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The Best Movies of 2018

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The year's best movies include, clockwise from top left, "Minding the Gap," "First Reformed," "Burning," "Happy as Lazzaro" and "Private Life." Credit: CreditClockwise from bottom left: Jojo Whilden/Netflix; Hulu; A24; Well Go Usa; Netflix

What Could Have Been

Some of the most inspiring films I watched this year were made by women who wore long skirts and high-button boots and couldn't yet vote for president. You can find some of their work in "Pioneers: First Women Filmmakers," a recently released DVD box set from Kino Lorber and the Library of Congress. (The [Blu-ray version](#) has more titles.) Some of these movies were featured in [a program](#) at Brooklyn Academy of Music that ran in July, one of several surveys that this vital arts center has dedicated to forgotten and overlooked female directors.

The more I watched these films from the beginning of the 20th century, the more I began to think about the movie world — the Hollywood — that could have been. By the late 1920s, women were largely shut out of directing in the American industry until the mid-1960s. If film pioneers like Lois Weber and Alice Guy Blaché had continued, it's possible that a radically different movie world might have emerged. In my alt-Hollywood fantasy, female and male filmmakers would have worked side by side, perhaps giving us unimagined stories and heroines. That history in turn might have laid the foundation for an equitable present rather than an industry defined by entrenched sexism.

This inequity shows no real signs of abating, presumably because sexism has never damaged the movie industry's bottom line. As of this writing, only a couple of the top 20 movies at the domestic box office have female-driven stories; in a few titles, the prominent female character shares the screen either as part of a romantic couple or a family. None of the 20 were directed by women. And then there is the continuing fallout from the Harvey Weinstein allegations and the #MeToo

movement, which my colleague [Brooks Barnes reported](#) in November are greatly contributing to a “profound malaise” in the movie capital.

“Yap, yap — go back to your kennels,” a movie producer said of [Time’s Up](#), the advocacy group formed in January by producers like Shonda Rhimes and performers like Reese Witherspoon to fight workplace sexual harassment. Barnes was startled by the movie producer’s comment. I was only surprised that he had been honest, even off the record. This producer is just one power broker, but he represents a mind-set that is responsible for mainstream industry that feels both creatively and ethically bankrupt. At this point, I wonder if it would be better for the powerful women in Time’s Up to forget about changing the old industry and just burn it down so they can rebuild it

This malaise has other sources, including the effect Netflix and Amazon are having on the big studios. Then again, these same studios — with their sequels and superheroes — are busily doing their part to turn American cinema into a gushing stream of uniformity. This seems unlikely to change especially given that in July the Walt Disney Company solidified its plans to buy Fox, thereby destroying one of the studios that created Hollywood. Opponents of the proposed deal include the Writers Guild of America West, which severely criticized the merger for furthering the media consolidation that has drastically limited competition.

The proof of these limits is evident at the box office, which in recent years has been dominated by branded product, much of it owned by Disney. The studio again leads the box office, having thus far gobbled up a staggering 27 percent of the domestic market share. (A decade ago, it released more features and had less market share.) You can like Disney movies and still believe that oligopoly is bad for movie culture. The same is true of Netflix, which has been showing its muscle in the movie world to feed its platform and which is where Joel and Ethan Coen’s “The Ballad of Buster Scruggs” is currently crammed among its thousands of good, bad and indifferent titles — all ready to watch, pause, forget.



Colophon (for the Arboretum Cycle), 2018, film still

10. ‘Colophon (for the Arboretum Cycle)’ (Nathaniel Dorsky)

With their gently nodding, brilliantly colored flowers and shifting shadows, Dorsky’s heart-soaringly beautiful films are reminders that cinema is also about light and form.

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