoke to Gordon-Levitt’s precise direction of the film – and themes regarding religion, coupling and women exposed a skill as a storyteller. This also anticipates what Joseph Gordon-Levitt the filmmaker will do next.

HIGHLIGHT: Like director Kevin Smith’s “Silent Bob” persona, Gordon-Levitt had a silent character in “Don Jon,” who only spoke when the morality of the situation made it necessary.

★ 7. “Spring Breakers”



Spring Breakers

Photo credit: A24

Like the James Franco thug character in this achingly audacious mind trip by filmmaker Harmony Korine, you may be apt to say, “it seems like a dream.” Four girls go on Spring Break to Florida, two end up in the middle of a drug lord feud. And what casting! Besides Franco, there are former clean image types Selena Gomez and Vanessa Hudgens as two of the four girls. The story is impossible to describe outside its full context, except to say it has highly symbolic doses of extreme anarchy, counterintuitive to the roles of women in society. James Franco absolutely loses himself into his rapper/lord Allen, and infuses all of his scenes with welcome danger. The most grateful thing that can be said of writer/director Harmony Korine is that he will never make the same film twice.

HIGHLIGHT: The length of time each of the four women Spring Breakers spend in their bathing suits, which conveys vulnerability rather than voyeurism.

★ 6. “Stories We Tell”



Stories We Tell

Photo credit: Roadside Attractions

Actress/Filmmaker Sarah Polley fashions a unique documentary essentially about herself – and structured it in a way as to reveal as much as she can about the subject. She delves deeply into family secrets and uncovers more than she might have bargained for, but tells the story so directly and passionately that all forgiveness and freedom derived from these truths are realized. The story also has such a fluidness and rhythm that even the twists and surprises seem natural to how it flows. The honesty that Polley displays with her own story is indicative of a maturing filmmaker, one who is on a path to a major work of cinematic art.

HIGHLIGHT: The use of archival footage from old family home movies, which keeps expanding the story up to a breaking point.

★ 5. “Blue Jasmine”



Blue Jasmine

Photo credit: Sony Pictures Classics

As he did in *Match Point* (2005), American auteur Woody Allen explores economic class structure, but instead of London he comes home to the United States. It all centers on the character of Jasmine (Cate Blanchett), the wife of a high flying New York City financier (Alec Baldwin). Jasmine loses her money and status when her hubby meltdowns like Bernie Madoff, and she is forced back to her middle class roots, moving in with her sister in San Francisco. There is delicate humanity in the film, as the brittle Jasmine is set against those who forgive her (her sister), those who reject her very presence (Ginger's ex-husband, played to perfection by comic Andrew Dice Clay) and those who want to use her. Blanchett is amazing in capturing the nuances of Jasmine's hell, and Allen's script is a roller coaster ride of potential redemption and karma retribution. It's a fascinating story the whole way through, within that special Woody Allen perspective.

HIGHLIGHT: Creating a subtle counterpoint for Jasmine is Sally Hawkins as her sister Ginger, who goes through a learning curve of her own.

★ 4. "12 Years a Slave"



12 Years a Slave

Photo credit: Fox Searchlight Pictures

There were three brave 2013 films that depicted life for African Americans in the United States over the years – “42,” the stark retelling of the Jackie Robinson story, “The Butler,” which symbolically covered the 1960s civil rights era and “12 Years a Slave,” which overtook the other two by presenting a brutally cold and honest view – by director Steve McQueen – upon a based-on-truth story of a African American free man who is kidnapped in the mid-1800s, and forced into slavery down South. The horrors of torture, rape and psychological beat downs that are met upon the slaves are portrayed starkly without tears, including the experiences of the captive Solomon, portrayed with guttural truth by Chiwetel Ejiofor. It is the type of important film that leads to questions like, “how can we cleanse the sins of our past, and allow that cleansing to redeem our future?”

HIGHLIGHT: Like a prisoner of war, Solomon took it upon himself to hold onto sanity in the midst of a virtual all-is-lost circumstance.



3. “Her”



Her

Photo credit: Warner Bros.

I have seen the near future, and it is “Her.” In what is a natural step in the technological revolution process that we’re all going through, writer/director Spike Jonze imagines an operating system that becomes a companion. Joaquin Phoenix plays a relationship-challenged man who falls in love with the digital intelligence that exists to please him, and as in all relationships in which one partner develops faster and alternately than the other, it is doomed to difficulty. This science fiction exploration is also creepily familiar, as we gather our electronic devices and develop relationships with them. As machines are beating our human grandmasters in chess, who is to say that they won’t someday surpass us in other-worldly experiences? There is hope in Spike Jonze’s scenario, if only we’re willing to seek it.

HIGHLIGHT: Scarlett Johansson as the voice of the operating system. Between her portraying a put-upon Jersey girl in “Don Jon,” and creating character out of just voice acting in “Her,” it’s been a very good year for Scarlett J.

★ 2. “The Patience Stone”



The Patience Stone

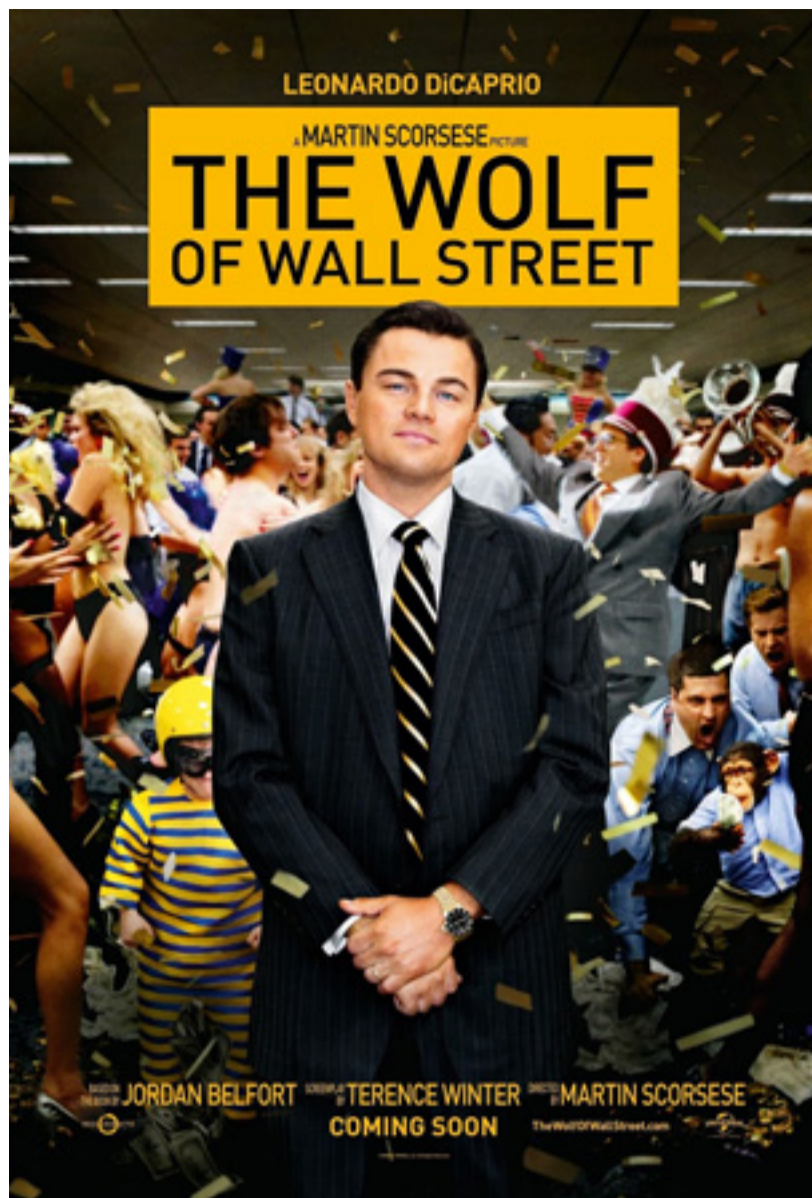
Photo credit: Sony Pictures Classics

Produced by Afghanistan, France, Germany and Britain in 2012, and garnering a limited release in the U.S. in 2013, this emblematic cinema survey of religion, war and women's societal status is stunning in what it accomplishes. It's a story set in a war zone, the type of war zone that the United States has become very familiar with in the last ten years. A soldier, who is also a husband, has been shot and injured, and is in a vegetative state. As his wife and child must flee as the street fighting comes to their home, the wife comes back to care for her stricken mate. To pass the time, she uses the non-responsive companion as a "patience stone," the symbolic inanimate object that absorbs all of her confessions. The secrets that are revealed are indicative of a woman's plight in such a time and place, and the truth that spills forth changes everything. Director Atiq Rahimi adapted her own novel, and visualizes the story as an evolution revolution, and uses her woman character (Golshifteh Farahani) as all women.

HIGHLIGHT: When the patience stone breaks apart.



Number One. "The Wolf of Wall Street"



The Wolf of Wall Street

Photo credit: Paramount Pictures

Another classic from director Martin Scorsese, this film takes on the real “goodfellas” in society, the robber barons of Wall Street. Based on a true story, it flashes back to the go-go 1980s, when financial regulations were softened to the point of moneymen simply stealing funds or making up new ways to steal funds – which was the foundations for the current financial manipulations. Leonardo DiCaprio slam dunks the role of stock trader Jordan Belfort, a blistering amoral soul who lives for the accumulation of wealth and all the highs that come with it. The film has already caused debate in the marketplace as being too glorifying of psychotic behavior, but ladies and gentleman, behold our financial “leaders,” for the most part playing the role of greedy sociopaths. Like when Martin Scorsese broke down the motivations of organized crime (money), he does the same – and in the same grand style – with the motivations of our so-called captains of Wall Street (money). This film will echo down the corridor of Scorsese’s overall history.

HIGHLIGHT: The selling point of a ballpoint pen as a bookend for before the beginning – as they said in “Citizen Kane” – and after the end of Jordan Belfort.

Click the links to read Patrick McDonald’s long form reviews of [Be Good](#) [20], [Running from Crazy](#) [21], [Blue Jasmine](#) [22] and [The Patience Stone](#), [23] plus interviews with [Todd Looby](#) [24] of “Be Good” and [Mariel Hemingway](#) [25] of “Running from Crazy.”



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