

# Associated Press movie critics find

By Christy Lemire and David Germain  
AP Movie Writers

LOS ANGELES – Associated Press reviewers Christy Lemire and David Germain saw the same films in 2011, but they clearly weren't seeing the same pictures.

They usually have a fair amount of overlap in their top 10 lists, but this time, they agreed on only one film. Here are their picks.

The top 10 films of 2011, according to AP Movie Critic Christy Lemire:

1. "Martha Marcy May Marlene" – The year's most haunting film, with a star-making performance from Elizabeth Olsen as a young woman who struggles to assimilate to the outside world after fleeing a cult. Writer-director Sean Durkin, making his astoundingly confident feature debut, cuts seamlessly between the psychological abuse of her past and the paranoia of the present. Olsen's placid, open face reveals nothing and yet suggests seething torment. And as the group's creepy, charismatic leader, John Hawkes radiates menace without ever raising his voice.

2. "50/50" – It's a comedy about cancer, which would sound like a tricky proposition, but director Jonathan Levine has crafted a film that's uproariously funny, and he finds just the right tone every time. Joseph Gordon-Levitt stars as a young man who learns he has a rare tumor on his spine, one he has a 50-percent chance of surviving; friends and family

try to help and usually end up saying or doing the wrong thing. Comedy writer Will Reiser based the script on his own cancer diagnosis in his 20s, and his words are filled with dark humor and a wry recognition of the gravity of this situation, but also with real tenderness.

3. "The Myth of the American Sleepover" – No one saw this movie. It was only in theaters for a few weeks and it didn't even make \$40,000. And that is such a shame, because not a single moment rings false in this quietly observant, gently insightful feature debut from writer-director David Robert Mitchell. He's taken a genre that's overly familiar – the all-night teen dramedy – and made it feel refreshing and new. He also made it look effortless. By assembling a cast of unknowns, some of whom had never acted before, he creates a warm aura of authenticity and naturalism.

4. "The Tree of Life" – Bold, gorgeous, ambitious, self-indulgent, maddening – Terrence Malick's opus about nothing less than the origin of the universe is all these things and so much more. But it's also unlike anything you've ever seen and it's sure to alter your mood long after it's over. If you're open to letting the impressionistic imagery wash over you, to allowing yourself to get sucked into the film's rhythms and fluidly undulating tones, you'll be wowed. Brad Pitt gives one of the best performances of his career as a stern father of three boys in 1950s Texas and Jessica Chastain is lovely as his playful, doting

wife.

5. "Bellflower" – Evan Glodell directed, wrote, co-produced, co-edited and stars in this ultra-low budget film – his first feature – which essentially suggests that getting your heart broken is tantamount to the apocalypse. He takes this notion to incendiary heights, and in doing so, has made one of the most wildly creative movies to come along in a while. He even built the camera used to shoot "Bellflower," which allows for an oversaturation of colors that vividly reflects his characters' extremes. His film subtly morphs from a sweet, idyllic romance to something dangerous and disturbing. He's an exciting, young filmmaker to watch.

6. "Melancholia" – The best film Lars von Trier has made in a while, maybe since "Breaking the Waves," and yet it's a devastatingly beautiful, operatic mixture of all his signature themes and visual schemes. His exploration of depression is visually sumptuous, featuring a lengthy, wordless, super-slow-motion prelude that portends his characters' fate. For melancholia isn't just a state of mind but a planet that's hurtling toward Earth, and Kirsten Dunst is riveting as the new bride who welcomes such a catastrophe. The excellent supporting cast includes Charlotte Gainsbourg, Kiefer Sutherland and Stellan Skarsgard.

7. "Take Shelter" – There seems to be a theme emerging; here's yet another selection about the threat of an apocalypse, either real or imagined. That's much of the allure of writer-director Jeff Nichols' film: It keeps us guessing until the very end, and even the ending is open for interpretation. "Take Shelter" is both daring thematically and striking aesthetically, even as it pierces at the heart of the most relatable, everyday anxieties we all experience. And it features a tremendous lead performance from Michael Shannon as a husband and father in rural Ohio whose nightmares grow more vivid and urgent.

8. "Hell and Back Again" – Director and photographer Danfung Dennis has crafted a documentary about the war in Afghanistan with the mesmerizing, dreamlike artistry of a feature film. And yet he maintains the bracing, intimate realism needed to authentically tell a story about battle, survival and redemp-

tion. Dennis' structure is similar to that of "Martha Marcy May Marlene." He jumps back and forth between a 25-year-old Marine sergeant's return to his North Carolina hometown and the mission that left him seriously wounded. He is so in the thick of things, he'll repeatedly make you wonder how he got that amazing shot.

9. "Beginners" – Cute narrative gimmicks abound here, ones that might have seemed too cloying or self-conscious, but writer-director Mike Mills makes it all work with humor and poignancy. He also draws lovely, natural performances from Christopher Plummer and Ewan McGregor as a father and son who are finally getting to know each other, truly, toward the end of the father's life. And Melanie Laurent, who was so striking as the daring theater owner in "Inglourious Basterds," shows a softer side here, and an effortless gift for comedy, as the young woman who teaches McGregor's character how to fall in love, for once, as a grown-up.

10. "Bridesmaids" – Director Paul Feig's film takes the typically cliched wedding movie genre and completely upends it and reinvents it into something surprisingly daring and alive. But it also takes the Judd Apatow-style buddy comedy, with its mixture of raunchiness, neurosis and sentimentality, and tailors it to female experiences and sensibilities. That the film achieves both of these ambitious goals simultaneously while remaining (mostly) hilarious is a testament to the power of Kristen Wiig as co-writer and star, and to the awesomely eclectic ensemble cast of strong comediennees who surround her.

The top 10 films of 2011, according to AP Movie Writer David Germain:

1. "The Artist" – Enough with 3-D. Enough with super widescreen Technicolor. Enough with all the talking. Cinema finally is back where it belongs with this boxy, black-and-white, silent gem about a 1920s screen idol whose career is muzzled by the talkies. Director Michel Hazanavicius lets us all in on his wondrous dream, a film whose every moment delights with grand visual tableaux, lush music, ageless performances by Jean Dujardin and Berenice Bejo and the most adorable dog this cat lover has ever seen. Luddites unite. Silence really is golden.

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