

Best Movies of 2022

Amid endless agonizing over the State of Cinema, the actual releases proved a bounty for film lovers, whether fans of the art house or the multiplex.

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The Most Fearless Visions

In 1985, The New York Times’s longtime film critic Vincent Canby wrote an inspired, admirably cranky essay about the future of cinema. The spark for his ruminations was “Room 666,” a documentary from Wim Wenders that had just opened in New York. Shot during the 1982 Cannes Film Festival, the movie consists of different directors alone in a hotel room where they respond to a question that Wenders had written on a piece of paper: “Is cinema a language that is about to get lost, an art that is about to die?”

The first director — and the other inspiration for Canby’s disquiet — was Jean-Luc Godard, who described Wenders’s project as an inquest on the future of films. For the next 10 minutes or so, Godard, smoking his familiar cigar, meditates on this vexing, evergreen question with his characteristic intelligence, opacity and epigrammatic wit. The news isn’t good. “The dream of Hollywood is to make one film,” Godard says, “and it’s television that makes it, but which is distributed everywhere” — which is as good a description of our NetflixDisneyMarvel world as I’ve read.

For Canby, Godard’s prediction of a one-movie world had already come to pass. Acclaimed films from the likes of Jonathan Demme were struggling at a box office dominated by wide releases like “Beverly Hills Cop.” Canby believed that there was plenty of blame to go around, pointing to risk-averse money types and a “sheeplike” public. He wrote that “our society is being increasingly homogenized, possibly through the pervasive power of television to plant the same ideas, the same fears and the same fads in more people, more quickly, than has ever before been possible in the history of the world.” Yikes!

I don’t think Canby and Godard were entirely right (feel free to discuss among yourselves), but after nearly four decades and innumerable interchangeable franchise sequels, it’s clear they weren’t entirely wrong. Yet, all these years later — and even as the industry struggles through yet another of its interminable crises — I am again heartened by all of the good and great movies that continue to be released. People often ask me if I’ve seen any good movies lately. I have, many of them, this and every year, but if I can’t tempt you with one of my favorites of 2022, I suggest you watch a film or two by Godard.

His soul left the world on Sept. 13; his movies will live forever.

1. 'EO' (Jerzy Skolimowski)

Soon after this indelible heartbreaker opens, a little circus donkey called EO — named for the sounds he makes — sets off on a strange, at times phantasmagoric, adventure. Along the way, he encounters other animals but, more consequentially, kind and cruel people whose treatment of him reflects the denatured world that we have made. Now 84, Skolimowski has made one of the rare movies that speak to life's most essential questions, and he's done so with the ecstatic vision and fearlessness of a cinematic genius who seems as if he's just getting started. (*In theaters.*)



Sideshow and Janus Films

2. 'Petite Maman' (Céline Sciamma)

Set largely in and around a house nestled in the woods, Sciamma's Lilliputian tour de force is a wittily modern fairy tale and model of elegant narrative economy. At its charming center is a young girl who together with another new acquaintance ventures forth on a modestly scaled yet expansive journey filled with delights and enchantment, one that finds our little heroine embarked on the greatest, most mysterious adventure of all: love. (*Streaming on Hulu.*)

3. 'Nope' (Jordan Peele)

For his latest, Peele has drawn on touchstones and assorted genres — it's a horror movie, a family

comedy, a revisionist western, a science-fiction freakout — to make something unequivocally his own. There’s a lot going on in “Nope,” but what lingers is how Peele seduces you with familiar film strategies for an elegiac meditation on people of color in an industry — in a country — that has turned their suffering into spectacle. It’s a history that Peele has already upended by becoming one of the most significant American directors working today. (*For rent on most major platforms.*)

4. ‘No Bears’ (Jafar Panahi)

For years, the veteran filmmaker Panahi — a longtime critic of the Iranian government — has been making movies under profoundly challenging circumstances, including house arrest. In “No Bears,” he plays himself (presumably with some artistic license), a filmmaker named Jafar Panahi who has moved temporarily to a small town as he remotely directs a movie in nearby Turkey. It’s a difficult process as well as an act of profound resistance. Here, in a story of place and displacement, Panahi soars above borders both imagined and terrifyingly real. (*Coming to theaters.*)



Jafar Panahi behind the wheel in “No Bears,” which he also directed. JP Production

5. ‘Kimi’ (Steven Soderbergh)

There isn’t a false or wrong note in this witty thriller about a woman facing multiple challenges, including her own (well-founded!) anxieties about the world. Set very much in the now — our heroine, a resourceful tech worker played by a terrific Zoë Kravitz, wears a mask when she goes outside — the movie touches on a number of intersecting subjects, including isolation and surveillance technology as a means of oppression. But it’s Soderbergh’s supremely assured filmmaking that has repeatedly brought me back to this playful delightf. (*Streaming on HBO Max.*)

6. ‘The Eternal Daughter’ (Joanna Hogg)

A stunning Tilda Swinton plays both a mother and her adult daughter in this beautifully controlled, affecting story about memory and grief. When it opens, the two are en route to a getaway at an elegant estate, a trip that soon turns beguilingly mysterious. With precision, gentle humor and some sly cinematic chicanery, Hogg and her brilliant actress turn something that looks ordinary into something quite extraordinary. (*In theaters.*)

7. 'Happening' (Audrey Diwan)

Based on the memoir by Annie Ernaux — who won the Nobel Prize in literature this year — “Happening” is one of several powerful recent movies that understand abortion as a fundamental right and an index of a culture’s attitude toward women. With intimacy and lucid resolve, Diwan makes it clear that abortion isn’t simply grist for hand-wringing and political argument; it is instead, a practical and necessary means by which her heroine can secure self-sovereignty, a future, a life. There is only one choice for her, and it is hers to make. (*For rent on most major platforms.*)

8. 'Decision to Leave' (Park Chan-wook)

One of the dizzying pleasures of this labyrinthine movie is that it’s a delirious riff on “Vertigo,” Alfred Hitchcock’s aching 1958 drama about a male detective’s obsession with a mystery woman. Once again, there is a man and a woman as well as love and betrayal. Yet as “Decision to Leave” unfolds and settles into its own distinctively kinked groove, the movie’s emotional focus progressively shifts from the obsessed lover to the object of his relentless, uncomprehending gaze, and Park’s clever homage turns into a poignant rejoinder. (*In theaters.*)

9. 'Expedition Content' (Ernst Karel and Veronika Kusumaryati)

This documentary made for the weirdest moviegoing experience I had this year, partly because for most of its 78 minutes all it shows is a black screen. Although the movie includes a few brief visuals, the relative absence of imagery forces your attention on the soundtrack, which consists of audio recorded during the making of “Dead Birds” (1964), an ethnographic classic about the Dani people of New Guinea. The result is a mind-expanding inquiry on anthropology — how it speaks and for whom — and on cinema itself. (*More information on the film is here.*)

10. 'All the Beauty and the Bloodshed' (Laura Poitras)

Poitras’s tough-minded, formally graceful portrait of the photographer Nan Goldin, her art and her activism, opens with Goldin huddled with some like-minded compatriots outside the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Before long, Goldin et al., are staging a die-in inside the institution, one of many such protests that she and others mounted against institutions that had taken money from members of the Sackler family whose company, Purdue Pharma, developed the opioid painkiller OxyContin. As Poitras goes on to show, Goldin’s protest is just the latest chapter for an artist who draws beauty from bloodshed. (*In theaters.*)

And make sure to watch: “Armageddon Time”; “The Cathedral”; “Corsage”; “Descendant”; “Dos Estaciones”; “Funny Pages”; “Futura”; “Great Freedom”; “Hold Your Fire”; “I Didn’t See You There”; “Intregalde”; “Lingui, The Sacred Bonds”; “Louis Armstrong’s Black & Blues”; “Nanny”; “Playground”; “Pleasure”; “Return to Seoul”; “Riotville, U.S.A.”; “Three Minutes: A Lengthening”;

“The Tsugua Diaries”; “Till”; “The Woman King”; and “The Worst Person in the World.”

A.O. SCOTT

The Best Questions Raised by Movies

Scrolling through my memories of 2022, I find a lot of interesting movies and a lot of anxious, contradictory opinionizing about The State of Cinema. Most of it had to do with one question: Would people venture back into theaters post-pandemic, or did the future belong to streaming? The boffo success of “Top Gun: Maverick” in May and “Black Panther: Wakanda Forever” in November didn’t quite settle the issue.

Neither does the proliferation of movies that evoke the wonder and glory of the movie past. Cine-nostalgia has become a genre in its own right. Last year’s tender elegies to celluloid, “Belfast” and “The Hand of God,” were followed this year by “The Fabelmans,” Steven Spielberg’s reflection on his own film-besotted youth; Sam Mendes’s “Empire of Light,” set in a fading seaside movie palace in early 1980s Britain; and “Babylon,” a fever dream of old Hollywood from Damien Chazelle.

Sentimentality and self-consciousness can be signs of decadence. Set out to memorialize the glories of an embattled art form, and you may end up contributing to its obituary. Not that I think the movies are dying, any more than they have been dying for the past 90 years or so, as they were fatally menaced by sound, television, corporate greed and audience philistinism. The movies are always turning into something else, even as they drag their history along with them. Old styles persist alongside new possibilities, and originality finds a way to assert itself amid the thunderous conformity of the franchises and the howling wilderness of the algorithms.

Like every other art, film advances through criticism, by which I don’t mean after-the-fact assessments by people like me, but the skeptical scrutiny that filmmakers bring to bear on the conditions and traditions of their own creative practice. The two best meta-movies of the year, Jordan Peele’s “Nope” and Jafar Panahi’s “No Bears,” accentuate the negative in their titles, and take tough, contrarian stands against gauzy clichés about the magic of movies and the power of imagination. They remind us that magic is always the product of hard, unglamorous work, and that power is never innocent.

If one thing unites the 10 disparate choices on my list — which ranges from an old-fashioned French costume drama to an Afrofuturist science-fiction musical, with a couple of documentaries in the mix — it is that critical spirit. They seem to question not only the aspects of human experience they represent, but also their own methods and assumptions. They are pictures very much in motion, thinking out loud in the darkness.

1. ‘Nope’ (Jordan Peele)

Some fans of Peele’s earlier films, “Get Out” and “Us,” may have been nonplused by this curious mash-up of western and science-fiction tropes. What was it saying? But the apparent absence of an overt allegorical or political message strikes me as an advance rather than a retreat. The movie is a genre

joyride and a philosophical puzzle. And it has plenty to say — about labor, family, race, grief and (yes) movies — in a visual language that feels at once familiar and radically new. The playful, heartfelt performances (from Daniel Kaluuya, Keke Palmer, Steven Yeun and Brandon Perea) achieve the same kind of improbable, thrilling balance. (*For rent on most major platforms.*)



Daniel Kaluuya in “Nope,” directed by Jordan Peele. Universal Pictures

2. ‘Neptune Frost’ (Saul Williams and Anisia Uzeyman)

Speaking of radical and new, this masterpiece of anarchist aesthetics faces down our current dystopia — one in which African miners are worked to death to dig the minerals that power the West’s technology; sexual and political violence are endemic; ecological catastrophe and genocide are in danger of being normalized — and summons up a utopian spectacle of music, silliness, sex and beauty. A hundred years from now, if the planet survives, this will be counted among the classics of our sorry time, taught in schools and quoted in speeches. (*Streaming on the Criterion Channel and Kanopy.*)

3. ‘Mr. Bachmann and His Class’ (Maria Speth)

When they aren’t hailed as heroes, schoolteachers are held up as scapegoats. The actual work they do is rarely examined with the kind of rigorous, sympathetic scrutiny that Speth brings to this portrait of a German educator approaching retirement. Her documentary is an argument for paying attention and a lesson in how to do it. (*Streaming on Mubi.*)

4. ‘Aftersun’ (Charlotte Wells)

A father (Paul Mescal) and his 11-year-old daughter, Sophie (Frankie Corio), take a vacation on the

Turkish coast, a trip filtered through Sophie's adult memory. This debut feature feels so matter-of-fact and unaffected that you may not notice the complexity and assurance of its craft. Its emotional power, though, is unmistakable. (*In theaters.*)

5. **'No Bears'** (Jafar Panahi)

Panahi, recently sentenced to prison in Iran (and previously banned from directing movies there), continues his relentless, humane investigation of his country and his vocation. Heartbroken but not quite despairing, he testifies to the power of cinema as a tool of resistance even as he reckons with its — and his own — limitations. (*Coming to theaters.*)

6. **'Tár'** (Todd Field)

Of course there is no such person as Lydia Tár, the problematic maestro of the Berlin Philharmonic. But also, thanks to Cate Blanchett's galvanic performance and Todd Field's ruthlessly precise direction, there is. (*In theaters.*)



Cate Blanchett as a conductor in a scene from "Tár." Focus Features

7. **'Lost Illusions'** (Xavier Giannoli)

A breathless tour of the sleazy, seductive modern media system, in which reputations and loyalties are bought and sold, hype trumps truth and gossip makes the world go round. It's early 19th-century Paris, but the period atmosphere only makes the present-day relevance more piquant. Benjamin Voisin plays Lucien, a young poet from the provinces who is all too happy to savor the corruptions of the capital. (*Streaming on Mubi.*)

8. **'Flux Gourmet'** (Peter Strickland)

A perverse, hilarious essay on the nature of art in the form of a fantastical tale about food, passion, flatulence and funny hats. (*For rent on most major platforms.*)

9. **'All the Beauty and the Bloodshed' (Laura Poitras)**

This documentary is a collaboration between two relentlessly honest artists: Poitras and the photographer Nan Goldin, whose candor about her own life is inspiring and sometimes terrifying. Goldin's work and activism during the AIDS and opioid epidemics are the focus, but if this is a biographical documentary it's also one that, like Goldin's pictures, redraws the boundary between life and art. (*In theaters.*)

10. **'Down With the King' (Diego Ongaro)**

While not explicitly a pandemic movie, this quiet character study has many of the hallmarks of Covid cinema: a small cast; outdoor locations; uncomplicated scenes and a minimalist approach to plot. A hip-hop star, played by the real-life rapper Freddie Gibbs, has gone into the woods, like Henry David Thoreau, to live deliberately. His malaise, beautifully conveyed in Gibbs's subtle, unaffected performance, is specific to his own professional and personal circumstance, but also captures what a lot of us have felt in the past few years. It's easy to feel we must reset the terms and conditions of our lives, but very hard to figure out how. (*For rent on most major platforms.*)

And 20 more ...

"A Chiara" (Jonas Carpignano); **"All That Breathes"** (Shaunak Sen); **"Armageddon Time"** (James Gray); **"Corsage"** (Marie Kreutzer); **"Descendant"** (Margaret Brown); **"Donbas"** (Sergei Loznitsa); **"Dos Estaciones"** (Juan Pablo González); **"Everything Everywhere All at Once"** (Daniels); **"The Fabelmans"** (Steven Spielberg); **"Fire on the Mountains"** (Ajitpal Singh); **"Futura"** (Pietro Marcello, Francesco Munzi and Alice Rohrwacher); **"Glass Onion: A Knives Out Mystery"** (Rian Johnson); **"Happening"** (Audrey Diwan); **"The Inspection"** (Elegance Bratton); **"Lingui, the Sacred Bonds"** (Mahamat-Saleh Haroun); **"Marx Can Wait"** (Marco Bellocchio); **"Pleasure"** (Ninja Thyberg); **"The Woman King"** (Gina Prince-Bythewood); **"Women Talking"** (Sarah Polley); **"X"** (Ti West).
