

And the Winner Is ...

Nation's Film Critics Find Few Hits, a Lot of Misses in '91

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By Pat McGilligan and Mark Rowland
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Never mind that Hollywood had a bad year, financially speaking. What kind of movie year was 1991, artistically speaking?

"It sucked," Owen Gleiberman, film critic for Entertainment Weekly, put it succinctly.

"The worst movie year I can remember," echoed Tony Lucia of the Reading (Pa.) Eagle. "I had trouble putting together a Top 10."

"Grim," agreed David Ansen of Newsweek. "The big studio product, with few exceptions, was timid, unimaginative and dumb. And Hollywood is encouraging the audience to have the same attributes."

No wonder audiences stayed away in droves. If there was any unanimity among the nation's film critics, it was that 1991 produced one of the all-time worst crops of movies. But the critics concur on little else.

The Los Angeles Film Critics Association hailed the sweeping gangster saga "Bugsy" as Best Film of 1991. The New York Film Critics Circle tilted toward the chilling "The Silence of the Lambs." The National Society of Film Critics, also New York-based, gave its nod to "Life Is Sweet," a funny, oddball look at a British working-class family by director Mike Leigh.

To seek a more democratic consensus, we went outside the big-city organizations and conducted a poll of 81 newspaper, magazine and television film critics—a sampling from across the country. Critics were asked to vote the best film achievements of 1991—in effect, "Critics' Oscars." The results showed some surprising winners—and the most splintered voting in the 12-year history of this poll.

Certainly, in 1991, there was no certifiable "big picture" for critics to rally around—no *auteur-de-force* like 1990's "GoodFellas," which in last year's poll of 80 crit-

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Critics Poll

BEST PICTURES, From G1

ics rated 34 votes as Best Picture and another 45 for Martin Scorsese as Best Director. This year, Best Picture votes were spread out among 25 candidates, quite a few of them, stubbornly, foreign-language preferences. And the domestic front-runners—"The Silence of the Lambs," "Thelma & Louise," "JFK," "Barton Fink," "Cape Fear" and "My Own Private Idaho"—drew Worst Picture votes from more than one critic.

No question that "Silence," which indulged a fascination with the psychotic mind within the taut rhythms of a serial murder mystery, topped the **Best Picture** category. But "Silence" received only 19 votes from our 81 film critics, with "Thelma & Louise" a distant second (12 votes total), and no other motion picture tallying more than seven.

"Silence" maestro Jonathan Demme earned **Best Director**, yet with only 20 votes. Again, the other votes were spread out over 25 directors, and only Barry Levinson for "Bugsy" (eight) and Oliver Stone for "JFK" (seven) were in any position to threaten Demme's victory.

There was a backlash against the disturbing subject matter of "Silence." "It contained an overall ghouliness that I found mindless and sickening," complained Jim Delmont of the Omaha World-Herald, who names it the year's Worst. To Carrie Rickey of the Philadelphia Inquirer, Demme's direction of "Silence," as well as Scorsese's direction of the terroristic "Cape Fear," were pathetic examples of first-rate directors "trying to make 'arty' exploitation films—like watching Picasso prove he can paint centerfold art."

Even so, many of the nation's film critics admired Anthony Hopkins's riveting lead performance as psycho killer Hannibal Lecter. Hopkins received a comfortable **Best Actor** backing of 27 votes. Close behind was Nick Nolte (20) for his turn as Tom Wingo in "The Prince of Tides," trailed by River Phoenix (12) in "My Own Private Idaho" and Warren Beatty (11) as Benjamin "Bugsy" Siegel.

Best Actress voting went neck-and-neck among Jodie Foster, the FBI heroine of "Silence," and the two self-liberated desperadoes of "Thelma & Louise," Geena Davis and Susan Sarandon. Some critics thought the award ought to be shared by Davis and Sarandon. "They were perfect as newly minted fugitives, improvising freedom in a brutally masculine world," said Douglas Armstrong of the Milwaukee Journal. But Davis (the ditsy one fleeing her husband and dull home life) pulled off an upset with 17 votes, edging costar Sarandon (13) and Foster (14).

Best Supporting Actor went to Samuel L. Jackson for his harrowing performance as the crack addict of "Jungle Fever," the only kudos this poll gave to a film that seemed to lose steam with the critics over the course of the year. Runner-up was Michael Lerner's quintessentially sleazy studio boss in "Barton Fink," the Coen brothers' film of '40s Hollywood gone amok.

Best Supporting Actress is, for some reason, always the most crowded category. Mercedes Ruehl, who took a small role and made it memorable in "The Fisher King," tied with nubile newcomer Juliette Lewis, who becomes a linchpin in the horror spun by "Cape Fear" (13 votes each). Kate Nelli-

THE TOP FIVE

A poll of 81 film critics found surprisingly little consensus on the best movies of 1991. The top vote-getters for best movie:

1. **The Silence of the Lambs** 19 votes
2. **Thelma & Louise** 12
3. **Beauty and the Beast** 7
- (tie) **Bugsy** 7
4. **Life is Sweet** 5
5. **Barton Fink** 4
- (tie) **JFK** 4
- (tie) **My Own Private Idaho** 4



SOURCES:
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gan was one vote behind (12) for her domineering matriarch in "The Prince of Tides," followed by Jane Horrocks of "Life Is Sweet" (9) and Diane Ladd of "Rambling Rose" (7).

Best Original Script was a cinch for James Toback's witty and incisive screenplay for "Bugsy" (20), although there was healthy competition from novice Calli Khorui's "Thelma & Louise" (13) and the Coens' "Barton Fink" (11).

Best Adapted Script: A resounding vote here for Ted Tally's faithful treatment of the Thomas Harris bestseller that was the basis of "The Silence of the Lambs" (28). David Cronenberg's imaginative rendering of William Burroughs's "Naked Lunch" came in second (10), followed by Calder Willingham's lucid reworking of his memoir "Rambling Rose" (8).

Best Editing: Doubtless Oliver Stone's "JFK" was the year's most controversial film, yet there was widespread sentiment to award his audacity with . . . something. Many critics admired the movie, others were not so sure. But the tabulation was overwhelming for Joe Hutshing and Pietro Scalia's editing sleight of hand (33 votes). "It was the only thing that really worked about that movie," according to Robert Denerstein of the Rocky Mountain News (Denver). Finishing a distant second was Thelma Schoonmaker for "Cape Fear" (14).

Best Special Effects: At last, something almost everyone could agree on: "Terminator 2" vaporized the competition with a whopping 59 votes.

Best Score (Original or Adapted): Disney's animated

"Beauty and the Beast" garnered votes in several categories, but this was its natural niche. The 23 votes reflected a general feeling that Disney animation is back, better than ever, in large part due to the Oscar songwriting team of Alan Mencken and the late Howard Ashman. Runners-up included the Irish band belting out soul tunes in "The Commitments" (13); and, curiously, Elmer Bernstein's reorchestration of Bernard Herrmann's original score for the remake of "Cape Fear" (10). Herrmann died in 1975.

Best Documentary: As bad a year as it was for major studio movies, it was even worse for documentaries. "I'm not even sure I've seen a documentary this year," admitted David Crumpler of the Florida Times-Union in Jacksonville. Of the two most widely distributed—"Paris Is Burning" and "Hearts of Darkness: A Filmmaker's Apocalypse"—Jenny Livingstone's intimate portrait of Harlem transsexuals won big (30) over "Hearts" (19).

Best Foreign Language Film: It was an especially rich year for foreign films. Critics had nothing but praise for "La Belle Noiseuse" (Jacques Rivette's study of a creative relationship between an artist and his model), Krzysztof Kieslowski's "The Double Life of Veronique" (with Cannes' Best Actress Irene Jacob in a tale of the disparate destinies of look-alikes with the same name), and director Yves Robert's companion versions of Marcel Pagnol's memoirs of his idyllic youth in Provence, "My Father's Glory/My Mother's Castle."

But the thumbs-up winner, with 21 votes, was "Europa, Europa," a French-Polish production directed by Agnieszka Holland—an astonishing true story about a Jewish teenage boy masquerading as a Nazi to survive the horrors of the Third Reich.

Worst Film: We couldn't resist—we asked the nation's critics to name the year's biggest bomb, a category that the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences politely eschews. As in the past, there was no shortage of vented spleen. Critics always disagree about the worst, of course—some favoring head-chopping horror sequels, while others take aim at respectable drama rife with pretense.

But, inevitably, there is one movie each year that manages to encapsulate an almost universal sense of awfulness. As if by osmosis, the critics know exactly which one that is.

"'Hudson Hawk' was so bad I didn't even see it," bragged Ella Taylor of the Los Angeles Weekly, a Yogi Berra-ism if we ever heard one.

Sorry—lots of other film critics did. "Hudson Hawk," a big-budget flop starring Bruce Willis, was the loss leader. In keeping with our diplomatic tradition, we won't mention the vote pile-up, but it was considerable. And it should be noted that Willis's other starring vehicle, "The Last Boy Scout," also logged some Worst votes.

Willis can claim a victory of sorts, though. As a star of the 1990 film "The Bonfire of the Vanities," he is a major player in "The Devil's Candy" (Houghton Mifflin, 1991), Julie Salamon's account of what went awry with the making of that budget-busting. The film critics in this year's survey named it **Best Movie Book of the Year**; in last year's poll, they named "Bonfire" 1990's Worst Picture.

Let's end this on an upbeat note. There were a few positive trends—more women directors, more black filmmakers. When the film critics were asked to cite a **Rookie of the Year**, there was an outpouring (32 votes) for John Singleton, the director of "Boyz n the Hood," whose slice of central L.A. life was heralded for its thoughtful depiction of an urban culture too frequently sensationalized.