

## Film Feature: The 10 Best Films of 2014, By Nick Allen

Submitted by [NickHC](#) [1] on December 31, 2014 - 4:19pm

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CHICAGO – Just like every year before it, there were no perfect films in 2014. I do not see this as a negative thing - reaching for greatness is far more electrifying than the plateau of achieving it, as presented in a hustler's opus like 'Whiplash,' which specifically eschews applause after a drum solo that just may have been perfection.

It's all about genuine ambition - that's the fuel that is going to keep cinematic storytelling arresting as it continues to jump, flip, retread, reboot, restore, subvert, invert, and stumble forward. The best films of 2014 are the ones that have this quality in front of or behind the camera, and sometimes both; the quality of pushing viewers along with them, of making polarizing choices that won't land well for all, but yearn for something more.

This aspect was found in dollops throughout the film year. Separate highlights include the sense of humor of "The Guest," the ruthless Lars von Trier-iness of "Nymphomaniac Vol. 1," the exhilarating potential of freshman director Justin Simien's "Dear White People," and a certain rapper's life-changing cameo in "Top Five." Or, Jenny Slate's debut performance in "Obvious Child," a fruitful declaration of what's to come next from her. Or, the late Gary Poulter's clenched-fist non-actor acting in "Joe." Or, "The Babadook." (BAAA-BAAA-DOOOK-DOOOK).

Ambition was also found at the movies too. While streaming services and smaller screens became further accommodated, there were still special experiences that further proved the nonpareil of sitting next to strangers, bowing before big screen and the artists who fill its canvas. These moments include experiencing Michael Bay's unabashed, all-American meta epic "Transformers: Age of Extinction," or witnessing Christopher Nolan aim for "2001: A Space Odyssey" with the incredible vision of "Interstellar," a film that leaves one wondering just how much more viewers could want from a blockbuster director firing on all cylinders.

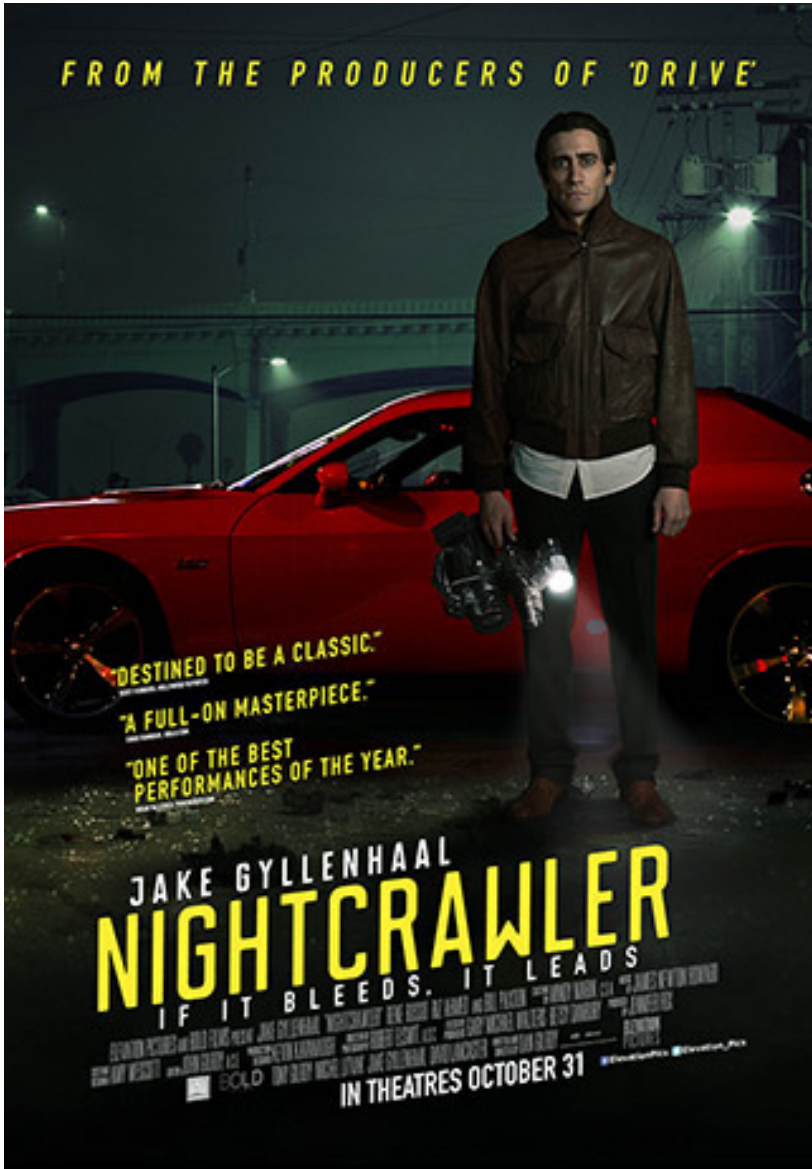
This year included special festival viewings as well, such as a movie house that packed its laughs to the ceiling with David Wain's rom-com spoof "They Came Together," the slam-dunking grand slam home run at May's Chicago Critics Film Festival. On a lesser scale but at a length longer than "Transformers" was experiencing "Winter Sleep" at this October's Chicago International Film Festival, witnessing a rare movie whose length becomes an enveloping source of its power, where its intimate storytelling provides a spectacle rarely provided. (That film will be officially released in Chicago January 2015).

And of course, the best theatrical experience of 2014 is a personal venture, and one that has a special closeness - viewing Steve James' "Life Itself" in the same Chicago screening room that I had spent countless hours with Roger Ebert & others, toiling in the darkness.

Another year is down, and a whole line-up of fare is to be assembled. Behold, the best films of 2014, a wonderfully most imperfect year.



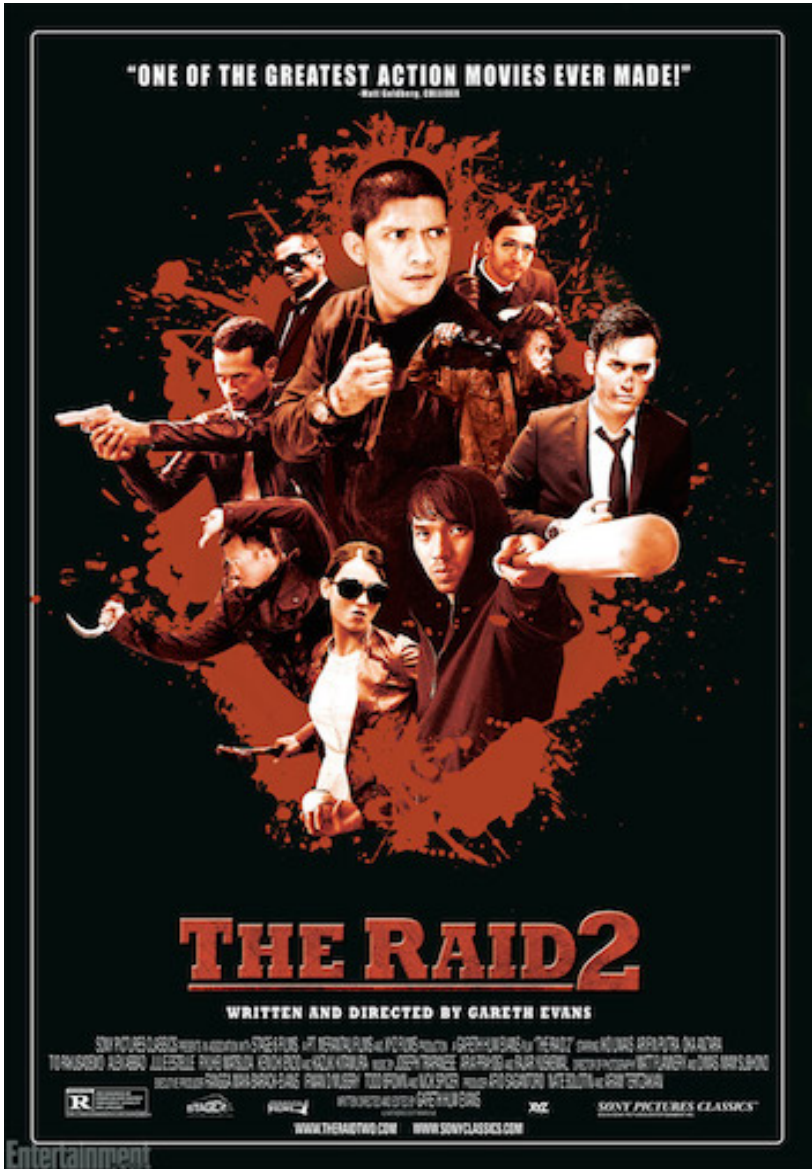
### 10. "Nightcrawler"



Nightcrawler  
Photo credit: Open Road

My confusion of why people don’t change the channel after non-cable programming bleeds into the 10pm news was assuaged by writer/director Dan Gilroy’s “Nightcrawler.” While showing how our viewership of others’ personal horrors as sadism that can be manipulated, Gilroy also creates a fine horror story of a hardworking freelancer, who tackles success with entitlement. Jake Gyllenhaal is the fascinating title monster, a wolf in news cameraman’s clothing. Functioning as a fine genre movie, “Nightcrawler” sears with a handful of sequences that rank among the year’s best, as we witness news narratives not being captured, but created.

★ 9. “The Raid 2”



The Raid 2



Photo credit: Sony Pictures Classics

Until writer/director Gareth Evans blesses action fans with “The Raid 3,” this will probably be the best movie of the genre in this decade. His 150-minute opus “The Raid 2” is a rampaging ass-kicker of expertly-executed martial artistry that mixes exhilarating fight sequences and chases, with an expansive narrative that wants to have the same intricacy as “The Godfather.” As his previous “The Raid: Redemption” boasted legendary moments of relentless action, “The Raid 2” raises a bar only Evans can touch, as displayed in an introductory prison riot, or a beautiful car chase in the third act. “The Raid 2” proves that movie adrenaline is a very real force in spectacle, sometimes equally for filmmaker and viewer.

★ 8. “Boyhood”

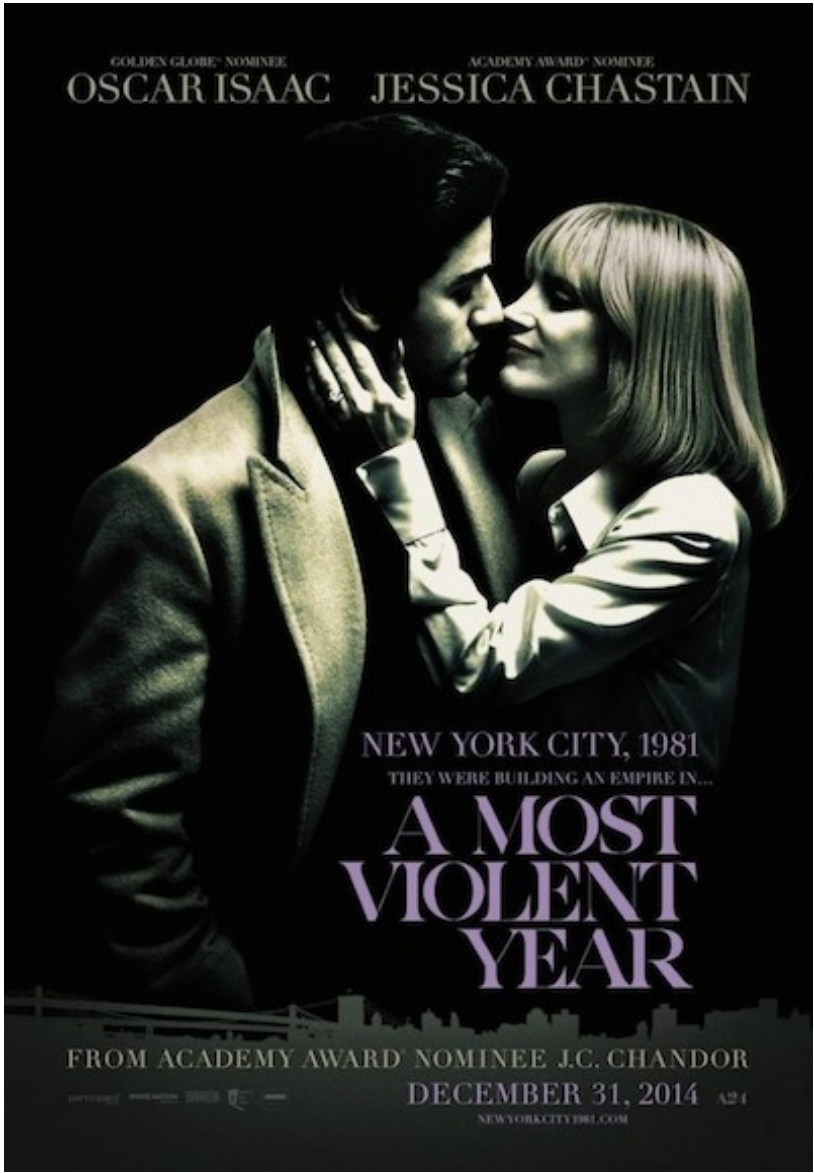


Boyhood  
Photo credit: IFC Films

The coming-of-age film is given another landmark with Richard Linklater’s “Boyhood,” a fictional story with recurring actors that documents how a person blossoms from the origins of a simple human being. The life of young non-actor Ellar Coltrane, and the character he plays, vividly expresses the way in which we are influenced by the lives of people around us through the gradual passage of time.

“We’re all just wingin’ it” is one of the more profound lines from the pertinent “Boyhood,” especially due to its simplicity. For a film that is so intellectually realized, it remains humbled by the daunting questions, and doesn’t claim to have any answers. And yet, Linklater’s film is so thorough in its introspection that it just might have some.

★ 7. “A Most Violent Year”



A Most Violent Year  
Photo credit: A24 Films

Similar to 2013, 2014 has been the year of the American hustle. Here is a story about trying to be successful in a competitive world that we can relate to more than gangster tales - the narrative of someone trying to stay clean. “Inside Llewyn Davis” Oscar Isaac delivers another extremely promising turn as Abel Morales, an immigrant and business man trying to not get caught up in the dirty moves of his competitors. A similar story of endurance from “All is Lost” writer/director J.C. Chandor, “A Most Violent Year” has a vivid energy with its empathy, and features more than a couple heart-racing passages that are built from the potential of pure cinema.

★ 6. “Two Days, One Night”



Two Days, One Night



Photo credit: IFC Films

The truth in the Dardenne brothers’ filmmaking and the deeply-felt embodiment by Marion Cotillard combines for a tremendous slice of human nature with “Two Days, One Night.” In a performance that defines her ability for rigorous emotion with a strong grasp on the everywoman’s subdued existence, Cotillard plays Sandra, a person wrestling with depression who must ask her 16 coworkers individually to vote for her to keep her job when they return to work on Monday, though they’ll lose a bonus if she stays on. As the Dardenne bros. vividly present this anxious journey through agile pacing, the situation gains intense weight from its immediate significance; Sandra’s emotionally-wrenching campaign makes for a microcosm of a world of workers who share economic hardships, but scrape together paychecks for independent means. With innate high stakes, “Two Days, One Night” is the Dardenne’s survival film, with Cotillard’s performance a “Gravity”-like spectacle amply articulating the world’s need to have a little faith in people.

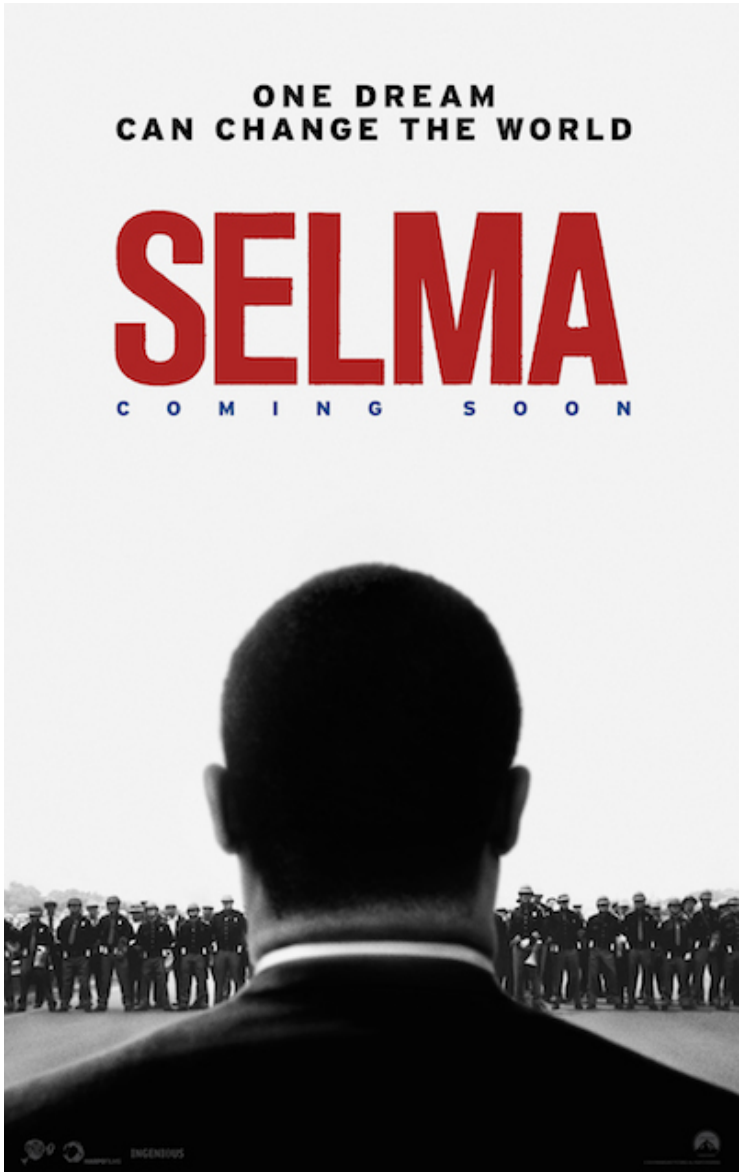
★ 5. “Frank”



Frank  
Photo credit: Magnolia

One of the year’s best films about art itself starred Michael Fassbender in a papier-mache head. Lenny Abrahamson’s “Frank” is a profound ode to how art feels, a quality more important than ratings or logic. Fassbender plays the songwriter and band leader (think early Flaming Lips) and earns singularity, as he indirectly exposes to wannabe indie pop star (played by Domhnall Gleeson) to the inherent purposes of art. An incredibly genuine odyssey, “Frank” becomes even better when discovering its source of inspiration, the real-life Frank Sidebottom, whose content is only a spiritual inspiration for Fassbender’s work. The performance of the film’s final song, “I Love You All,” which is written on the spot, is a year-best moment.

★ 4. “Selma”



Selma  
Photo credit: Paramount Pictures

Some very patriotic sawdust got in my eye for half of “Selma,” a crucial documentation of Martin Luther King Jr.’s effect on America after “I have a dream.” While I had the unique timing of seeing this film a day after the Michael Brown verdict, there is no doubt that the film has a timeless power, especially when watching the magnificent portrayal by David Oyelowo as Dr. King. Director Ava DuVernay treats this point of history with necessary contemplation, while writer Paul Webb expertly recreates the natural verbose brilliance of Dr. King, all without having the rights to his speeches. The completing feature to this incredible experience is the cinematography of Bradford Young (who also shot “A Most Violent Year”), whose wide angles capture the moment of his speeches, in which one man was able to invigorate the lives of so many.

★ 3. “The Lego Movie”

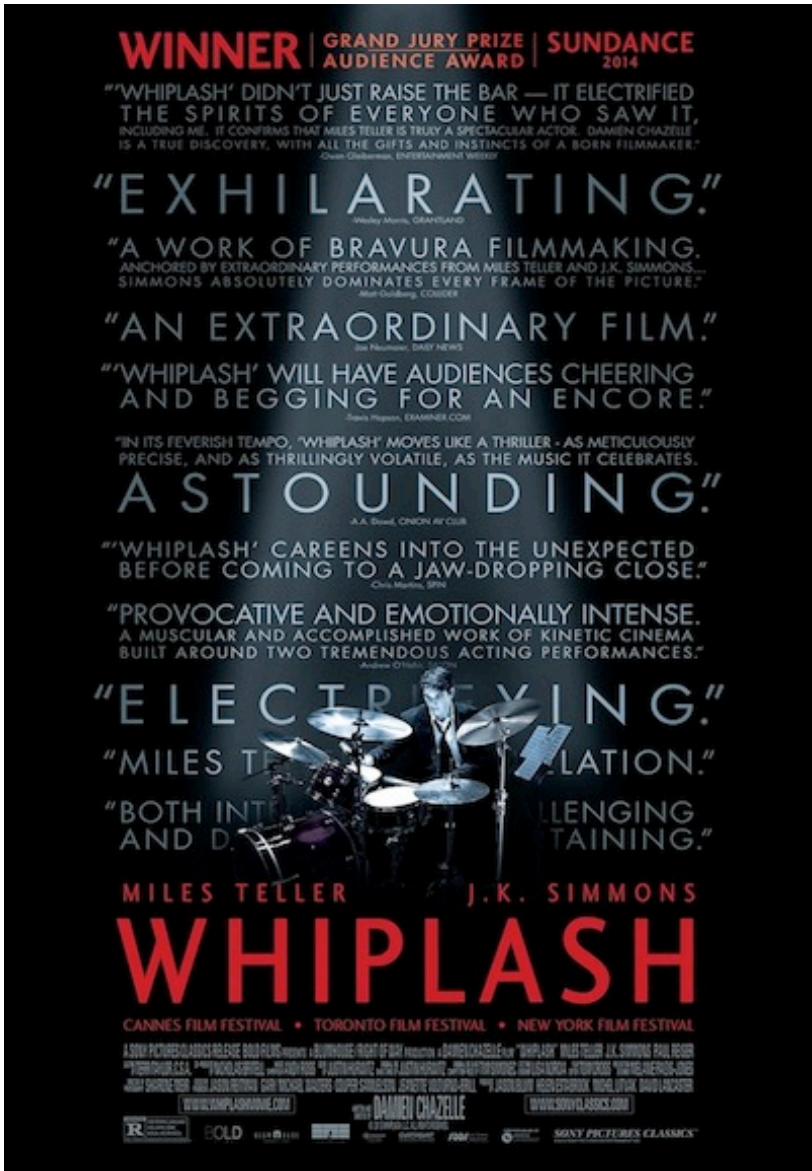




The Lego Movie  
Photo credit: Warner Brothers

Anyone worried about the restrictions within Hollywood adaptations need only watch “The Lego Movie” to see the potential of films based on previous products. Directors Phil Lord & Chris Miller inject the agile humor from their successful “21 Jump Street” reboot into this take on a creative toy, and a brand’s entire image is changed in the process. At the same time, “The Lego Movie” breaks the system, deconstructing the alienation in the beloved arc of “the special,” an effect that made following releases like “Divergent” look lifeless in comparison.

★ 2. “Whiplash”

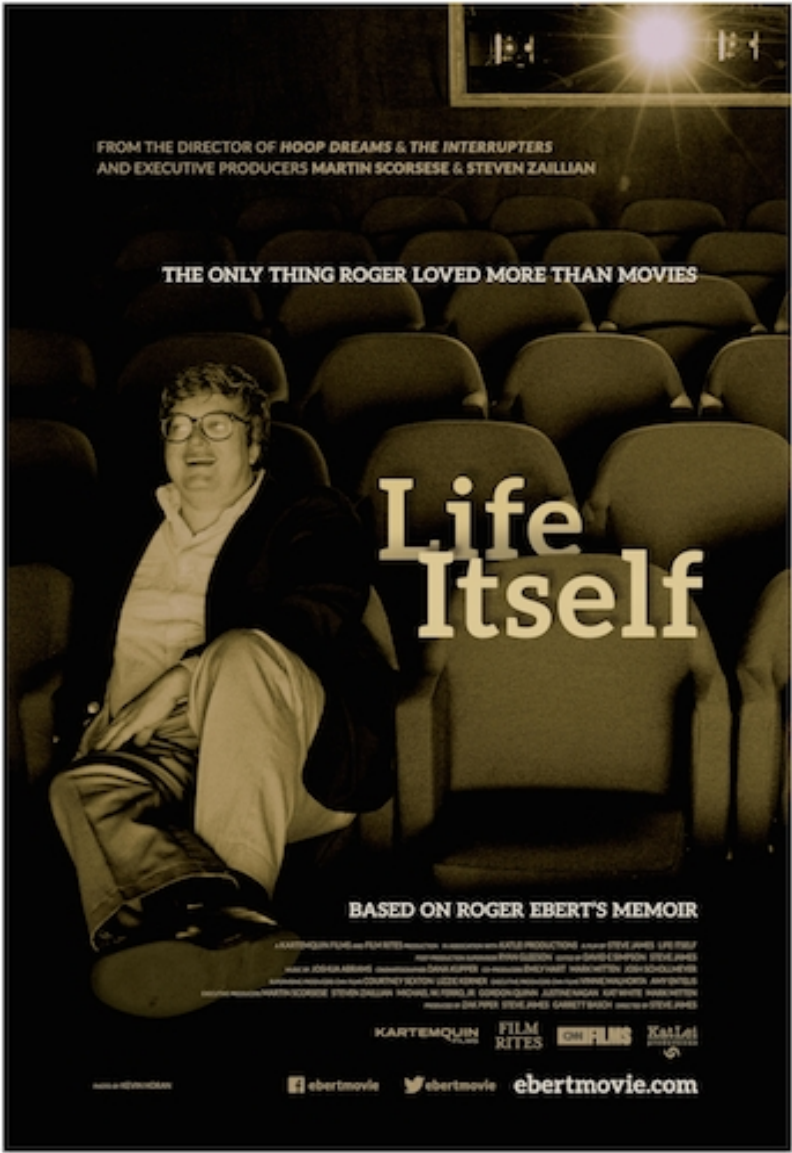


Whiplash  
Photo credit: Sony Pictures Classics

The “Rocky” that musicians have long been owed, “Whiplash” is ambition as a drug. A jazz drumming thriller that goes bare bones to show a musician’s focus, “Whiplash” is the expression of a new fear from cinematically-inclined musician Damien Chazelle. Fittingly, the film is accelerated by two bold performances, from Miles Teller’s aspirational drummer Andrew, to the vicious embodiment of the voice telling him to give up, played by J.K. Simmons in one of the year’s most memorable turns.

Along with its pulsating denouement for a story about jazz band that could fire up a football team, “Whiplash” has a definitive zeal of its own. Defying the expected cinematic representations of musical physicality and basing its narrative solely on a drummer’s ambition, Chazelle’s film audaciously affirms that the voice of failure is only silenced by fearlessness.

★ 1. “Life Itself”



Life Itself  
Photo credit: Magnolia

No bias needed: Steve James' documentary "Life Itself" is the best film of 2014. It's a heartfelt tribute to a fellow film critic who I and many others shared endless amounts of meditative hours in the dark, the guru who could always write it best. As Ebert was famously a populist and more importantly a Chicagoan, "Life Itself" shares a grand existence with its feet planted on the ground. In a wondrous tribute to a person's craft, critic Roger Ebert becomes unofficial co-director of his tale, while James harnesses the elements of friendship and love that can make even the most human tales cinematic.

There are numerous emotionally moving passages to be found in "Life Itself," and one of them remains a dark confession from Martin Scorsese. It is an extremely rare moment in which the hyperactive motormouth is rarely silenced during his own reflection about Ebert's influence on his career. He is brought to a point of humbled tears. This is one memory of a film that is built on a grand gesture about art regarding its fruition, and heralds as to how there will always be a need for critics even long after writers like Ebert have become archival posts. As much as artists like Scorsese may earn their prestige for the popular work they create, the conversation about their creations, or about those who may be due for Scorsese heights, is just as important. To have the power that Ebert did as a philosopher of film is no limited task. This is a documentary worthy of his work.

For "The 10 Best Films of 2014," by Patrick McDonald of HollywoodChicago.com, [click here](#). [30]



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