Film Feature: The 10 Best Films of 2014, By Patrick McDonald

Submitted by PatrickMcD [1] on December 22, 2014 - 4:07pm

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CHICAGO – It's that time of year to figure it out, as 2014 leaks away, and the film year follows suit. Whittling down a list to ten films, after hours of entertainment and provoking of thought, is a fool's challenge at best. Then who better to do it than Patrick McDonald of HollywoodChicago.com.

Best to change it up to first person voice, since I'm writing the actual article. So, I, Patrick McDonald, will attempt to break down the film year into the 10 Best, and my colleagues on HollywoodChicago.com will follow suit in the next several days.

The most difficult slot of any list like this is the 10th position, for it leaves out so many brilliant possibilities for 11th place and onward. At that position are the international films "Bright Days Ahead," "Force Majeure" and "The Raid 2"; the horror/comic genius of "Dead Snow 2: Red vs. Dead"; the offbeat outside-the-mainstream films "Dom Hemingway," "Listen Up Phillip," "Land Ho," "Nightcrawler" and "Obvious Child"; the sci-fi creativity of "Edge of Tomorrow" and "Snowpiercer"; the documentary brilliance of "Jororowsky's Dune," "Red Army," and the Chicago-produced "Lakay"; and finally, the narrative excellence of "Still Alice," 'The Gambler,' 'The Grand Budapest Hotel," "Wild," "Birdman" and the weird and wondrous "Enemy."

Below each film will be a link to full reviews and/or interviews associated with the films. So now, filtered through my biased perspective and joie de cinema, Patrick McDonald's 10 Best Films of 2014…

**10. "The Guest"**



The Guest
Photo credit:

5. "Captain America: The Winter Soldier"

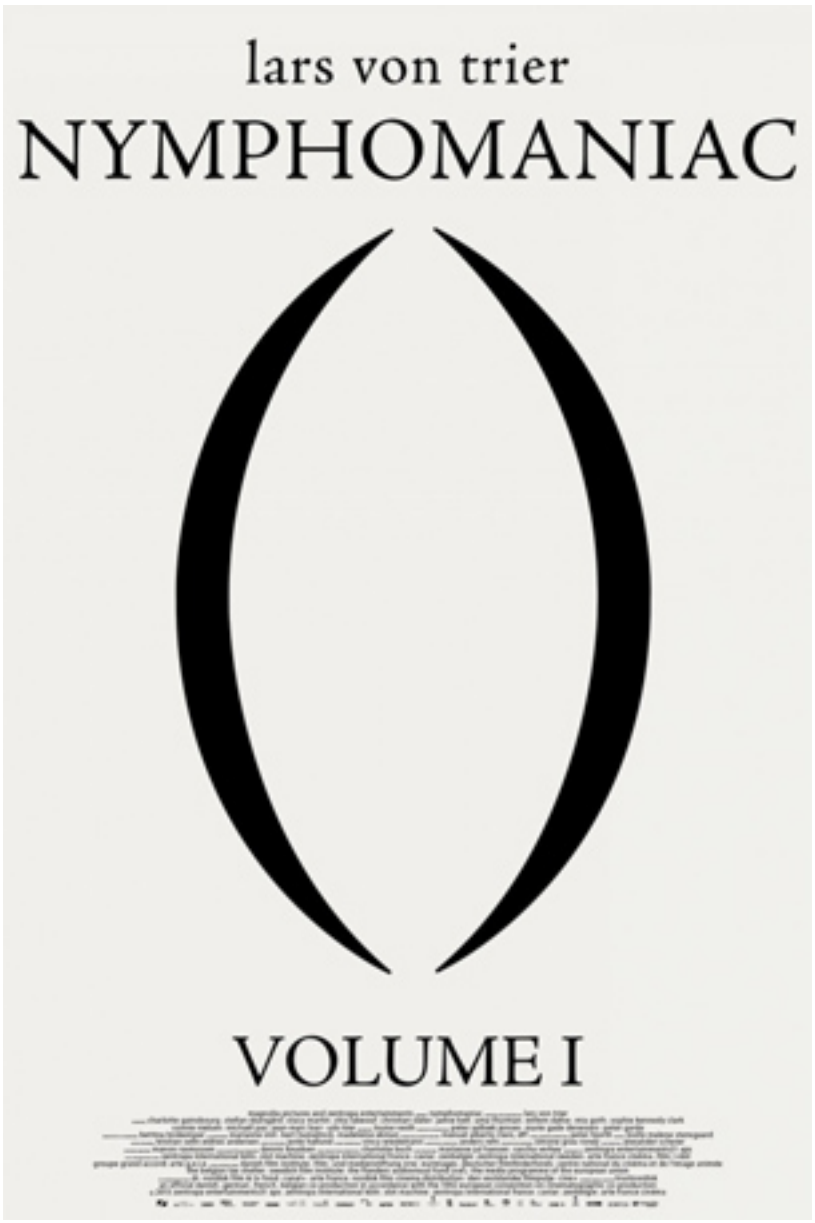


Captain America: The Winter Soldier
Photo credit: Walt Disney Studios

Captain America has become the cinematic equivalent of "The Dark Knight" for Marvel Comics films. This is simply a magnificent piece of storytelling, blending the comic book hero sensibility with a 1970s-style paranoid indictment – complete with the poster actor of that particular genre, Robert Redford. All the cylinders clicked in the use of Captain America (Chris Evans), his dilemma and the villainy behind his dilemma. And the Marvel films are now getting famous for its soundtracks as well, resurrecting forgotten Top 40 hits or in the case of this film, Motown soul. One great tip for watching the film came a comic book fan friend of mine, "imagine a 1940s morality dealing with modern problems." One of the best comic book movies ever made.

HIGHLIGHT: *Early in the film, Captain America has a onionskin book with a list of modern things he needs to "look up."*

4. "Nymphomaniac: Vol. 1"



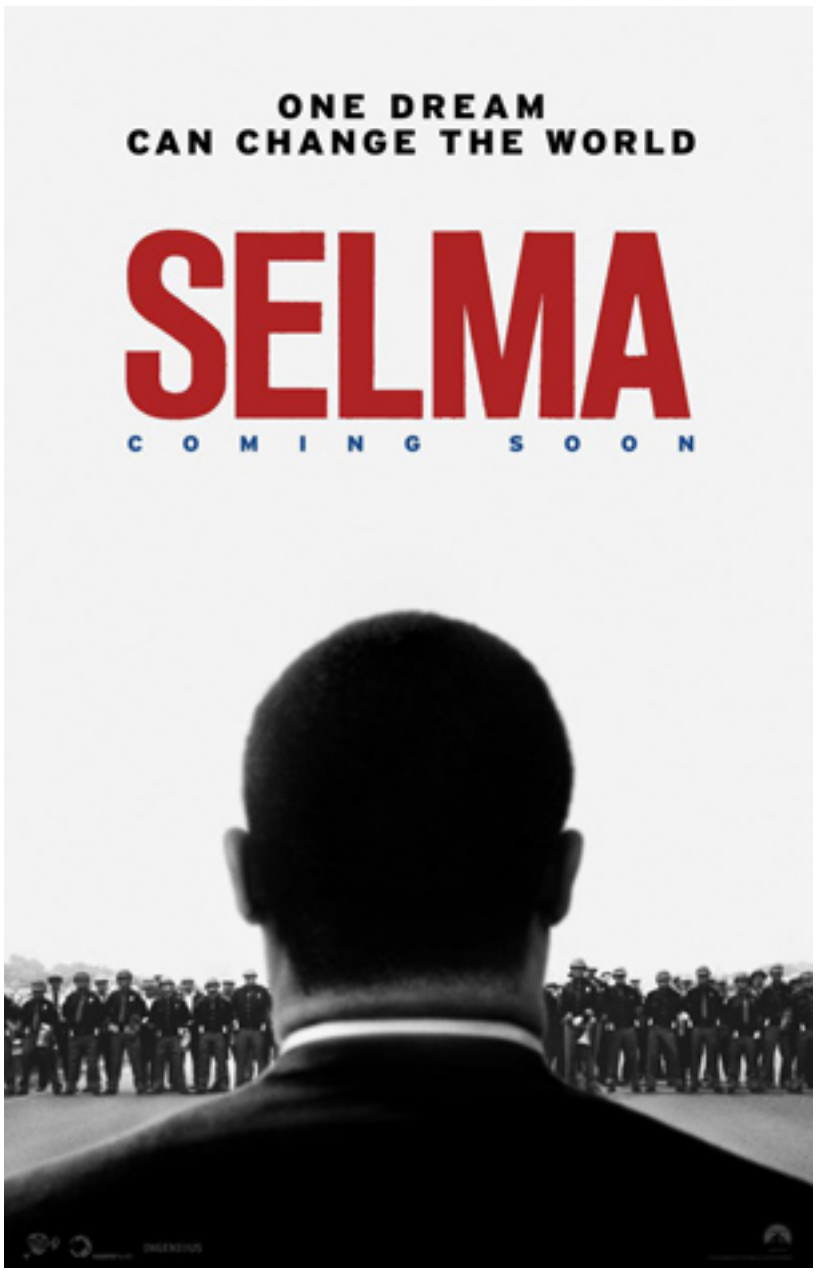
Nymphomaniac: Vol. 1
Photo credit: Magnolia Pictures

Cover your eyes, kids, Lars Von Trier is back on track. There are two "volumes' of the "Nymphomaniac" film treatise from von Trier, with the first one being the most effective and less downtrodden than the second. Re-reading the full review of volume the first, I was fooled by a crucial character. However, the first one also explores human sexuality in a forthright way, as a fingerprint in all of us. Our nature is married to our nurture, and the main character Joe (portrayed young by Stacy Martin and older by Charlotte Gainsborg) is shown to have a difficult relationship with her father, and most likely an over-saturated hormonal intuition. The first volume was more forgiving of her nature, and presented it as an adult choice and almost saintly use in some cases (with graphic sex). The biggest backlash is delivered in "Volume 2," but there are shades of it in the first chapter. This film digs deep into its character's psyches, and ultimately into our own reaction to it.

HIGHLIGHT: *Stacy Martin had to do the heaviest "lifting" to do as young Joe.*

Click here *[27] for the full review of "Nymphomaniac: Vol. 1."*

3. "Selma"



Selma
Photo credit: Paramount Pictures

"Selma" will be released in some markets on Christmas Day, and in that sense it is a Christmas present to the nation, STILL dealing with the themes and the wounds presented in this flawless narrative overview of the Selma, Alabama, voting rights march – which was led by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Screenwriter Paul Webb and director Ava DuVernay create a balance between the conflicted human beings of 1965 America – both black and white, leaders and marchers – and their incredible accomplishment of bringing equality to a land that could argued, had just as bad apartheid as South Africa. Producer Oprah Winfrey portrays a small but vital role as an ordinary African American citizen who is beated back by a state-sanctioned system, that for some reason feels superior to their brothers and sisters. British citizen and Nigerian-rooted actor David Oyelowo humanizes Dr. King in a profound way, and takes the character to heights that soar. We as a nation owe a debt to these brave warriors, and we as a nation have to acknowledge that this debt had not been fully paid. "Selma" is a reminder of how attitudes still need to be adjusted, and how precious freedom of the soul can be.

HIGHLIGHT: *The speech by King at the end, at the Alabama State Capital, a clarion call to the better angels of our nature.*

TO COME: An interview with actor David Oyelowo and director Ava DuVernay, and a full review. "Selma" will be released in Chicago on January 9th, 2015.

2. "Under the Skin"



Under the Skin
Photo credit: A24

Another important film that slipped under the radar, "Under the Skin" is a Stanley Kubrick-style dreamscape that markedly communicates the circumstances of relationships and isolation in the interaction of men and women, through the path of an alien visitor portrayed by Scarlett Johansson. Without knowing this – the story was adapted from a novel – it would be easy to theorize that Johansson's character could be a serial killer, or a psychotic loner. The inner core of the film is her journey, and the effect she has on others. We are all victims of our "outer core," the benefit or denial of the genetic pool. By putting one of the most beautiful actresses as the essence of the outer core in the visitor, director Jonathan Glazer ("Sexy Beast") is certainly commenting on the "beauty is skin deep" adage, and what resides inside of us is really who we are. That simple analogy is presented so ardently, and artistically, that it illuminates like sunshine.

HIGHLIGHT: *When Scarlett's suitors in the film literally melt within her charms.*

Click here *[28] for the full review of "Under the Skin."*
Click here *[29] for an interview with writer/director Jonathan Glazer of "Under the Skin."*

1. "Whiplash"



Whiplash
Photo credit: Sony Pictures Classics

This is not a showy film, and it's probably best described as Paper-Chase-meets-the-Julliard-Music-School, but what it touches is at the core of all of us…the natural rhythm of life. The story of a jazz drummer prodigy – possibly a once-in-a-lifetime find – and his megalomaniac music professor, is told through a backbeat of tempos that pulse through the center of our everyday heartbeat. I was sweating at the end of this picture, through the climatic concert. Plus the cat-and-mouse game between the professor and student is a titanic clash of wills. There are no happy endings in this face-off, only the hope – the one hope – that for a moment a human being can achieve perfection, while another human being guides him there. "Whiplash" is a true and imaginative film experience.

HIGHLIGHT: *The final concert, summed up in this line from my original review, "This is a freaking great movie, and a piece of fiery jazz entertainment."*

Click here *[30] for the full review of "Whiplash."*
Click here *[31] for an interview with writer/director Damien Chazelle of "Whiplash."*

To directly access the reviews, interviews and writings of Patrick McDonald, Writer and Editorial Coordinator of HollywoodChicago.com, click here. *[11]*

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Source URL (retrieved on *Mar 29 2024 - 6:31am*):
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