The best movies of 2020



We didn’t go to the movies much this year, but the movies still came to us. While the convenience of home viewing can’t match the experience of watching a spectacle in the dark with others, the other joy of movies — talking about them — is easier than ever, thanks to our connected world. And 2020’s pandemic sidelined a lot of big blockbusters, leaving smaller, more interesting movies to take center stage. As silver linings go, this one isn’t that bad.

Here, in no particular order, are ten incredible movies from a year where movies still rallied to offer experiences that were provocative, compelling, and fun.

The Assistant

One of the best films made in response to the crimes of Harvey Weinstein and the subsequent #MeToo movement, *The Assistant* follows an assistant (Julia Garner) who works at an unnamed movie production company in New York City for one long, miserable day. Looming over everything is the powerful, predatory boss — never shown or heard except over the phone — whom everyone accommodates and protects. *The Assistant* is

essential, difficult filmmaking, and a quiet, unblinking condemnation of the ways abuse is allowed to persist.

Bill & Ted Face the Music

The biggest surprise of the year was a third *Bill & Ted* movie, and it was a joyous one in a year short on things to feel good about. Ironically, it starts with disappointment: Bill and Ted (Alex Winter and Keanu Reeves) have somehow not yet written the song that will unite the world, the one promised by *Bill & Ted's Excellent Adventure*. They're out of time now, and if they don't deliver, the world's going to end.

So they do what they always do: travel through time and space to try to find an easy way out, only to learn that there is so much love and joy to be found if you just commit to doing things the hard way, with the people you love by your side.

Lovers Rock

The second film in Steve McQueen's *Small Axe* collection now streaming on Amazon is perhaps its best — and also its smallest. Mostly set at a single party, *Lovers Rock* opens a window into a whole universe via a single extended dance scene, a moment of cinematic bliss unlike any other this year. Consider this a recommendation for all five *Small Axe* films, but treat this one as special: it's 70 minutes of falling in love, and that's the best feeling in the world.

An incredible reinvention of a classic Universal monster, *The Invisible Man* turns the classic '30s film of a man gone mad with power after becoming invisible into a portrait of toxic masculinity. The remake portrays a woman's (Elisabeth Moss) struggles to escape her controlling, abusive, tech-billionaire boyfriend (Oliver Jackson-Cohen) and survive his elaborate campaign to gaslight her with his high-tech invisibility suit. Like the best horror, it leverages the frightening and fantastic to push on something terribly real.

Birds of Prey

The only big, traditional superhero film we got this year was also the most refreshing. *Birds of Prey* is an action movie about the breakup between Harley Quinn (Margot Robbie) and the Joker (unseen) and its messy, violent fallout. A lean, mean thrill ride with genuinely great action choreography (a rarity for big superhero movies!), *Birds of Prey* doubles down on something most action movies are surprisingly bad at: if you're gonna have a fight scene, why not make it look really damn cool?

First Cow

While the title delivers on its premise – there is a cow, and it is featured prominently – *First Cow* is also one of the finest explorations of a friendship you'll see in a movie this year. A chef, Cookie (John Magaro), and King-Lu, a Chinese immigrant on the run (Orion Lee), form an unlikely bond over a business opportunity: stealing milk from the first and only cow in the Oregon Territory. What starts as a partnership of convenience becomes a gradual expression of care, one that makes *First Cow* an irresistibly tender and warm cinematic achievement.

La Llorona

A horror film where the real terror is in contemplating what isn't shown, *La Llorona* wrestles with a real-life nightmare by way of a thinly veiled fictional stand-in: the genocide of the Maya Ixil by a brutal Guatemalan dictator. (Named Enrique Monteverde in the film, and Efraín Ríos Montt in real life.) When the former ruler and general (Julio Diaz) is acquitted for his war crimes on a technicality, his mansion becomes a haunted house, as unexplainable forces cry for justice. Masterfully crafted and deeply layered, *La Llorona* is cinema as remembrance, a film made to bring to light what we cannot – and should not – forget.

Boys State

If you've never heard of Boys State, let me explain. It's an annual summer program sponsored by the American Legion where high schoolers spend a week building a government from scratch. This documentary, which follows a number of boys attending a recent one in Texas, will make you wonder why.

An ingenious subject presented by smart filmmakers, *Boys State* is an exercise that examines the id of our political process; teenagers learn how to negotiate the difference between what they've been told about government and what actually succeeds, while they inadvertently replicate our nation's many shortcomings. *Boys State* won't fill you with hope, but it also won't fill you with dread. It's a movie about just how much work we have to do.

Dick Johnson Is Dead

When filmmaker Kirsten Johnson learned that her father, Dick, was suffering from dementia, the two agreed to make the long goodbye the diagnosis left them with into a film — specifically, a film where they imagine all the ways Dick Johnson might die and what might be waiting for him after.

The film is less morbid than that description may seem. *Dick Johnson Is Dead* is an incredibly moving work of affection, a documentary about celebrating a loved one's life while they're still here to appreciate it. It's about how remembering someone is a vital part of loving them.

Da 5 Bloods

During the Vietnam War, five soldiers nicknamed themselves Bloods and hid a chest full of gold deep in the jungles in which they fought. Only four made it back home; they never forgot that loot or the friend they buried with it. *Da 5 Bloods* is a revenge movie disguised as a treasure hunt. As the four remaining bloods return in the present day to claim their

gold, their desire for vengeance drives them.

They’re angry at the country that asked them to fight for freedom while denying it from them, at the Vietnamese people whose world they destroyed in the service of that war, and at the very idea of America — the way it warps and twists you into new shapes in the battered name of democracy. *Da 5 Bloods* is Spike Lee’s opus about the wars we never stop fighting, even after the guns are put away.

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