

# The Best Movies of 2020

[Richard Brody](#) December 2, 2020

Since March, the year in cinema has been defined by a near-total absence of significant theatrical releases—first, because theatres across the country were [shut down](#) in response to the [coronavirus pandemic](#) and, subsequently, because even after they [reopened](#) people largely stayed away. The new 007 film and the new Wes Anderson film, among dozens of others, were bumped to next year's schedule; "Soul" and "Wonder Woman 1984" are being released on streaming sites rather than in theatres; the Cannes Film Festival was cancelled, and many others, such as the New York Film Festival, were held online. In spite of this, 2020 has been, against the odds, a wonderful year for new movies. The absence of tentpole-type films—superhero spectacles, familiar franchises, star vehicles—had the welcome effect of thrusting independent films to the foreground. With "virtual cinema" releases, art-house venues such as Film Forum and Film at Lincoln Center have stepped up to become, in effect, distributors; streaming behemoths, including Netflix, Amazon, and the newcomer HBO Max, are playing the part of art houses; and less prominent sites, digital versions of film festivals, and online self-distribution have taken the place of limited theatrical releases. Nevertheless, I had the sense, through much of

the year, that even the best new independent films were being met with a muted response, stemming in part from (as I [wrote about](#) a month ago) a lack of media buzz but also, relatedly, from a collective sense of numbness in the face of the pandemic's collective and inequitably borne tragedy and the disastrous political response to it.

The reality is that there isn't a movie on the list of thirty-six below that has made a scintilla of difference in the nation's crises this year, even if there are some great ones that address major political matters directly and movingly. It's hardly the filmmakers' fault. There's no reason to expect movies to make a practical difference in electoral politics (despite Michael Moore's longstanding efforts). But, at a time of emergency, in which the very survival of Americans and American political institutions has been in question, the impotence of movies to make a difference is an inescapable aspect of watching and thinking about cinema. Considering the changed state of movies in the face of the pandemic is impossible, and immoral, without also considering the governmental failures—rooted in indifference, incompetence, malevolence, and greed—that have made the pandemic an ongoing medical and social catastrophe.

This year has served as a terrible reminder that there's no such thing as normalcy—for many individuals and for society at large, crisis is a permanent state of affairs, and what's normal, alas, is the systemic failure to recognize and respond to it. Yet movies, generally speaking, aren't

up to the demands of depicting extraordinary events, whether they are the extremes of seemingly private life (violence, death, sex) or the enormities of politics and abuses of power. The movie business as a whole—both Hollywood and independent—internalizes and reflects norms. It emphasizes unity over candor, a good story over what's really happening; it shapes stories to fit arcs rather than creating forms to accommodate realities. It fails to dramatize the connections between private life and the political situation, inner life and public power. Because of generalized, ingrained, and internalized guardrails against the kind of imaginative freedom required to do so, filmmakers tend to be disinclined to break a dramatic framework in order to say what's on their minds. As a result, even some movies of progressive intent contribute to the drone of media conventions, and to their distortions; their tone and form fatally undermine their substance.

In a time of crisis, form appears frivolous, style is suspect, and beauty is undervalued—mistakenly. (Some of this year's best films overtly confront this conflict.) The inner truth of experience and the authenticity of emotion are, in and of themselves, cleansing to a defiled mediasphere. The best of modern, post-classical filmmaking has always been an act of resistance, whether or not those films' subject matter is expressly political. The fundamental politics of movies is the expansion of cinematic form, the creation of new possibilities of

expression—most significantly, the expression and inclusion of experiences and ideas otherwise kept out of movies, whether owing to intentional suppression or falsely innocent conventions of storytelling. Progress in the arts, like progress in politics, isn't linear; it's dialectical, in multiple dimensions, and involves unforeseeable responses to unforeseeable events, including sudden and dramatic eruptions of creative originality and visionary imagination. At its best, filmmaking (like film criticism) points not at the present but toward the future. I'm anticipating a peaceful transition of political power at the beginning of next year, and also looking ahead to as yet unfathomable varieties of cinematic revolution to come.

A note on my list: I've counted as a 2020 release any new film that was made available online for any length of time this year, including those shown in online versions of festivals and special series. I didn't, however, include some notable ones that were available online but also have upcoming releases by active distributors planned for next year, such as Matías Piñeiro's "[Isabella](#)" and Jia Zhangke's "[Swimming Out Till the Sea Turns Blue](#)," both of which would have figured high on the list. So would several films that came out this year but have been sitting in the vaults for some time, including "[Hill of Freedom](#)" (2014, Hong Sang-soo), "[And When I Die, I Won't Stay Dead](#)" (2015, Billy Woodberry), and "[Jayhawkers](#)" (2014, Kevin Willmott). Also, Steve McQueen's series "[Small](#)

[Axe](#)" isn't, as some have maintained, a TV series; it's a set of five feature films that he made in a short period of time—that's quite an achievement in itself, which is rendered all the more imposing by the great artistic merit of them all. All five are, separately, among my best films of the year.

## 1. "[Kajillionaire](#)"

*Photograph by Matt Kennedy / Focus Features*

Miranda July's exuberant yet terrifying drama, about a patriarchal family of scammers and a young woman's spirit of resistance and liberation, is realized with an exhilarating imaginative freedom.

## 2. "[Da 5 Bloods](#)"

Dramatizing the inseparable link between the battle for justice and the battle for historical truth, Spike Lee's film follows a group of Black veterans of the Vietnam War who head back to Vietnam with motives as mixed now as they were then.

## 3. "[The Whistlers](#)"

The Romanian director Corneliu Porumboiu, who's obsessed with the political implications of language, turns a classic dirty-cop thriller into an epistemological

mosaic that's centered on a Canary Islands language which uses whistling instead of speech—and on how it's used to avoid government surveillance.

#### 4. "[Dick Johnson Is Dead](#)"

*Photograph courtesy Netflix*

When the documentary filmmaker Kirsten Johnson learned that her elderly father, Richard, a psychiatrist, was exhibiting symptoms of dementia, she invited him to live with her and filmed their new shared adventure. The result, which includes staged tragicomic sequences feigning Richard's death and afterlife, plus the behind-the-scenes story of producing them, is a metafictional exploration of the metaphysical.

#### 5. "[An Easy Girl](#)"

In Rebecca Zlotowski's daringly subjective drama, a sixteen-year-old girl living in Cannes and unsure of her future is unexpectedly visited by her twenty-two-year-old cousin from Paris, a young woman who lives the fast life and draws her into it; the girl's ensuing whirl of reckless behavior proves radically and surprisingly transformative.

#### 6. "[Never Rarely Sometimes Always](#)"

Sidney Flanigan plays a seventeen-year-old high-school

student in rural Pennsylvania who, unable to get an abortion in that state without parental consent, travels to New York for the procedure. The writer and director, Eliza Hittman, emphasizes the bureaucratic obstacles and administrative infrastructure abortion involves—and the inseparable connection of private life and public policy.

## 7. "[On the Rocks](#)"

*Photograph courtesy Apple*

Sofia Coppola's comedic drama, about an artist who confronts the gale-force personality of her worldly, suave father, is a bitterly ironic challenge to the venerable ideal of male Hollywood cool.

## 8. "[Lovers Rock](#)"

The second film in Steve McQueen's "Small Axe" cycle is a bracingly original musical centered on a house party by and for Black Londoners of West Indian descent, where joy and expectation meet romance and danger. McQueen, working with the cinematographer Shabier Kirchner, develops a boldly original style for dance and its emotional world.

## 9. "[Time](#)"

Sibil Fox Richardson, whose husband, Robert, was

imprisoned for a bank robbery in which they both took part, made video recordings of her life with their children—and of her efforts to overturn his unconscionably long sentence. The filmmaker, Garrett Bradley, draws on Fox Richardson's archives and films her ongoing quest for Robert's liberation, bringing together personal and political history and revealing the unredressed legacy of Jim Crow.

## 10. "[City Hall](#)"

Focussing on the activities and administration of Boston's mayor, Marty Walsh, a Democrat who expressly embraces ethnic inclusion and equality of opportunity, Frederick Wiseman's latest documentary presents a comprehensive vision of politics as meticulous and rational management guided by authentic empathy.

## 11. "[Fourteen](#)"

*Photograph courtesy Grasshopper Film*

In Dan Sallitt's intimately scaled and audaciously wide-ranging drama, the lifelong friendship of two thirtyish women in Brooklyn is shaken by the unaddressed fault lines of their stifled conflicts and the powerful implications of their diverging ways of life.

## 12. "[Yes, God, Yes](#)"



Karen Maine, in her first feature, tells the story of a Catholic-school teen-ager's resistance to the preachings and teachings of sexual abstinence; the drama of her quiet but consequential revolt emerges with textured physicality and deeply nuanced evocations of the inner life—along with bitterly ironic comedy.

### 13. "[Shirley](#)"

Josephine Decker directed, with melodramatic intensity and a furiously probing image repertory, this historical fantasy about Shirley Jackson's effort, around 1950, to break through her agoraphobic terrors and write a novel—and to engage a young lecturer's wife in the psychodrama of her research.

### 14. "[Cuties](#)"

*Photograph courtesy Netflix*

For her first feature, the French director Maimouna Doucouré tells a story of personal import that emphasizes the disturbing power of multiple dimensions of patriarchy: in Paris, an eleven-year-old girl of Senegalese descent is angered at learning that her father is preparing to take a second wife—and, in response, repudiates her family's belief in modesty by joining classmates in a provocative hip-hop dance performance.

## 15. "[Mangrove](#)"

Steve McQueen's first "Small Axe" release is a historical drama set in the late nineteen-sixties and centered on a Black-owned restaurant that serves as a social hub for the West Indian community in London. The gathering place becomes a target of police harassment, resulting in a historic court battle; McQueen focusses on the intellectual background that comes to the fore under pressure and develops into a mass movement.

## 16. "[Talking About Trees](#)"

The once vital and now stifled Sudanese film industry is the subject of this documentary, by Suhaib Gasmelbari, in which a group of now elderly and involuntarily retired filmmakers attempt to reopen a long-shuttered movie house in the city of Omdurman and, in the process, bring to light the country's arbitrary politics and reflect on the power of the cinema itself.

## 17. "[The 11th Green](#)"

*Photograph courtesy Destination Maitland LLC*

Christopher Munch wrote and directed this wildly imaginative inside-the-Beltway sci-fi tale of an investigative journalist—the son of a recently deceased Air Force general—who uncovers evidence of a military conspiracy involving alien contact and alien technology,

and who becomes the target of a government surveillance campaign that echoes Cold War-era machinations.

## 18. "[The American Sector](#)"

From a modest and oblique concept—the effort to find and photograph the dozens of fragments of the Berlin Wall that are dispersed throughout the United States, in public and private hands—the filmmakers Courtney Stephens and Pacho Velez engage in a fascinating range of happenstance conversations from which a grand vision of historical resonance and political consciousness emerges.

## 19. "[The Forty-Year-Old Version](#)"

Radha Blank wrote, directed, and stars in this intimate and vulnerable comedy, about a Black female playwright whose latest play is produced by a white man who demands distorting compromises for its largely white audience—and her efforts to rediscover her uncompromised voice by way of hip-hop performance.

## 20. "[Paris Calligrammes](#)"

*Photograph courtesy Ulrike Ottinger*

The German director Ulrike Ottinger's documentary,

about her development as a young artist in Paris in the nineteen-sixties, is both a bildungsroman and an unfolding of modern German history from the perspective of other, elder German artists in Parisian exile.

## **21. "Red, White, and Blue"**

The third of McQueen's "Small Axe" films is based on the real life of Leroy Logan (played by John Boyega), a young Black scientist who, [in 1983](#), joined the London police force. Logan's explicit aim was to reform the department—owing, in part, to the fact that his father was brutalized and wrongly arrested by white officers—and McQueen films his story with a poised widescreen aesthetic of analysis and contemplation.

## **22. "Alex Wheatle"**

This "Small Axe" film is based on the true story of Alex Wheatle, a Black writer who was imprisoned because of his involvement in the 1981 Brixton riots.

## **23. "Education"**

The fifth of the "Small Axe" films tells a story, based on Steve McQueen's own experience, about an eleven-year-old Black boy in London who, despite his evident intelligence, is relegated—as are many minority students—to a special-education school.

## 24. "[Joan of Arc](#)"

The ten-year-old Lise Leplat Prudhomme stars in the second musical drama by the extravagantly inventive Bruno Dumont. It's about France's sainted savior, and it features extended dialectical disputations, military scenes staged as production numbers, and music by the singer-songwriter Christophe.

## 25. "[Residue](#)"

*Photograph courtesy Array*

Merawi Gerima's sharply perceptive first feature is the story of a young Black filmmaker who returns to his family's neighborhood in Washington, D.C., in order to make a film about the traumatic gentrification that it's undergoing—and who discovers that he's an outsider to his former friends.

## 26. "[The 24th](#)"

This passionate and analytical historical drama by the prolific director and screenwriter Kevin Willmott assembles an extraordinary cast (including Trai Byers, Mykelti Williamson, Aja Naomi King, and Bashir Salahuddin) for the story of soldiers in a Black regiment during the First World War who are subjected to the menaces of Jim Crow and take grave risks to defend

themselves.

## 27. "[Bacurau](#)"

*Photograph from Kino International / Everett*

Juliano Dornelles and Kleber Mendonça Filho directed this bold political and supernatural fantasy about a rural Brazilian village that, during an electoral campaign, is subjected to attack by a band of mercenaries and organizes a disciplined and imaginative resistance.

## 28. "[She Dies Tomorrow](#)"

In this apocalyptic fiction of contagion, directed by Amy Seimetz, the anticipation of death is itself a malady that spreads on contact—and reflects psychological ills endemic to the modern bourgeoisie.

## 29. "[The Assistant](#)"

Kitty Green's psychologically agonizing drama of predatory workplace practices is centered on a young woman who works at a New York film company and gets inklings of her male boss's abuse of his office for sex with other young women.

## 30. "[Gatsby in Connecticut](#)"

In this engaging rabbit-hole documentary, a nonprofessional filmmaker pursues his obsession with "[The Great Gatsby](#)," tracing key elements of Fitzgerald's story to Westport, Connecticut—and connecting with a writer who [published](#) a related report in *The New Yorker*.

### 31. "[Ham on Rye](#)"

*Photograph by Carson Lund / courtesy Factory 25*

Tyler Taormina's first feature takes a finely nuanced, boldly supernatural, and photographically exquisite view of the rituals and transitions associated with the end of high school.

### 32. "[Wojnarowicz: F\\*\\*k You F\\*ggot F\\*\\*ker](#)"

The copious archive of the late artist David Wojnarowicz is at the center of Chris McKim's documentary, which considers in detail the connections between the *AIDS* crisis in the nineteen-eighties, the era's culture wars, and the political and social oppression of homosexuals.

### 33. "One Night in Miami"

Regina King's finely imagined and fervently acted directorial *début* tells the story of a meeting, in 1964, between Malcolm X, Sam Cooke, Jim Brown, and Muhammad Ali (still known at the time as Cassius Clay).

### 34. "[Build the Wall](#)"

Joe Swanberg's light-toned drama looks with quietly passionate detail at solitary artists as they age, collaboration as it develops, and friendship as it curdles.

### 35. "Mank"

*Photograph courtesy Netflix*

The core of David Fincher's flashback-centric drama about Herman Mankiewicz's [work on the screenplay](#) of "Citizen Kane" is Mankiewicz's confrontation with the right-wing politics that he discovered in the Hollywood of the nineteen-thirties.

### 36. "[Santiago, Italia](#)"

Nanni Moretti, best known for directing and starring in autofictions such as "[Dear Diary](#)," made this documentary about the resistance of the Italian Embassy in Chile to the Pinochet coup and its aid to the victims—and he comes out from behind the curtain, to crucial effect.

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