

FILM

The 10 Best
Films of 1985

Cry the Beloved Cinema

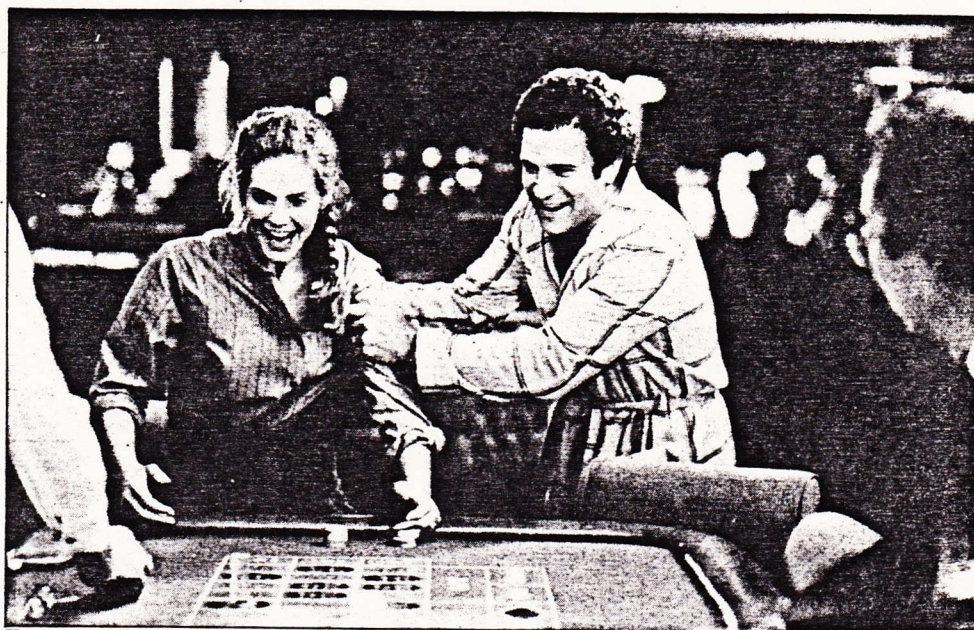
By David Edelstein

All year I look forward to writing a 10 Best list, yet when it's time to sit down and spit it out, a part of me rebels. Perhaps it's because I've missed a lot, so there's an element of sham here. But it's also the knowledge that, in compiling this list, I'm one more cog in the hype machine ("One of the year's 10 Best!") that has ripped the guts out of American criticism. Worse, it has probably hurt our movies. This has been, without a doubt, the lousiest year for film since last year, which was the lousiest year for film since the year before; and yet the ads burble with masterpiece this and surge of blinding brightness that. The distance between critics who at least attempt to be serious and those whose primary function is to generate ad copy seems wider than ever; although, in another sense, even serious critics go out of their way to write emblematizable phrases for the movies they like.

On one level, the skills of the profession are not worth addressing—they're idiots. But they have 20 times the influence of me, J. Hoberman, and Andrew Sarris combined; and they're the loudest, most visible members of our order. They love to be quoted, and I can understand why: the folks back home are far more impressed when a few of my pitiful adjectives make the national ads than they are by the review itself. But the trafficking in superlatives gives legitimacy to the hype machine—it says a vital part of a critic's job is to be blurred. And with that criterion, you get extraordinary clowns in this business. One critic has written "Put this on your must-see list" so many times that, if you did, you'd spend 12 hours a day at the cinema. In the trade they say, "He Loves Movies," but I wonder how anyone who really loves movies can continue to write blissfully about this and that towering achievement when the cinema is—both artistically and financially—in a state of crisis.

Me, I'm a drag at Christmas parties. There's no American film I can recommend this season. Half of *The Gig*. A third of *The Jewel of the Nile*, if you must go to the cinema. But people aren't going. They went to *Rocky IV* when it opened, but attendance dropped 44 percent in the second week. And I'll be surprised if they continue to line up for *Out of Africa* once the word gets out that it's a bore. *Young Sherlock Holmes* is such a perfect piece of construction that you have the sense, while watching it, that you could get up and leave and it wouldn't matter: the machine would keep spewing out thrills, with or without you. By aiming for nothing but blockbusters, by struggling to please all of the people all of the time, Hollywood has created a jaded audience—an audience that has gotten what it wants for so long that it no longer wants what it's getting. The audience has no respect for the medium—movies can't tell it anything it doesn't already know.

A teacher at a local film school gave me a chilling philosophy of screenwriting: in the first draft of a screenplay, he said, you should figure out how you feel about the material; in the second, third, and fourth drafts you should worry about ma-



Hagerty and Brooks are *Lost in America* and yuppie angst.

nipulating the audience to feel exactly the same way. That's a pretty good reason for the state of mainstream cinema: its filmmakers have been taught to jerk you around. They've always got their eye on you, instead of on their characters or their story. A picture like *The Color Purple* has the best intentions in the world, but Steven Spielberg treats his audience like eight-year-olds: he can't trust it to be moved without the wall-to-wall music, the incessantly arcing camera, or all those shots that deify the characters instead of letting us get to know them. Spielberg is a brilliant filmmaker and Sylvester Stallone is a hack, but *The Color Purple* and *Rocky IV* are remarkably similar: both are too busy selling themselves to settle down and tell a story.

And so I complete the cycle by trotting out my list. It was a tough job this year—I had to go to television to flesh it out. There were good films, of course, but you want the stuff on this scroll to be special; and as much as I liked, say, *Sugarbaby* and *When Father Was Away on Business*, they're small, sweet works—the sort that don't stand up to too much hype. I missed *Dream Child* and *The Home and the World*; I did catch up with Jan Troell's *Flight of the Eagle*, which I'd like, retroactively, to put on my 1983 10 Best List. It's too bad I can't tell you about a film opening in February, an American masterpiece—and I don't throw that term around loosely. (Hint: its director-writer-star is short, Jewish, and lives with a beautiful actress.) It would be Number One in this company by a billion miles, approximately. In the meantime, put these on your "must-see list." *They're unforgettable! Out of this world! Emotional surges into triumphs of blinding brightness! Amazing! Wow!*

1. **Prizzi's Honor.** John Huston's black comedy, one of the few authentic specimens. A wry mixture of *The Godfather* and *The Honeymooners*, it comes closer to anatomizing a sick relationship than *Scenes from a Marriage*. Four stars! A winner!

2. **Lost in America.** By Albert Brooks. (See my entry in "Avant Pop.") A 10 out of 10! Wow!

3. **Shoah.** By dwelling (agonizingly) on the minutiae of mass extermination, Claude Lanzmann brings us closer to comprehending the most incomprehensible tragedies in human history. *Searing and wrenching! The greatest work of God or man in 2 billion years!*

4. **Witness.** Woven with surprising delicacy by Peter Weir, this is a violent thriller in which violence is the issue. Terrific performances by Harrison Ford, Kelly McGillis, and Alexander Godunov. *Noble, compelling, a cause for rejoicing! Five stars (out of a possible four)!*

5. **Death of a Salesman.** Arthur Miller's play, with its inflated rhetoric and mythic pretensions, has always been tough to stage—tone problems, you understand. But for television, Dustin Hoffman and Volker Schlöndorff went all out for Expressionism. What they came up with was an authentic American Nightmare, the story of a man who carves his initials into a tree that isn't there. Nice support from John Malkovich. Christian Blackwood's *Private Conversations* documents the shooting. *Out of this world! An absolute knockout!*

6. **Re-Animator.** Stuart Gordon's stylish, tongue-in-cheek mad-scientist movie is one of the best gross-out comedies ever made. Gordon's background is with the Organic Theater in Chicago, and he brings a zest and conviction to pulp material that bodes well for our B-movie future. *Breathtakingly beautiful! I was T.K.O.'ed!*

7. **Allonsanfan.** The Tavianis' 1974 tragicomedy about a French nobleman whose early political ideals come into conflict with his later life; the radical sect he once led now won't leave him alone. It runs down, but it's a frightening and funny one-joke movie. *Wrenching, riveting, and powerfully gripping! I was stunned!*

8. **Kaddish.** Steve Brand's film got little attention when it opened in January, but the story of Yossi Klein and his Holocaust-survivor father makes for a powerful documentary about coming to grips with an overwhelming parental legacy. *Nine stars (out of a possible four)! This is the big one! Zowie!!*

9. **Streetwise.** A suspect documentary about children of the street—one has the nagging feeling that these kids are performing (and, in one case, committing suicide) for the camera. But it's still a vital piece of reporting, a glimpse into the worldview of children growing up without money, status, or a stable home life. *Powerfully sobering and chillingly terrific!*

10. **Ran.** Akira Kurosawa's stab at *King Lear* is a little too majestic for its own good, but it's one of the few genuine epics in years. The battle scenes are sublime: our eyes are transfixed while our minds lament the waste. *I was seared, writhed, riveted, shot, stabbed, decapitated, and cremated! 100 stars!!!*

I regret not having room to discuss, in order of release, *Blood Simple*, *A Private Function*, *Songwriter*, *The Purple Rose of Cairo*, *Heartbreakers*, *What Have I Done To Deserve This?*, *Pumping Iron II*, *Almost You*, *Secret Honor*, *Tosca*, *Kiss, Pee-Wee's Big Adventure*, *Compromising Positions*, *After Hours*, *Sweet Dreams*, *When Father Was Away on Business*, *A Year of the Quiet Sun*, *Sugarbaby*, or *The Gig*. I have run out of adjectives.

But let's give a big *Village Voice* Wow! to three dynamite performances by three world-class actresses: Jessica Lange in *Sweet Dreams*, Vanessa Redgrave in *Wetherby*, and Ellen Barkin in *Enormous Changes at the Last Minute*.

Now it's everyone's favorite part: The 10 Worst List. You won't find *The Heavenly Kid* or *Revolution* here: no one liked them. And I take great pride that my 10 Worst list might be some other guy's 10 Best list. These aren't just bad movies—they're movies you want to throttle.

1. **Goonies.** The first full-length cereal commercial—it's like being pelted with Milk Duds for 90 minutes. Special booby prize to the guy who mixed the soundtrack: the dialogue might as well have been in Urdu.

2. **A Chorus Line.** Unwatchable. Richard Attenborough, who gave us a perfect British Raj life of Gandhi, seems an odd choice to direct a dance musical: he's the visual equivalent of tone deaf. He cuts to reaction shots in the middle of big numbers. He cuts to what's happening off-stage in the middle of big numbers. He gives us more disconnected body parts than *Re-Animator*. *Tory Go Home!*

3. **To Live and Die in L.A.** Rancid cops and robbers from Mr. Sunshine, William Friedkin. The complex philosophical idea behind this movie is that everyone betrays everyone else.

4. **Pale Rider.** A dark and sickly attempt to revivify the Western, spiced with welcome moments of unintentional hilarity. (Clint Eastwood sleeps with Carrie Snodgrass to restore her faith in the benevolence of the Creator.) More and more, Clint seems like a meathead.

5. **Into the Night.** *North by Northwest* for narcoleptics. It was a toss-up between this and *Spies Like Us*, John Landis's other empty, contemptuous piece of work, but *Spies* doesn't have the yucko murders. In the Old Country, they'd have chopped off his head and stuffed his mouth with garlic.

6. **Perfect.** A trendy exposé of yellow journalism, in which the screenwriter, Aaron Latham, brings the same yellow-journalism tactics to exposing his own profession. Even Jamie Lee Curtis in leotards can't compensate.

7. **Rambo / Rocky IV.** Because ya gotta do what ya gotta do.

8. **The Slugger's Wife.** He wanted a cheerleader, but she had to be her own person. Neil Simon's *cri de bore*.

9. **Year of the Dragon.** Michael Cimino (*Heaven's Gate*) continues his hot streak.

10. **The Color Purple.** See above. I wish I didn't have to do this, but I've read it should be against the law not to see *The Color Purple*, and, when it comes to art, I'm a libertarian from way back. Get the critics off our backs!