

TOP 10

BY MOLLY TEMPLETON

1. *Holy Motors*

Holy Motors's opening features the film's director, a movie theater and an audience that stares back at us. Surreal, mystifying, intimate and brazen, *Holy Motors* tucks concerns into peculiar vignettes; you have to tease out its meaning, or your version of its meaning, piece by piece. Is it a twisted story of a man's life, being different characters at different times? Is it just a showpiece for Denis Lavant, the film's impossible chameleon of a star? Is it mostly concerned with the wear and tear of art and performance? *Holy Motors* is a world unto itself; it reads as if the contents of director Leos Carax's head poured onto the screen. Nothing surprised me more, or felt more true and whole, than this disjointed, dense, oddly personal film.

2. *Zero Dark Thirty*

While I wasn't particularly intrigued by the notion of a movie about the hunt for Osama bin Laden, I cared a lot about what Kathryn Bigelow was going to do after *The Hurt Locker*. *Zero Dark Thirty* revisits similar territory to her Oscar-winning film, and not just in that it's about the Middle East: Jessica Chastain's Maya is as driven, intense and obsessed with her work as was Jeremy Renner's William James. William's necessity was right in front of him; Maya's is nebulous, variable. It's her intuition, her need to follow things through that propels this film, shrinking a manhunt into its tedious, ugly pieces, and finding no heroes among those who carry it out.

3. *Amour*

No one expected Michael Haneke to make a movie about love — not after *Caché* and *Funny Games*, or even the stark, darkly beautiful *The White Ribbon*. And *Amour* is about love, yes, but it's as disconcerting an experience as we've come to expect from the German director: unsentimental, difficult, solitary and true. You may watch this film with someone, but you're alone as you sit and consider how you relate to the characters. What choices would you make if your options seemed so few?

4. *Lawless*

The director of *The Proposition* with an unbelievably talented cast — Jessica Chastain, a surprising Shia LaBeouf, Tom Hardy, Jason Clarke and Gary Oldman — what, exactly, kept *Lawless* from the success it deserved? A beautifully acted period piece about Prohibition, family and the ever-blurry line between authority and morality, *Lawless* was marketed as if it were a late-summer diversion, a shoot-out with moonshine. But anyone who's seen a Hillcoat film knows to expect something very different. Hardy speaks in grunts; Chastain's character remains a mystery, but a vital one; the brutality is ugly and plain. This year was full of films that considered the violence in America's past and present; this movie more than deserves to be discussed in the same breath as the rest of them.

5. *Django Unchained*

Django is all over the map: funny, brutal, giddy, vicious, satisfying, horrifying. Director Quentin Tarantino draws specific lines around his subjects: violence against the mostly morose white men (loopy, scary Leonardo DiCaprio is the worst) is cartoonish, with spurting gouts of blood; violence against black bodies is brutal and believable, almost too much so. That's part of the point — you're supposed to feel queasy and foul, and hate these racists as much as Django (the excellent Jamie Foxx) does. But you're not off the hook for doing so. Django is the hero of this semi-Western, but not the embodiment of Tarantino's thesis: That's Dr. Schultz (Christoph Waltz), the dentist-turned-bounty hunter who says he hates slavery but has no qualms about turning it to his advantage. Watch Schultz as he and Django, on a quest to free Django's wife, near their destination. As Foxx's face tightens, as he reaches for his gun more often, Schultz begins to quail. He's set this train in motion, but fear creeps in as he realizes that helping Django means giving up some of his power. Roxane Gay said it best: "*Django Unchained* isn't about a black man reclaiming his freedom. It's about a white man working through his own racial demons and white guilt."

6. *Safety Not Guaranteed*

I would like every smart, thoughtful, imperfect romantic comedy to star Aubrey Plaza — so dry, so stoically uncertain — and Mark Duplass, who had one hell of a year. Director Colin Trevorrow and writer Derek Connolly let you wonder about Kenneth (Duplass), a grocery store clerk who puts an ad in the paper looking for a time-traveling companion. Is he unhinged? Does he think he's serious? Plaza, as the magazine intern who tags along with her self-obsessed boss to investigate, takes Kenneth seriously and doesn't; she's always right up close and simultaneously a step back, analyzing and doubting as she gets involved. Next to all the year's big-ticket issue films, *Safety* is comfortable, personal and smart.