

# The Best Six Movies of the First Half of 2021

Getting back to theaters feels great, people.



With my childhood best friend (and [vice president of the Los Angeles Film Critics Association](#)) Tim Grierson, I host a weekly movie podcast, called Grierson & Leitch. (Subscribe on [Apple Podcasts](#) and [Spotify](#)!) Tim and I grew up in Central Illinois obsessed with “Siskel & Ebert,” and the podcast is meant to be just like that show: Two Midwestern dopes who see way too many movies and love nothing more than to talk about them with each other.

Ever since 1991 — when I was 16 years old — we, at the

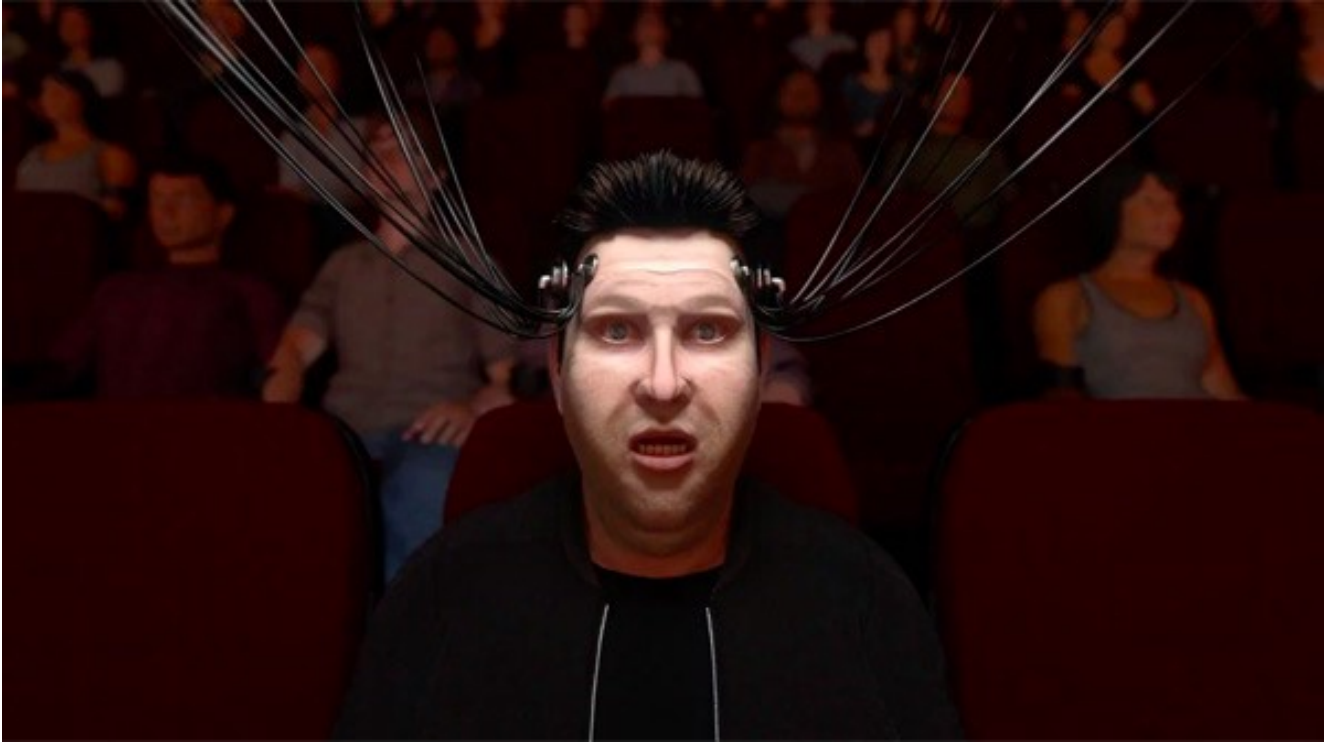
end of the movie year, announce our Top 10 Movies of the Year to each other, a podcast tradition that is now known as "[Dorkfest](#)." But at the midway point of the year, which, as you might have noticed, just passed, we give our six best films of the first six months. It's a way to point out movies that people might have missed, and make sure we don't forget them when the movie year ends.

We did [this show two weeks ago](#), right before Grierson left for the Cannes Film Festival. (He saw some great movies there: [Here's his ranking of every movie he screened](#).) It occurred to me that, other than that podcast, I had not actually *listed* my six best films of the year so far anywhere. So this seems like the right place for it.

Before I list, though, I must say: It has been truly glorious to be back in movie theaters again. Everyone has their own risk tolerance, but going to the movies was basically the first thing I wanted to do when I was fully vaccinated. I'd missed it terribly. Going to the movies has always been a place of peace for me, a refuge I can enter where, for two-or-three hours, my own world peels away and I get to go somewhere else entirely. Ebert once wrote, [about the first time he saw Star Wars](#), that "my imagination has forgotten it is actually present in a movie theater and thinks it's up there on the screen. In a curious sense, the events in the movie seem real, and I seem to be a part of them." This is what the best movies do for me. They transport me to another universe, another life, entirely. I like the life I have; movies are not a place to escape from some torment or

pain. But movies expand the limits of my imagination. They allow me, for a while, to be something else.

It's so good to have them back. Here are the best six movies I've seen this year so far.



***A Glitch in the Matrix*, directed by Rodney Ascher**

The director of the terrific documentaries *Room 237* (about fans' theories about *The Shining*) and *The Nightmare* (about people who have living nightmares) looks at the theory that we all live in a simulation, and the people who desperately believe it. I wrote about this movie here and like it even more now. Ascher's movies are not about the theories: They're about the people who believes them so passionately. And the movie, made during the pandemic, looks terrific. ([Available for streaming on Hulu.](#))





### ***In the Heights*, directed by Jon M. Chu**

It does not reach the glorious peaks of *Hamilton*, but Lin-Manuel Miranda's musical is a joyous, sometimes downright euphoric explosion of energy and good cheer. Chu expands the canvas and makes the musical numbers feel both real and fantastical. It is impossible for this to not put you in a good mood. (Available for streaming on HBO Max on July 30.)



### ***A Quiet Place, Part II*, directed by John Krasinski**

Stronger, more focused and more expertly directed than the first film, *A Quiet Place Part II* is a thrilling, almost insanely tense sequel that expands the canvas but doesn't lose the claustrophobic thrill. This remains a terrific idea for a movie and works even better the second time. Definitely see it in a theater if you can. (Available only in theaters.)



### ***Saint Maud*, directed by Rose Glass**



A horror film like few others, *Saint Maud* is first and foremost a character study about a woman who is falling apart but still trying to hang on. The movie is terrifying, but in a much more interesting way than you'd think. And the ending is an absolute killer. ([Available for streaming on Hulu.](#))



### ***Summer of Soul*, directed by Questlove**

A fantastic concert film about the 1969 Harlem Music Festival, informed by a director who is equal parts fascinated by the actual rapture of music and eager to embrace the world, and the people in it, with big huge open arms. See it on a big screen, if you can, but if you watch it home, make sure to play it loud. ([Available for streaming on Hulu.](#))



## ***Zola*, directed by Janicza Bravo**

Famously based on a Twitter thread, *Zola* is a wild, energetic fever dream that's absolutely intoxicating to watch. It has the wit, cleverness and playfulness of early Tarantino: At times, it feels like the next generation version, a director getting high on their own supply. It's electrifying. (Available in theaters only.)

Apologies to the equally wonderful *The Mitchells Vs. the Machines* and *Barb and Star Go to Vista Del Mar*, both of which *just* missed this list. Go see some movies, people. They're good for the soul.

*Will Leitch writes multiple pieces a week for Medium. Make sure to follow him [right here](#). He lives in Athens, Georgia, with his family and is the author of five books, including [the novel How Lucky](#), now out from Harper Books. He also writes [a free weekly newsletter](#) that you*

*might enjoy.*