

The Best Movies of 2021

This year's releases, augmented by movies postponed from last year, offer exceptional artistry amid the industry's commercial difficulties.

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Illustration by Shira Inbar

From an artistic perspective, 2021 has been an excellent cinematic vintage, yet the bounty is shadowed by an air of doom. The reopening of theatres has brought many great movies—some of which were postponed from last year—to the big screen, but fewer people to see them. The biggest successes, as usual, have been superhero and franchise films. “The French Dispatch” has done respectably in wide release, and “Licorice Pizza” is doing superbly on four screens in New York and Los Angeles, but few, if any, of the year's best films are likely to reach high on the box-office charts. The shift toward streaming was already under way when the [pandemic](#) struck, and as the trend has accelerated it's had a paradoxical effect on movies. On the one hand, a streaming release is a wide release, happily accessible to all (or to all subscribers). On the other, an online release usually registers as a nonevent, and many of the great movies hardly make a blip on the mediascape

despite being more accessible than ever.

When tracking the fortunes of ambitious movies, it's important to keep an eye on the spread—not, as in sports betting, the handicap of numbers but the aesthetic spread that separates the most original films of the day from prevailing commercial norms. The past two decades have been a time of peaceful revolution in the movies.

Established auteurs, from Spike Lee to Martin Scorsese, have found liberation through the rise of independent producers, and ultra-low-budget outsider independents—including Greta Gerwig, Barry Jenkins, the Safdie brothers, Joe Swanberg, the late Lynn Shelton, and others in their orbits —have broken through to the mainstream and shifted the very core of commercial cinema. (Among the marks of the narrowed spread are the overwhelming success of such distinctive movies as “Moonlight,” “Us,” and “Little Women,” and the franchise stardom of Adam Driver.) But these shifts have led to an industry snapback—a reconquest and occupation of studio terrain. The [hiring of Terence Nance](#) to direct “Space Jam 2” was a welcome sign of progress; his [departure from the project](#), in July of 2019 (reportedly because of creative differences), was a sign that the winds of Hollywood were pushing back to familiar shores. (The movie, titled “[Space Jam: A New Legacy](#),” came out in July; it isn't good, but it's high on the year's box-office chart.) The double whammy of overproduced mega-spectacles in theatres and audiovisual snackables at home is a sign that, even if theatrical viewing

bounces back, movies' place in the market is likely to be even more tenuous.

In one sense, this pattern is as old as the movies themselves: for every advance, there's a reaction. In the earliest years of Hollywood, a century ago, a star-driven system gave way to a director-driven one, which studio executives then quickly clamped down on. What emerged was a top-down system that, ever since, has seemed, absurdly, like a natural and ineluctable state of the art. More recently, in the seventies, filmmakers such as Steven Spielberg and George Lucas came along to devise a new pop conservatism, rooted in television and nostalgia, that quickly pushed the most forward-looking of their New Hollywood peers toward the industry's margins. The lesson is that there is nothing natural, inevitable, or immutable about the Hollywood way of doing things—neither the methods of production nor the dictates of style and form that result. (The absence of a unified and centralized documentary system is why nonfiction, as reflected in this year's list, has continued its aesthetic expansion uninhibitedly.)

Even before the pandemic, it was becoming tougher for artistically ambitious, low-budget features to get any theatrical release, let alone achieve commercial viability. (Several of the best independent films that I've seen in recent years remain unreleased to this day.) But the economics of streaming services present their own peculiar challenges. With theatrical releases, viewers don't pay for a

ticket unless they want to see a movie. Streaming subscriptions, in effect, amount to paying in advance for movies before they are available, which means that platforms have an incentive to deliver the familiar—whether narrowly formatted star-and-genre movies or films by name-brand auteurs, who can easily draw interest. And the widening spread between the most profitable movies and the most original filmmakers risks putting pressure on directors to soften or suppress their most original inspirations, or to filter them into formats, genres, or systems that resist or counteract them.

There's a danger worse than the studios and their overproduced, over-budgeted methods: a debilitated Hollywood that would relinquish its filmmaking dominance to an even smaller number of giant streaming services. Netflix and Amazon (and, to a lesser extent, Apple TV+) have done respectable jobs of producing and releasing artistically worthy movies, including some that are high on my list. They do it so that they can compete, as players rather than disrupters, with studios and major independent producers for prestigious artists and projects. But if theatrical viewing continues to shrink, taking with it the studios' preëminence and turning independent producers and distributors into dependent husks, the big streaming services will have much less incentive to finance movies of any significant artistic ambition.

The economics of any individual movie are irrelevant to the progress of the art form; the pantheon of classics has no

connection to the industry's treasury. Yet the careers of filmmakers are inseparable from their ability to secure access to financing, and the history of cinema is a graveyard of unrealized projects that should serve as a cautionary tale against the squandering of worthy talent. Young filmmakers working outside the system and with scant expectations of getting in are the future of the cinema, which is an art form that doesn't know what it needs until it gets it. The art advances through a generational takeover—which can happen only when movies seem worth taking over at all. As an avid moviegoer wary of the threat of contagion, I go to theatres cautiously, with careful attention to screenings where there are large numbers of empty seats around me. Yet each empty seat bodes ominously for the future of feature filmmaking over all. The cinema has weathered crises of many sorts, economic and political, but if movies themselves hold any lesson, a rebirth is as likely to resemble a zombie as a phoenix.

A note on this list: for [last year's picks](#), when releases were in flux because of the pandemic, I included movies that were available to stream through festivals and special series. Several of those films have had official releases in 2021, and I've included them again, to retain (or restore) adherence to the traditional calendar.

1. "[The French Dispatch](#)"

Wes Anderson's wildly comedic, yet fiercely serious,

adaptation of stories and personalities from the classic age of *The New Yorker* unleashes a self-surpassing torrent of dramatic and decorative complexity, philosophical power, and physical intensity. It's an extraordinary film of the life of the mind-body connection, of history in the present tense.

2. "[Licorice Pizza](#)"

What Paul Thomas Anderson lays out as a pugnaciously romantic coming-of-age story for a teen-age actor and a hectic trip of self-discovery for a twentysomething dreamer, set in the San Fernando Valley of the early seventies, turns wondrously and gleefully into his version of "Once Upon a Time . . . in Hollywood"—and a vastly superior one at that, owing to the wide-ranging scope of his tenderness, skepticism, humor, and insight.

3. "[Zola](#)"



Photograph by Anna Kooris / Courtesy A24

Janicza Bravo's antic drama about two young dancers' wild road trip to Florida—for fun and for profit—as it goes off the rails terrifyingly, violently, and absurdly, is based on a real-life Twitter thread by the title character, and Bravo's exuberantly imaginative and stylized direction reflects the woman's retrospective tall-tale wonder at having survived it.

4. "[I Was a Simple Man](#)"

Christopher Makoto Yogi's second feature is one of the great movies about death; it's the drama of an elderly man of Japanese descent in rural Oahu who, while terminally ill, is visited by the ghost of his late wife. Her spectral presence conjures the island's troubled history and his own family conflicts—and Yogi films the metaphysical and the

practical with the same lyrical audacity.

5. ["In the Same Breath"](#)



Photograph courtesy HBO

In an astounding combination of personal documentary and investigative journalism, Nanfu Wang reconstructs the earliest days of the *COVID* pandemic in her native China (where she happened to be visiting relatives while the virus's spread was being censored)—and the similarly politicized mishandling of the crisis, soon thereafter, in the United States.

6. ["C'mon C'mon"](#)

Voices carry the intricate, time-bending action in Mike Mills's turbulent, tender family melodrama and memory piece, in which a radio producer and his young nephew bond amid work trips and recorded interviews, family crises

and reconciliations. It features one of the greatest of recent performances by a child actor.

7. "[Passing](#)"

In her directorial début, Rebecca Hall adapts Nella Larsen's 1929 novel of racial identity with a distinctively literary flair and precision that spotlights the contemplative, yet passionate, artistry of its stars, Tessa Thompson and Ruth Negga, and evokes the period Harlem setting in deft touches.

8. "[Pebbles](#)" ("Koozhangal")

India's nominee for Best International Feature Film at the Oscars is P. S. Vinodraj's first feature, set in a remote Tamil Nadu village, where a rage-filled man uses his young son as a pawn to force his estranged wife to return. Vinodraj films their journey in elaborately nuanced detail and dramatizes women's and children's sly and bold forms of resistance to patriarchal violence.

9. "[Petite Maman](#)"



Photograph courtesy Lilies Films

This breathtaking high-concept fantasy, written and directed by Céline Sciamma—in which an eight-year-old girl staying at the house of her late grandmother makes a new friend in the nearby woods who turns out to be her mother as a child—is a grandly imagined and sharply observed tale of female intimacy and family secrets.

10. "[Procession](#)"

The behind-the-scenes revelation of the filmmaking process—and the nature of cinematic authorship—gains historic resonance in Robert Greene's collaborative movie, in which he teams up with six men, who'd been sexually abused in childhood by Catholic clergy, to make short, dramatic films about their experiences.

11. "[The Woman Who Ran](#)"

The prolific South Korean director Hong Sang-soo features his longtime collaborator (and partner) Kim Min-hee in a quietly ferocious tip-of-the-iceberg melodrama of a woman who visits old friends and unearths their intimate stories of romantic and professional frustration—along with tales of her own troubled past.

12. "[The Disciple](#)"



Photograph courtesy Netflix

Musical performance has rarely been filmed as lovingly or as discerningly as in Chaitanya Tamhane's drama about a young musician's devotion to a venerable master of the art, and the fragile endurance of a grand tradition.

13. "Being the Ricardos"

Aaron Sorkin fuses the political, romantic, professional, and artistic crises of Lucille Ball and Desi Arnaz into the drama

of a single week of production of a single episode of "I Love Lucy" and pays attention to the many varieties of creative imagination that would go into it.

14. "Parallel Mothers"

In Pedro Almodóvar's history-anchored and grief-seared melodrama, a photographer (played by Penélope Cruz) has a child with a forensic archeologist, who is preparing to excavate a mass grave in which her great-grandfather's body was buried during the Spanish Civil War; meanwhile she forms a passionate bond with a young woman who gives birth in the same hospital.

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

From a simple, seemingly contrived premise—the effort to film the dozens of slabs of the Berlin Wall that are on display in the United States—Courtney Stephens and Pacho Velez develop a far-ranging documentary of accidental encounters that illuminate American political history and mythology on the wing.

16. "[All Light, Everywhere](#)"

With a blend of personal cinema, investigative journalism, and revelatory research, the documentary filmmaker Theo Anthony connects the politics of police body cams and eye-in-the-sky surveillance to the hidden history of movies,

photography, and racial prejudice.

17. "[A Cop Movie](#)"



Photograph courtesy Netflix

This surprising, ingeniously labyrinthine docu-fiction hybrid, directed by Alonso Ruizpalacios, follows the private and professional lives of two Mexico City police officers and uncovers systemic corruption that distorts their relationships with colleagues, their dealings with the citizenry, and the very terms of public order.

18. "[Swimming Out Till the Sea Turns Blue](#)"

Jia Zhangke's probing interviews with, and about, writers in China, from before the revolution to the present day, reveal the connections between political circumstances and creative practices, in addition to the ways in which artists maneuver ironically with censorious powers to get

published and sustain careers.

19. "[Listening to Kenny G](#)"

The best-selling instrumental artist of all time opens up generously and good-naturedly to the documentarian Penny Lane, who turns the occasion into a sharply ironic probe of the sociology and philosophy of musical taste.

20. "[Drive My Car](#)"

A production of "Uncle Vanya" in Hiroshima by a widowed director gives rise to a vast outpouring of confessions in a drama, by Ryûsuke Hamaguchi, that—as the title suggests—focusses on the automobile as an intimate social space and a tool of art.

21. "[The Card Counter](#)"

An Iraq War veteran battles his tormenting memories of Abu Ghraib at the poker table—and gets caught in a vortex of violence at home—in Paul Schrader's furious, guilt-torn drama of intimate apocalypse.

22. "[Uppercase Print](#)"



Photograph courtesy Big World Pictures

In this blend of documentary and drama, by the director Radu Jude, the oppressive investigation of a high-school student in Romania, in 1981, for anti-authoritarian graffiti is the subject of a stage production intercut with an astounding, extended set of archival television clips that reveal the surprisingly alluring shams on which the Communist dictatorship depended.

23. "[Little Girl](#)"

Sébastien Lifshitz's documentary is an extraordinary portrait of a transgender girl, who became aware of her gender dysphoria in very early childhood—and who faces hostility and ostracism in her small French town.

24. "[Cry Macho](#)"

In Clint Eastwood's rueful and introspective drama, an elderly, retired rodeo rider heads to Mexico to rescue both a friend's young son and the title character—who, in a grandly ironic twist, happens to be the boy's pet rooster.

25. "[Exterminate All the Brutes](#)"

Raoul Peck's mighty, anguished four-part essay-film is a virtual illustrated lecture on the vast history of white supremacy as it reaches from the Crusades and Europe's genocidal conquest of the New World to the practice of slavery in the United States, to the Holocaust, and to present-day institutionalized racism.

26. "[Paris Calligrammes](#)"

The German director Ulrike Ottinger, one of the most original cinematic stylists, offers a self-portrait of her days in Paris in the nineteen-sixties, which is also a historically rich recollection of the elder artists and writers who inspired her creative sensibility.

27. "[The Year of the Everlasting Storm](#)"

Two of the seven parts of this anthology film about the COVID pandemic are miniature masterworks: a warmly comedic, yet candidly death-haunted, tale from the home of the Iranian director Jafar Panahi, whose mother-in-law visits the family after months of enforced separation; and the American director David Lowery's drama of a solitary

woman's connection to past generations' grief by way of archival letters and the duty that they impose.

28. "[You Will Die at Twenty](#)"



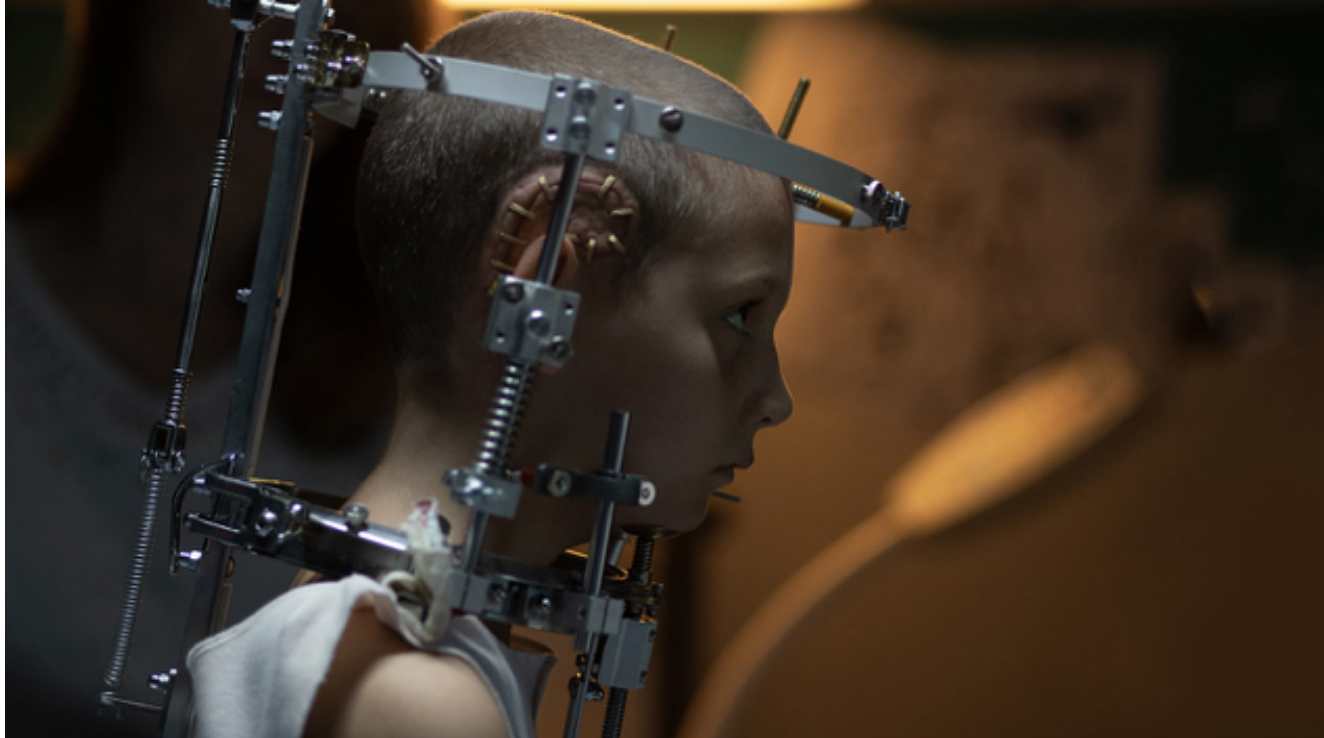
Photograph courtesy Film Movement

The Sudanese director Amjad Abu Alala's first feature is a sharply symbolic coming-of-age story about a young man who, under the burden of a curse that makes him a pariah, challenges his rigid religious upbringing and its narrow cultural and political assumptions.

29. "[France](#)"

Bruno Dumont, who has been on a wild directorial ride since the extravagant outburst of "Li'l Quinquin" in 2014, now turns his attention to a tumultuous comedy about the Internet fame and infamy of a TV journalist as she confronts the public distortions and private delusions of mass media.

30. "[Titane](#)"



Photograph courtesy NEON

Julia Ducournau's body-horror fantasy, about a French woman with a titanium plate in her skull who becomes pregnant after sex with a Cadillac, is also a serial-killer thriller and a desperately melodramatic quest for family and identity.

31. "[Test Pattern](#)"

Shatara Michelle Ford's first feature, dramatizing a woman's odyssey from hospital to hospital after she has been sexually assaulted, lays bare the misogynous injustices of the medical and legal systems.

32. "[No Ordinary Man](#)"



Photograph courtesy Oscilloscope

In the empathetic, self-questioning vision of the directors Aisling Chin-Yee and Chase Joynt, their film about the transgender musician Billy Tipton is also a wide-ranging analysis of the very implications of making the film.

33. "[Isabella](#)"

The Argentinian director Matías Piñeiro's theatre-centered drama fuses art and life, action and memory, in the story of a pregnant actress whose professional struggles and family conflicts intertwine with her work on a production of "Measure for Measure."

34. "[There Is No Evil](#)"

The director Mohammad Rasoulof's ferocious, bitter drama is composed of four episodes about the practice of capital punishment in Iran and its corrupting and terrorizing influence throughout Iranian society.

35. "[Wojnarowicz](#)"

The late artist David Wojnarowicz's vast archive of audio recordings and images provides the basis for Chris McKim's harrowing, thrilling, and tragic documentary portrait, which also presents his political and artistic activism on behalf of *ACT UP* and his resistance to the governmental persecution that he faced.

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