

# Arts & ENTERTAINMENT

## 10 Best

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it), and is the best work of director Alexander Payne, who marshals a cast of underrated actors and ordinary folks to impart a story that feels soulful and true. One of the Academy's most glaring omissions is Mark Orton's gorgeous original score, which embodies the film's spirit and also stands beautifully on its own. You can read my full length review at [portlandobserver.com/news/2013/dec/04/soulful-journey](http://portlandobserver.com/news/2013/dec/04/soulful-journey).

**2. *12 Years a Slave*** is by far the most important film on my list and is a master class in how film can enrich and deepen understanding of a neglected subject. Director Steve McQueen (as deserving of a directing Oscar as is Alexander Payne) has the temerity and steady hand to sustain the attention necessary to absorb the magnitude of suffering and the mundaneness that characterized American slavery.

I can make just as strong a case for Chiwetel Ejiofor to win for best actor as Bruce Dern, though for very different reasons; it is hard to

overestimate the feat he carried off in embodying the agony of this character, and Lupita Nyong deserves an Oscar for the same reason.

This remarkable film is worth viewers' investment of time and presence; to watch it is to participate in a collective deepening of consciousness that we desperately need in order to make sense of our present circumstances. My full review is available at [portlandobserver.com/news/2013/nov/06/12-years-slave](http://portlandobserver.com/news/2013/nov/06/12-years-slave).

**3. *American Hustle*** is the most entertaining film on my list. Here, David O. Russell finally pulls off the right combination of chaos and playfulness and a story that strikes notes that feel true even when the fun wears off. It is a positively rollicking blend of comedy, outrageous characters and fashions, an entertaining sort-of-true crime story, and some very astute observations about what motivates human behavior and about American society. It's one of the few times a film has attained nominations in all the major acting categories and each one is deserved.

Christian Bale is particularly a marvel, and I would give Amy Adams the award for best actress of those who were nominated (though Emma

Thompson deserved to win and wasn't nominated). My full review is at [portlandobserver.com/news/2013/dec/31/exactly-right](http://portlandobserver.com/news/2013/dec/31/exactly-right).

**4. *Her***, the last of my four best pictures, has the best and most original screenplay. Writer-director Spike Jonze takes a science fiction premise that was full of pitfalls (a man falling in love with his operating system), and creates a believable universe that is emotionally challenging and philosophically engaging.

The film offers some perceptive suggestions about where our relationship with technology might well be headed -- but what I loved most was its insights about the nature of intimacy itself, about how and why people connect and what causes relationships to blossom and fade.

I expect that many will find, as I did, that this lovely and heartfelt film manages to hold a mirror up to longings and inner struggles that we mostly keep to ourselves. You can read my full review at [portlandobserver.com/news/2014/jan/29/connecting-her](http://portlandobserver.com/news/2014/jan/29/connecting-her).

**5. *Inside Llewyn Davis*** got snubbed by the Academy, but deserved nominations for Best Picture and Best Director and includes a better Original Song than any of the nominees ("Fare Thee Well"). The Coen brothers' meditation on the folk music scene of Greenwich Village in 1961 is full of glorious music and wistful observations about the thin line between artistic success and artistic failure. Oscar Isaac also deserves more credit than he has received for his portrayal of a frequently unlikable musician whose grim singleness of purpose can make him insufferable but also appears to be essential in a successful artist.

Leave it to the Coens to build a film around a person who is both maddeningly flawed and gloriously gifted, sometimes in the same moment. With no trace of sentiment, they invite you to wonder about all the talent that has gone uncelebrated, and about what we choose to celebrate. See my full review at [portlandobserver.com/news/2013/dec/24/beautifully-crafted-movie](http://portlandobserver.com/news/2013/dec/24/beautifully-crafted-movie).

**6. *Hannah Arendt*** offers the exceedingly rare opportunity to explore the life and visionary thinking of a middle-aged woman with the courage to rigorously examine hard questions and to express and then hold onto her perspective on those questions, even in the face of withering criticism. Its feminist director, Margarethe Von Trotta, succeeds in the difficult task of depicting thinking as action, and Barbara Sukowa as Arendt conveys the sense of a life of intention and a mind constantly in deliberate motion. Arendt's revolutionary thinking



PHOTO COURTESY FOX/SEARCHLIGHT  
Chiwetel Ejiofor stars as Solomon Northup in the film '12 Years a Slave,' one of the top films of 2013.

about the problem of evil remains controversial, but permanently altered public discourse. Read my full review at [portlandobserver.com/news/2013/dec/18/courageous-discourse](http://portlandobserver.com/news/2013/dec/18/courageous-discourse).

**7. *Alien Boy*** has not captured a national audience, but certainly deserves one. This film by Portland documentarian Brian Lindstrom was the best film I saw at last year's Portland International Film Festival. It tells the very complex story of James Chasse, a gentle man with schizophrenia who was tackled by three police officers one day in the Pearl District, and suffered terrible injuries, including 17 broken ribs and a punctured lung, and then died in police custody.

Lindstrom wisely begins by helping you understand Chasse as a person before turning to the events that led to his death, which the film unravels with patience and care. As someone who has a front seat to a lot of maneuvering and politics, I know how difficult it can be to tell a story like this and capture its true complexity, so I was blown away by how successfully the filmmakers accomplished that here, to devastating effect. Lindstrom and his masterful editor maintain such a steady touch that all the emotion they stir up feels completely genuine, and not the least bit manipulated.

**8. *Museum Hours*** is a meditation on a friendship between a man and a woman in late middle age who bond over art, heavy metal music, loss, and wandering the streets of Vienna.

The film depicts their walks, and their conversations, moving back and forth between the streets and the paintings inside the Kunsthistorisches Museum. The camera lingers over a stark land-

scape, or skin illuminated by light, and then moves to a street or a weathered face outside, as if to suggest that one of the masters well might choose this for his subject.

Like a Bruegel painting, the film doesn't tell you where to look or what to think in the way most movies do. If you let it, it will usher you into a sort of mindfulness, coaxing you to be present with the beauty, and the dinginess, and the cold, to listen to the quiet of the museum, the sounds of the street, the loveliness of the woman singing. It's a brilliant, poetic film that works as a kind of guided meditation. You can read my full review at [portlandobserver.com/news/2013/sep/17/lesson-mindfulness](http://portlandobserver.com/news/2013/sep/17/lesson-mindfulness).

**9. *Let the Fire Burn*** is the second devastating documentary on my Top 10 list. Its director, Jason Osder, spent a decade assembling footage that tells the story of a longstanding feud between the city of Philadelphia and a radical separatist group of mostly African Americans called MOVE, which culminated in a deadly stand-off in 1985.

When the group's members defied attempts to evict them from their home, police tear-gassed the group, fired into a house full of women and children, and then dropped a bomb. The resulting fire left 61 mostly African-American working families homeless and 11 people dead, including five children.

Osder's careful compilation of this history -- so recent and yet already so neglected -- is an important lens on how drastically government power can assume the characteristics it ascribes to its errant citizens. My full review is available at [portlandobserver.com/news/2013/nov/14/police-power-run-amuck](http://portlandobserver.com/news/2013/nov/14/police-power-run-amuck).

**10. *Barfi***, strangely, never had a theatrical release in Portland, though I saw it at PIFF last year and it is available on DVD and also streaming on Netflix. The film's complicated plot involves a mischievous deaf-mute man and his relationships with two women who come to love him. Though he is silent, his physical comedy and buoyant spirit are positively elegant.

I expect to have the occasion to write a longer review soon, but for now I'll just say that what begins as a charming romantic screwball comedy takes a turn along the way and ends up having quite an impact. Every frame dazzles.

Darleen Ortega is a judge on the Oregon Court of Appeals and the first woman of color to serve in that capacity. Her movie review column *Opinionated Judge* appears regularly in *The Portland Observer*. You can find her movie blog at [opinionatedjudge.blogspot.com](http://opinionatedjudge.blogspot.com).

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