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The top 18 films of 2011

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NCR Today

According to Box Office Mojo, 2011's 592 films made somewhere between \$381 million (with "Harry Potter and Deathly Hallows Part Two") and \$325 (with "Redneck Carnage," which I did not see) at the box office.

I saw 119 films in 2011 -- about two movies a week. I was away for four weeks in September and October, so I missed "50/50," about a young man diagnosed with cancer, and "We Need to Talk about Kevin." I did not see "Albert Nobbs" yet, but will let you know when I do. These are films buzzing in the Oscar zone.

Here is my list of 14 films that I found most interesting in 2011. Are they the best? I don't know. But they kept my attention, told a worthy story in an artistic or clever way, shed light on the human condition, showed respect for human dignity though sometimes in a dark way, asked questions and allowed the audience to discover or make meaning without imposing or preaching. And some were wonderfully entertaining.

Click on the film's title for my longer reviews.

Hugo

Martin Scorsese's homage to imagination, story-telling, cinema, art and family. I loved this movie about an orphan who must solve a mystery, and in so doing, finds so much more. Based on an innovative, award-winning novel by Brian Selzer.

The Help

A young college graduate in Mississippi in the 1960s interviews the "help," African-American women who work for white families, in view of a book. When it is published, racial prejudices generations deep

are revealed. Based on a best-selling book by Kathryn Stockett.

Super 8

This sci-fi thriller by J.J. Abrams and produced by Steven Spielberg (and others) is a terrific movie about lonely children who want to make a movie but end up discovering an alien. The human and Christian themes are myriad, from respect for differences to reconciliation in families. Elle Fanning, Dakota's young sister, deserves an Oscar nomination, and she was only 11 when this film was made.

Hanna

In this political thriller, a young girl is raised by her father in the wilderness to be an assassin, specifically to kill her own mother. In this stylish, choreographed, cold film, the performance of Saoirse Ronan ("Atonement," "The Lovely Bones," "The Way Back") is stellar once again.

Midnight in Paris

A writer with writer's block visits Paris with his fiancée and her parents, and while wandering the streets at night for inspiration, enters a time warp to spend time with expats of what Hemingway called "The Lost Generation," writers and artists living in Paris in the early 1900s. What an enchanting way to meet people who continue to influence our culture today.

The Artist

In 1927, an actor refuses to make a "talkie," a movie with sound. A young actress he befriended and advised watches over him as his career and marriage crash and burn. This is one of the best films of the year for originality, creativity, enjoyment -- and the dog.

The Way

Director/writer Emilio Estevez teams up with his dad, Martin Sheen, to make a film about a man, Tom, on pilgrimage to the Shrine of St. James of Compostella in Spain. No one would choose the three companions who join up with Tom, like characters out of "The Wizard of Oz," but this is a story about journey, change, grace and the people God puts in our path.

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Win Win

Paul Giamatti is Mike, a failing lawyer and high school wrestling coach who lies to his wife about his work and lies again to become the guardian of Leo, an older man. Mike only does this for the income. But Leo's grandson, a high school wrestler, shows up and Mike and his family take him in. Mike, his family and community are transformed. This film is one of the good ones.

Another Earth

One of the best, most haunting films of the year. A young student who loves astronomy is distracted when gazing at a replica of the Earth that has appeared in the skies. A tragic accident ensues. Perennial questions of guilt, regret, restitution, and "What if there was a chance to do it over?" propel the film with the possibility of imagination.

Attack the Block

I wish more people has seen this small sci-fi film about a gang of poor kids from a housing project in London who go on the attack and discover other-worldly aliens are attacking them. Moses, the leader of the pack, leads his people to safety while asking questions about who the real aliens are and how we treat others different from ourselves. The special effects are low-grade, but the film was interesting, and I think

Moses, played by John Boyega, could be the next Denzel Washington.

The Hedgehog

This French film with English subtitles is based on the novel "The Elegance of the Hedgehog," by Muriel Barbery. It's about a quiet middle-aged woman, Renee, the doorkeeper of an apartment building in Paris. A lonely young girl with a video camera and a retired Japanese businessman draw out Renee, revealing secrets and great kindnesses.

Miral

A stirring film about the women of Palestine told through the story of Hind Husseini, who cared for Palestinian orphans beginning in 1948. Directed by artist Julian Schnable, this drama about the delicate flower of Palestine that few seem to notice growing by the sides of the road is as moving as it is compelling.

The First Grader

Winner of a Satellite Award for Education from the International Press Association in Hollywood, this is the true story of an 80-year-old Kenyan man who takes up the offer of the government that everyone has a right to learn to read and write. A celebration of education, determination and hope.

Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close

This inner journey of a young boy who loses his dad in the Twin Towers on 9/11 is captivating and sad and quirky and so moving. Based on the novel by Jonathan Safran Foer, Oskar, who, as he tells us, may have a condition on the Asperger's spectrum, loses himself in a nonstop search for the owner of a key he finds in his father's belongings, and to whatever that key unlocks. For anyone who loves New York City or has a close connection to the events of Sept. 11, this story is a journey through a mystery we may never understand. To me, it lifted some of the sorrow.

Documentaries

The Last Mountain

This is probably the most important film I have seen this year. It exposes the harm perpetrated by Big Coal in the United States. As Bobby Kennedy Jr. says in the film: "The problem is where you see large scale destruction of the environment of this magnitude you also see the subversion of democracy and that is the real victory big coal has accomplished in West Virginia."

Sholem Aleichem: Laughing in the Darkness

This is an noteworthy documentary about Solomon Naumovich Rabinovic, the master of Yiddish literature, who gave the world Tevye in stories that became "The Fiddler on the Roof." This film opened a whole new world for me, and it might for you.

Into the Abyss

Director Werner Herzog's gripping documentary about the death penalty is must-see viewing for all who believe in life and anyone who thinks the death penalty is a good idea.

Senna

I reviewed this for *NCR* last summer. It is the compelling story of the Formula 1 racing champion, a man for whom racing was everything, including a means of being with God.

Buck

This true story of the horse whisperer on whom Nicholas Evans based the character of his best-selling

novel is much more than about training horses -- it's about people. Buck Brannaman and his brother grew up in an abusive home, especially after the death of their mother, until they were placed with a wonderful foster family. Buck turned all his experiences into working with horses. This is a film for parents, teachers, therapists and all those in leadership positions. It can make us better people.

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