

# Far Better Films than the Oscar Nominated

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and Winston Duke and especially Lupita Nyong'o gave two (actually four) of the best lead performances of the year, unrivaled by the vast majority of the actual nominees. (Typical that Nyong'o was deemed worthy of recognition only for playing a brutalized enslaved person in "12 Years a Slave," for which she justly received the award for Best Supporting Actress, but was shut out for her complex lead performances here, as a privileged woman and her psychic shadow.) This film exploring our relationship to the "other" has more to say and deserves our attention more than any of the nominated films by a long shot.

3. "Seahorse" isn't yet available for online viewing in the U.S., but this film impacted me so profoundly when I saw it at QDoc in Portland last May that I can't let that stop me from putting it on my list. It takes viewers on the journey through pregnancy of a trans man, Freddie McConnell, and opens minds and hearts to the empathy and questions we had not thought to entertain regarding so many things about trans experience and parenting itself.

4. "The Nightingale" is not for everyone, which I say with real sorrow; the film depicts sexual and physical violence that will be

too much for some viewers, just as it was for those who lived it. But director Jennifer Kent tells this brutal story of Australian colonization carefully and responsibly, reportedly in collaboration with Tasmanian aboriginal elders who affirm the importance of depicting this aspect of history honestly. And there is more truth on display than most filmmakers even attempt to depict. Set in 1825 in what is now Tasmania, the film tells the story of Clare, a young Irish convict woman (brilliantly played by Aisling Franciosi) living under brutal circumstances of constant sexual violence. In demand among British soldiers for her singing voice (she is the nightingale of the title), she suffers a series of losses so unthinkable that she pursues her chief abuser, a heartless British officer, seeking revenge. She finds an unexpected ally in Billy (a miraculous Baykali Ganambarr in his first film role); though at first she, like all the whites, treats Billy as subhuman, over the course of their journey she comes to recognize and depend on his humanity and power. He tells her that his actual name, Mangana, means blackbird, and the two brutalized birds use their voices in profound ways in their joined journey. This film is painful to watch as it should be, and sparked for me important reflections about how violence and oppression dehumanizes

everyone involved.

5. "Fast Color" is yet another overlooked film directed by a woman (that's now three in a row) and is full of intriguing insights about the feared power of women at the margins. I'm still not sure if writer-director Julia Hart--or even stars Gugu Mbatha-Raw and Lorraine Toussaint--know what they had here; whether or not they did, they followed this story of black women's power to where its truth took them, and packed this mysterious film with wisdom.

6. "Peterloo" is the work of the great British director Mike Leigh, known for his exceedingly truthful improvisation-based films, such as "Secrets and Lies" and "Happy-Go-Lucky"). This film has garnered less awards notice than many of his other films, but is one of his very best, focusing on a horrible and little-understood historical event in 1819, in which the British army turned on a group of 60,000 citizens protesting for parliamentary reform in Manchester, killing as many as 15 and wounding about 700 people. With great care and profound insight, Leigh captures how the powerful can convince themselves and absolutely believe that they are endangered by the most vulnerable. Given the attention offered here to such a significant and neglected event in British history which



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Lupita Nyong'o stars in Jordan Peele's thriller "Us."

has so much to teach us about how power works, it doesn't feel at all neutral to me that this film is so under-recognized. It impacted me more than most films I saw this year, and is well worth checking out on Amazon Prime.

7. "The Two Popes" is one of only two films on my list to receive any Oscar nominations, though I'm not predicting it will win. Hollywood doesn't take to films that take faith seriously, and like "A Hidden Life," this film grapples respectfully with questions of faith, doubt, and integrity. Its examination of the life of the current pope (the first from Latin America) and his predecessor, who is his opposite in most ways, is surprisingly compelling and offers much to ponder in terms of how people of integrity can respectfully disagree and find common ground.

8. "Marriage Story" also deserves the acclaim it has garnered, including its Oscar nominations for Best Picture, Best Original Screenplay, and for three of its cast members. Writer-director Noah Baumbach has mined the territory of troubled relationships before, but never with this level of sensitivity and humanity and real insight about how inattention and neglect can turn genuine love into what looks a lot like hate, and how the legal process of marital dissolution and the lawyers themselves so often make everything so much worse. It's a familiar story told particularly well and with great care; I believed and cared about every word of this one.

9. "Amateurs" was the best film I saw at the Portland International Film Festival and, fortunately, is available to watch online. Once again, it's a film directed by a woman and, though made in Sweden, highlights the perspectives of people of color, which I have to believe partly accounts for its confinement to the festival circuit. It's a funny and uncommonly wise story of two high school girls, daughters of immigrants, who answer the city council's call for a film that will attract a big-box store to their provincial community.

10 and 11. "Afterlife" and "Vai" give me a final reason for gratitude to the film festival circuit, though I'm listing them together because neither is yet available for online viewing or on DVD in the U.S. They were the two best films I saw at the Seattle International Film Festival and are so much better than everything else I saw this year that I had to mention them in hopes you can find them soon. "Afterlife" is a beautiful story of a Dutch teenager finding a reason to live after the complicated death of her African-born mother, and "Vai" is a gorgeous compilation of connected stories by Pacific Islander women.

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