

A Second Opinion

BY CHRIS NASHAWATY

Wrenching romances and harrowing journeys won over this critic—but he still makes room for horror.

1

BEFORE MIDNIGHT

RATED R

When it comes to telling honest love stories, Hollywood threw up its hands and cried uncle long ago. That's why Richard Linklater's *Before* trilogy is such a miracle. It's the rare romance that feels like real life—heady, heartbreaking, and ultimately hopeful. Eighteen years after their first encounter on a train bound for Vienna in *Before Sunrise*, and nine years after reconnecting for an erotic Parisian encore in *Before Sunset*, Celine (Julie Delpy) and Jesse (Ethan Hawke) are stuck in the sort of uneasy domestic routine familiar to anyone who's ever been in a long-term relationship. Yes, fate has brought these two passing ships into the same port. But in the series' best chapter, Linklater is no longer just a romantic; he's a realist, too. On vacation in Greece, the couple grapple—sometimes flirtatiously, sometimes viciously—with their calcifying roles and unmet expectations. The honeymoon is over and their Eurail passes have long expired. But if you squint hard enough, you can still see the flickering flame that first drew them together—and us to them—all those years ago. (On DVD and VOD)

ILLUSTRATION BY JODY HEWGILL

2. GRAVITY

RATED PG-13

Not since Stanley Kubrick's mind-blowing head trip *2001: A Space Odyssey* has there been a film so alive to the awe-inspiring possibilities of cinema. The wonder of Alfonso Cuarón's deep-space slice of 3-D eye candy is that it manages to feel both weightless and weighty at the same time, as Sandra Bullock's stranded scientist Dr. Ryan Stone discovers that even floating far above Earth, she can't escape the memories that haunt her. As wonderful as Bullock is, the real star of the film is space itself: silent and infinite. *Gravity* is a thrilling, almost religious sensory experience that points to the limitless reaches of what movies can be and where they will take us in the future. (In theaters)

3. 12 YEARS A SLAVE

RATED R

No single work of art could possibly convey the horror and shame of slavery. But director Steve McQueen comes close with *12 Years a Slave* by narrowing in on the sickening true story of one exceptional man, Solomon Northup. Played with haunting grace by Chiwetel Ejiofor, Solomon wasn't born in chains like so many others he meets on his nightmare odyssey. He's a free man whose liberty is literally stripped from

him, which somehow makes the excruciating absurdity of his fate even harder for us to wrap our heads around. 2013 will go down as a banner year for agonizing tales of survival (*Gravity*, *Captain Phillips*, *All Is Lost*), but for me, none packed the brute, soul-shattering force of *12 Years a Slave*. (In theaters)

4. FRUITVALE STATION

RATED R

An unarmed 22-year-old African-American is shot and killed by a white transit officer. That this tragic incident actually happened in real life is horrifying enough. But what makes the moment reach deep into your chest and rip out your heart is how first-time director Ryan Coogler chooses to begin his film with this tragic coda. He gives *Fruitvale Station* a dreadful inevitability as he flashes back and bears witness to the final 24 hours of Oscar Grant III's life, showing us the ordinary events that would end up being his last. Coogler resists the temptation to turn Grant (Michael B. Jordan in a star-is-born performance) into a cardboard saint—he wrestles with his angels and demons until his final breath. *Fruitvale* paints a layered and complex portrait of a kid who never got the chance to become something more than a sad statistic. (On DVD and VOD Jan. 14)



Lupita Nyong'o in *12 Years a Slave*

5. CAPTAIN PHILLIPS

RATED PG-13

As he did in his vérité thriller *United 93*, Paul Greengrass mainlines *Captain Phillips* with an adrenalized you-are-there immediacy. No other director understands how to wield a handheld camera with the same nail-biting urgency, and no other storyteller knows how to craft a ticktock procedural with such Swiss-jeweler precision. Based on a ripped-from-the-headlines 2009 incident where four armed Somali pirates hijacked an American cargo vessel off the Horn of Africa, *Captain*

Phillips breathlessly reenacts the siege, standoff, and eventual rescue of the ship's captain by Navy SEALs. As Richard Phillips, Tom Hanks delivers one of his most nuanced, least movie-star-ish performances in ages. He makes you feel the vulnerability and confusion simmering beneath his heroic, can-do facade. That Greengrass also gets under the skin of Phillips' desperate captors—that he even *cares* to—is what makes this compassionate masterpiece a workout for your head and not just your quickening pulse. (In theaters)



James Gandolfini and Julia Louis-Dreyfus

6. ENOUGH SAID RATED PG-13

Nicole Holofcener's romantic comedy about a pair of single parents who manage to find a connection just when they've given up on the idea of love is the year's most bittersweet film. Julia Louis-Dreyfus finally gets to stretch out beyond the confines of the small screen as a divorced masseuse who protects her heart with sarcasm and self-deprecation. And James Gandolfini, in one of his final roles, gets to display the teddy-bear soul beneath his intimidating Tony Soprano alter ego. Both actors give relaxed, touching, and lived-in performances that sparkle and ache. When it's over—and trust me, the elliptical ending is note-perfect—you can't help but feel a profound sense of sadness and loss over all the other surprising roles we'll never get the chance to see Gandolfini play. (In theaters)

7. DECEPTIVE PRACTICE: THE MYSTERIES AND MENTORS OF RICKY JAY

NOT RATED

Were there more important documentaries this year? Absolutely. But none cast the same giddy spell as this one. Forget those Dos Equis ads; Jay, the hangdog raconteur, connoisseur of con artists, and historian of hustlers, is the most interesting man in the world. He's as lethal with a deck of cards as he is with a wry one-liner. And here, he happily takes us on a tour of all the chiseling cheats, colorful conjurers, and fast-fingered flimflammers who helped shape him into the man he is today. Which is to say, our greatest—and most entertaining—living magician. (On DVD and VOD)

8. OUT OF THE FURNACE

RATED R

It's a good year when we're treated to one Christian Bale film. This year we got two. David O. Russell's Scorsesean caper *American Hustle* will hog the Oscar buzz. But Scott Cooper's devastating death trip is the more emotionally involving film, thanks to one of Bale's most feverishly intense performances as an ex-con avenging his brother (Casey Affleck) by going after a backwoods sadist



Christian Bale

(Woody Harrelson). *Out of the Furnace* is so steeped in wrath, revenge, and tragedy, it feels as if it's taken from the onionskin pages of the Old Testament. (In theaters)

9. ALL IS LOST

RATED PG-13

Robert Redford has always been one of our most unknowable leading men—a golden-haired sphinx. Now, at 77, he's stepped forward and revealed his soul. In J.C. Chandor's grueling one-man show, *All Is Lost*, Redford plays a man sailing solo in the Indian Ocean whose hull is ripped open by a stray shipping container. Almost silently, the film chronicles the



Robert Redford

snap life-or-death decisions he makes as panic and resignation slowly set in. There aren't any fancy monologues here, just the existential dread writ large on Redford's weathered face. This is a master class in acting from a man whose quiver of tricks we thought was exhausted a long time ago. Who knew he was keeping his greatest one in reserve all this time? (In theaters)

10. THE CONJURING

RATED R

Digging my fingernails into my armrest while Lili Taylor played hide-and-seek with her daughters in *The Conjuring* was one of the most delirious experiences I had at the movies this year. The white-knuckle chiller about a husband-and-wife team of ghost hunters investigating a creepy old house in Rhode Island won't win points for originality (there's the usual smorgasbord of fetid stench, creaky doors, and visions of dead people), but director James Wan ratchets up those bump-in-the-night clichés with crackerjack craftsmanship, tightening the vise on the audience's frayed and frazzled nerves. (On DVD and VOD)