

Roger Ebert

THE BEST FILMS OF THE DECADE

“Synecdoche, New York” is the best film of the decade. It intends no less than to evoke the strategies we use to live our lives. After beginning my first viewing of it in confusion, I began to glimpse its purpose and by the end was eager to see it again, then once again, and I am not finished. Charlie Kaufman understands how I live my life, and I suppose his own, and I suspect most of us. Faced with the bewildering demands of time, space, emotion, morality, lust, greed, hope, dreams, dreads and faiths, we build compartments in our minds. It is a way of seeming sane.

The workings of the mind are a concern in all his screenplays, but in “Synecdoche” (2008), his first film as a director, he makes it his subject, and what huge ambition that demonstrates. He’s like a novelist who wants to get it all in the first book in case he never publishes another. Those who felt the film was disorganized or incoherent would benefit from seeing it again. It isn’t about a narrative, although it pretends to be. It’s about a METHOD, the method by which we organize our lives and define our realities.

Very few people live their lives on one stage, in one persona, wearing one costume. We play different characters. We know this and accept it. In childhood we begin as always the same person, but quickly we develop strategies for our families, our friends, our schools. In adolescence these strategies are not well controlled. Sexually, teenagers behave one way toward some dates and a different way toward others. We find those whose personas match one of our own, and that defines how we interact with that person. If you are not an aggressor and are sober, there are girls (or boys) you do it with and others you don’t, and you don’t desire those people to discover what goes on away from them.

But already “Synecdoche” has me thinking in terms of the film’s insight. That is its power. Let me stand back and consider it as a movie. It’s about a theater director named Caden Cotard (Philip Seymour Hoffman), who begins with a successful regional production, is given a MacArthur genius grant, and moves with a troupe of actors into a New York warehouse. Here they develop a play that grows and grows, and he devises a set representing their various rooms and lives.

The film begins as apparently realistic, but it shades off into -- fantasy? chaos? complexity?

In those earlier scenes, he was married to Adele (Catherine Keener). She leaves, and he marries Claire (Michelle Williams), who to some degree is intended to literally replace the first wife, as many second spouses are. Why do some people marry those who resemble their exes? They’re casting for the same role. Caden has hired an actor named Sammy Barnathan (Tom

Noonan) to star in the play, as a character somewhat like himself. Many writers and directors create fiction from themselves, and are often advised to.

What happens in the film isn’t supposed to happen in life. The membrane between fact and fiction becomes permeable, and the separate lives intermingle. Caden hardly seems to know whose life he’s living; his characters develop minds of their own. How many authors have you heard say their dialogue

involves “just writing down what the characters would say”?

Living within different personas is something many people do. How can a governor think to have a mistress in Argentina? An investment counselor think to steal all the money he’s entrusted with? A famous athlete be revealed as a sybarite? A family man be discovered to have two families? I suspect such people, and to a smaller degree many of us, find no more difficulty in occupying those different scenarios that we might in eating meat some days and on others calling ourselves vegetarian.

“Synecdoche” is accomplished in all the technical areas, including its astonishing set. The acting requires great talent to create characters who are always in their own reality, however much it shifts. Philip Seymour Hoffman’s character experiences a deterioration of body, as we all do, finds it more difficult to see outside himself, as we all do, and becomes less sure of who “himself” is, as sooner or later we all do.

Kaufman has made the most perceptive film I can recall about how we live in the world. This is his debut as a director, but his most important contribution is the screenplay. Make no mistake that he sweated blood over this screenplay. Somebody had to know what was happening on all those levels, and that had to be the writer. Of course he directed it. Who else could have comprehended it?



The other top films of the decade follow, with a nod to the fact that the decade still has one year to go. If it doesn't, you were 2 on your first birthday.

2. "The Hurt Locker" (2009). A film that concerns not the war but the warrior. It's set in Iraq, and by nature we identify with the hero, James (Jeremy Renner). But it focuses not on the enemy but on the bomb disposal expert himself, who risks his life hundreds of times when the slightest mistake would mean maiming or death. "War is a drug," the opening titles tell us. The man's fellow soldiers are angry with him for the chances he takes. He considers bomb disposal a battle of the wits between himself and the designer. Yes, but the designer is not there if a bomb explodes. He is. Yet he volunteers.

Apart from this psychological puzzle, Kathryn Bigelow's film has a masterful command of editing, tempo, character and photography. Using no stunts and CGI, she creates a convincing portrayal of the conditions a man like James faces. She builds with classical tools. She evokes suspense, dread, identification. She asks if a man like James REQUIRES such a fearsome job. The film is a triumph of theme and execution, and very nearly flawless.

3. "Monster" (2004). An Egyptian film critic told me in disbelief that this film made him sympathize with a serial killer. I knew what he meant. We are enjoined to love not the sin but the sinner. Patty Jenkins' film is based on the life of Aileen Wuornos, a damaged woman who committed seven murders. It doesn't excuse the murders. It asks that we witness the woman's final desperate attempt to be a better person than her fate intended.

Charlize Theron's performance in the role is one of the greatest performances in the history of the cinema. She transforms herself into a character with an uncanny resemblance to the real Aileen Wuornos -- but mere impersonation isn't as difficult as EMBODYING another person. Aileen, abused all of her life, knows she is doing evil but is driven to it by her deep need to provide for another person, her lover Selby (Christina Ricci), as she was never provided for herself. This doesn't make murder right in her mind, but she believes it's necessary. We disagree. But we're asked to empathize with her ruined soul, and because of Theron and Jenkins, we find that possible.

4. "Juno" (2007). One of a kind, a film that delighted me from beginning to end, never stepping wrong with its saucy young heroine who faces an unexpected pregnancy with forthright boldness. To be sure, life doesn't always provide parents and an adoptive mother for the baby as comforting as Juno's. But Jason Reitman's second feature doesn't set out to be realistic; it's a fable about how the sad realities of teen pregnancy might be transformed in a good-hearted world. Ellen Page creates a character to be long cherished, a smart, articulate 16-year-old who keeps a brave front and yet deeply feels what she's going through.

Juno's dialogue is so nimble and funny that some said no real person thinks that fast and talks like that. Real people

may not. Juno does. The original screenplay by Diablo Cody is pitch-perfect comedy writing, assuming the audience is as intelligent as Juno. Have you noticed how many stupid people are presented as normal, especially in mainstream comedies? I was surprised how much I laughed during "Juno," and then surprised how much I cared, especially during a luminous scene when the woman who will adopt her baby (Jennifer Garner) solemnly places her hand on Juno's pregnant belly and the two exchange a look so beautiful that if I'd known it was coming I don't know if I could have looked.

5. "Me and You and Everyone We Know" (2005). Another extraordinary film centered on a woman. Is it possible that women in the movies more readily embody emotion, and men tend more toward external action? But women as wildly different as Aileen Wuornos, Juno and Miranda July's Christine are tuned to inner channels that drive them with feeling, not plots. This first feature shows a certainty about the tone it wants to strike, which is of fragile magic. We don't learn a lot about Christine -- more, actually, about Richard (John Hawkes), the awkward shoe salesman she likes -- but the story's not about her life; it's about how, for her, love requires someone who speaks her rare emotional language, a language of whimsy and daring, of playful mind games and bold challenges.

Imagine Christine and Richard as they walk down the street. Still strangers, she suggests that the block they are walking down is their lives. And now, she says, they're halfway down the street and halfway through their lives. Before long they will be at the end. It's impossible to suggest how poetic this scene is; when it's over, you think, that was a perfect scene, and no other scene can ever be like it. And we are all on the sidewalk. July's film fits no genre, fulfills no expectations, creates its own rules, and seeks only to share a strange and lovable mind with us.

6. "Chop Shop" (2008). Here is the third world, thriving under the flight path to LaGuardia. Ale (Alejandro Polanco), a 12-year-old boy, works for the owner of an auto repair shop in an area few New Yorkers know about: Willets Point, square blocks of auto and tire shops that hustle for business. He's an orphan, dreaming of being reunited with his 16-year-old sister. He steals a little, cons a little, sells pirated DVDs and mostly works hard. He lives in a room knocked together in the crawl space of the shop. He's not educated, but is bright, resourceful and happy.

Poised on the edge of adolescence, he senses changes coming. As his sister (Isamar Gonzales) moves in with him, he proudly tries to support her -- to be the man in the family he lost. Ramin Bahrani observed Willets Point for a year and worked with two non-actors to achieve remarkably fluent and convincing performances. His film is a vibrant modern equivalent of the Italian Neorealist classics like "Shoeshine." It stays resolutely within its story, never making the mistake of drawing conclusions. It's riveting, entertaining, unforgettable, with a meticulous visual strategy. Bahrani, an Iranian-American born in Winston-Salem, N.C., has made three films (including

“Man Push Cart” and “Goodbye Solo”), and all three have made my Best 10 lists. In my opinion, he’s the new director of the decade.

7. **“The Son” (2002).** In a career filled with great films, “Le Fils” by Jean-Pierre and Luc Dardenne is stunning. It focuses intensely on two characters: Olivier (Olivier Gourmet), a Belgian carpenter, and Francis (Morgan Marinho), a young apprentice that a social worker wants to place with him. Olivier refuses. The moment they leave, Olivier scurries after them like a feral animal, spies on them through a door opening and leaps onto a metal cabinet to look through a high window. Then he says he will take the boy.

That’s all I choose to say. What connects them is revealed so carefully and deliberately that any hint would diminish the experience. Once again, as with all the films on this list, writing and acting are crucial. Yes, they’re well directed, but you know, there are a lot of fine directors. There’s a scene here where Francis and Olivier are working in a lumber warehouse, shifting and loading heavy planks. We know enough by then to invest the scene with meaning. The Dardennes achieve their effect primarily through sound: the raw, harsh sound of one plank upon another. I can think of many ways to film such a scene, none better.

8. **“25th Hour” (2003).** A film about the last 24 hours of freedom for Monty Brogan (Edward Norton), a convicted drug dealer. He lives in a heightened state. He focuses on the remaining important things: his lover, his father, his best friends. Spike Lee, working with David Benioff’s adaptation of his own novel, gives adequate screen time to all the people in Monty’s life; their lives will continue but, his friends agree, they will never see Monty again. Not the Monty they know.

The film avoids crime-movie cliches. It’s about the time remaining. Lee reflects Monty’s acute awareness of this with scenes of startling inventiveness, one an angry monolog delivered to a mirror, another a shared fantasy as his father (Brian Cox) drives him to prison. Too many movies now require their expensive stars to be onscreen in almost every frame. “25th Hour” is enriched by supporting performances, notably by Philip Seymour Hoffman as a pudgy English teacher, not accustomed to drinking, who makes a devastating mistake involving appearance and reality. Spike Lee writes eloquently with his camera in strategies that are anything but conventional.

9. **“Almost Famous” (2000).** The story of a 15-year-old kid (Patrick Fugit), smart and terrifyingly earnest, who through luck and pluck gets assigned by Rolling Stone magazine to do a profile of a rising rock band. The magazine has no idea he’s 15.

Clutching his pencil and his notebook like talismans, phoning a veteran critic for advice, he plunges into the experience that will make and shape him. It’s as if Huckleberry Finn came back to life in the 1970s, and instead of taking a raft down the Mississippi, got on the bus with the band. I was hugging myself as I watched it: This is my story. Well, except in the details.

Cameron Crowe, the writer-director, was inspired by his own experiences, here transformed by an ability to step outside the first person and clearly see the hero’s mother (Frances McDormand), a band groupie (Kate Hudson), the lead singer (Jason Lee) and the veteran journalist (Philip Seymour Hoffman, again). This is a coming-of-age story with the feel of plausible experience, because when you’re 15 even the most implausible things seem likely if they’re happening to you.

10. **“My Winnipeg” (2008).** If I said “Almost Famous” was my life, would you believe “My Winnipeg” tells the history of my hometown? All except for the details -- which, for that matter, don’t particularly pertain to Winnipeg, either. Guy Maddin’s films are like silent movies dreaming they can speak. No frame of his work could be mistaken for anyone else’s. He combines documentary, lurid melodrama, newsreels, feverish fantasies and tortured typography into a form that appears to contain urgent information. His sound tracks are sometimes clear narration, sometimes soap opera, sometimes snatches that seem heard over a radio from long ago and far away. The effect is hypnotic.

The city fathers of Winnipeg asked Maddin, their famous local filmmaker, to direct a documentary on their city. God knows what they thought of it. Now they can reassure the taxpayers it’s one of the best films of the decade. There are perhaps sights, sounds and even facts in “My Winnipeg” that are accurate, but how can you be sure when some of the most sensible elements are false and the most incredible are true? This is the story of everyone’s hometown; we piece it together in childhood and in some sense continue to regard it as true even when it isn’t. His beliefs about secret parallel taxi companies operating along invisible alleys are as reasonable as my own beliefs about the Bone Yard in Urbana-Champaign -- which is, after all, only a drainage ditch, but you can’t tell me that.

Those 10, and these 10, alphabetically, because all 20 titles are magnificent:

“Adaptation,” “The Bad Lieutenant,” “City of God,” “Crash,” “Kill Bill Vols. 1 and 2,” “Minority Report,” “No Country for Old Men,” “Pan’s Labyrinth,” “Silent Light,” “Waking Life.”

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