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The experts' 20 best movies of 2009

By Daniela Deane for CNN

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STORY HIGHLIGHTS

A movie blogger, a critic, a film social networker and a film festival director give us top flicks

Haneke's "The White Ribbon," Reitman's "Up in the Air," and "Avatar" most popular

Films from: U.S., Romania, Greece, Austria, France, Argentina, South Africa on list

We want your opinions too. What are your favorite movies from 2009? Tell us in SoundOff

London, England (CNN) -- It's been an epic year for movies.

From James Cameron's return to the big screen with "Avatar," to "Star Trek" re-imagined to the star-studded cast of Rob Marshall's "Nine," Hollywood has been going big guns this year.

Meanwhile over in independent film a new star was born -- Gabourey "Gabby" Sidibe -- the abused, overweight teen who grabs your heart and won't let go in "Precious: Based on the Novel Push by Sapphire."

And a few foreign language films -- "The White Ribbon" and "A Prophet," in particular -- simply blew critics' socks off.

We canvassed a diverse group of movie experts to find out what films they thought were the best of 2009. Disagree? Think they missed on? Tell us what regular movie goers think in SoundOff below.

The Blogger

Erik Davis, Editor-in-Chief, [Cinematical.com](#)

1. 'Avatar' (James Cameron, U.S.)

A visual orgasm. I think it'll definitely be a Best Picture [Academy Award] contender and Cameron will be a Best Director contender. There were definitely some things wrong with it story-wise. It's a bit clichéd, a story we've seen before. But from a visual standpoint, I had never experienced anything like it.

2. 'Up in the Air' (Jason Reitman, U.S.)

Reitman's film is great -- pretty brilliant. There's familiarity there, especially for anyone who's traveled a lot. It's a story you can connect with on a personal level. Reliable, familiar, and yes, a little bit poetic.

3. 'District 9' (Neill Blomkamp, South Africa)

Nice and refreshing to get a creative sci-fi original at the end of summer. A big action-intense film that is also smart and has

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something to say. It showed us what a summer blockbuster can be without hundreds of millions of dollars spent on it.

4. **'The Hangover'** (*Todd Phillips, U.S.*)

A guilty, raunchy comedy. You can't help but just crack up at it all. You had to recommend it to all your friends, because you couldn't stop laughing. And it brought three unfamiliar faces together that are under the radar in Hollywood. That was really good.

5. **'Nine'** (*Rob Marshall, U.S.*)

Is it one of my favourite films? I don't know. But, in terms of what audiences like and what the Academy likes, it's a big, star-studded musical. Daniel Day-Lewis is brilliant in it. The production values are marvelous. It's not blowing anyone's mind, they're not gushing over it, but it's a quality, movie/musical you almost have to put in the list.

The Critic

Mike Goodridge, Editor, [Screen International](#)

1. **'The White Ribbon'** (*Michael Haneke, Austria*)

It's the most extraordinary film. The most controlled, commanding movie. It's an incredible story that has implications for the 21st century.

2. **'A Prophet'** (*Jacques Audiard, France*)

Extremely ambitious European filmmaking. Thrilling to watch. It's about this Algerian guy in prison in France and it's a two-and-a-half hour epic ... the violence he goes through. It's an incredible epic, wonderful.

3. **'A Serious Man'** (*Ethan and Joel Coen, U.S.*)

I've never adored the Coen Brothers, but this movie just tickled my fancy. It's a hilarious film, a penetrating portrait of that Midwestern Jewish ghetto of the late 1960s. I laughed my head off. And it was beautifully acted.

4. **'Avatar'** (*James Cameron, U.S.*)

I love "Avatar." Like "Star Wars," "Lord of the Rings," it's one of those movies that really changes the paradigm of filmmaking. It has created an amazing new capability: watching computer-generated characters with the audience as invested in them as they are in the human characters. Who knows if it'll stand the test of time, though.

5. **'Precious: Based on the Novel Push by Sapphire'** (*Lee Daniels, U.S.*)

I saw it at Sundance 12 months ago and it still resonates. It's a beautiful story, like nothing you've ever seen before. It takes one of life's underprivileged and puts them at the center of a movie. She's obese, black, abused beyond comprehension, yet you're put in her shoes. It makes you think about life differently. Really powerful.

Avatar is a visual orgasm

--Erik Davis, Editor-in-Chief, Cinematical.com

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1. **'The White Ribbon'** (*Michael Haneke, Austria*)

Haneke has made his bid for an Oscar with this literary, early 20th century period piece set in a small pre-War German town. Lurking behind the stark, high-contrast black and white photography ... are the same sinister motivations that have driven all the characters in this master filmmaker's work. A beautiful film pitched at a larger, more respectable audience.

2. **'A Prophet'** (*Jacques Audiard, France*)

Prison dramas are notoriously difficult to render on screen with any authentic sense of the tedium that underscores the violence, claustrophobia and degradation of daily life. And yet here, Audiard paints a magnificently raw portrait, not only of survival, but of that most precious of human qualities -- the capacity to thrive, adapt and ultimately to transcend.

3. **'The Headless Woman'** (*Lucrecia Martel, 2008, Argentina*)

South America's most exciting filmmaker keeps getting more famous, and her movies keep getting smaller. "The Headless Woman" feels like it started as a noir ... but without warning, Martel drops the camera and everything moves out of focus. The result is a sliver of a film -- exquisite, beguiling and utterly mysterious.

4. **'Love Exposure'** (*Shion Sono, 2008, Japan*)

A four-hour epic of obtuse, perverse sexual deviancy, religion, abuse and evil is, of course, entirely about love. Resisting at every turn the temptation to condemn the morality and behavior of his five severely emotionally damaged protagonists, he instead paints a portrait of real, raw emotion. This ponderous and beautifully-shot film will endure long after this list has turned to dust.

5. **'Phantoms of Nabua'** (*Apichatpong Weerasethakul, Thailand*)

A remarkable example of the true power of cinema. This short film is a tone poem, a disarticulation of space, a testament to disaffected masculinity and an exemplary piece of cinematography.

The Festival Director
Despina Mouzaki, Thessaloniki International Film Festival

1. **'The White Ribbon'** (*Michael Haneke, Austria*)

An allegory for the times and the dangers that lie beneath the surface that could lead us to totalitarianism. A political film with a strong message. A modern film that speaks about how difficult it is to let go of our bad traits -- traits that endanger our own existence. Haneke is, as always, a master. A dark story of a very specific community.

2. **'Up in the Air'** (Jason Reitman, U.S.)

The best American film of the year. One of those rare moments when a director catches the momentum of what society is facing right now and captures it in such a smart way. Funny and tragic at the same time, the story of the leading character is the story of a 21st century man who has lost track of what is important in life.

3. **'Police, Adjective'** (*Corneliu Porumboiu, Romania*)

Another film that proves that Romania is in the vanguard of original filmmaking and storytelling today. Language is at the heart of this story of surveillance, bureaucracy and the difficulty of letting old habits and policies go. A critique of the country's post-Communist stagnation.

4. **'Lourdes'** (*Jessica Hausner, Austria*)

A great film on the subject of faith and the questioning of miracles by an original voice from Austria. Combining delicate humor with the tragic stories of the people who are hoping for a miracle at Lourdes, Hausner succeeds in creating an impeccable balance of respect for human nature without hiding its weaknesses.

5. **'Dogtooth'** (*George Lanthimos, Greece*)

We are very proud to have the rare opportunity to include a Greek film in the best films of the year without feeling we're doing it a favor. Having won awards at Cannes and numerous other European festivals, Lanthimos is a talent to watch.

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These aren't "experts," they are critics.

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What about "Princess and the Frog" and "Up"?

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Ok where is "Me & Orson Welles" ?

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i haven't seen many of these, but the movie 9 is unwatchable.

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Bangstad

I was thrilled to see a list that included movies I haven't heard of (more movies to check out). Some of the experts were managers of film festivals so one would expect non-mainstream choices. This backlash against critics is kinda petty. "I'm outraged because my favorite movie wasn't selected".

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SheDevil23

I'm just curious to know where these "critics" were when Transformers 2 came out? It was the biggest movie of the year (now next to Avatar).

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[KeenanrH](#)

KeenanrH

it's a bit pretentious of you all to get on here and lambast them for having devoted their careers or lives to film. i feel like you're all aware of good movies out there this year, and everyone has their own personal preference, and these people, who by definition, would be the experts on the matte ...more

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[evan2442](#)

evan2442

I think people need to stop jumping down others throats because they mentioned a few films you've never heard of. Instead of just assuming someone is pretentious and/or needs no expertise to make these types of lists (which i neither agree with or disagree with), why don't you go out to an indie the ...more

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The Epic film of the year RED CLIFF. You must see this film. John Woo is the man.

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Where was "The Road"?

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Also, District 9 was really enjoyable. It's hard to boil it down to 6, but these pretentious (good call, Whatever09) critics missed a lot.

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[Swag06](#)

Swag06

why wasn't the movie "Up" (disney pixar) included in this? that movie was better than any of these movies in this article..and when u put "best movies of 2009" make sure they werent fro 2008 duh!

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DickRussell

20 years from now, which one will you remember?

If you said anything other than "Avatar", you're either lying or a jaded professional film critic.

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DonoftheDead

I've heard of 3 of these movies. District 9, The Hangover and Avatar. The rest? Probably some critics fantasy film that was shown in 1 theater in a goat herding town in Spain once. Yippee. Some great stuff this year I cannot recommend ENOUGH is a film called "Ink" made on a \$250,000 budget, this dark ...more

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[Johnny](#)

Johnny

The experts' 20 best movies of 2009? unny when they included: "he Headless Woman' (Lucrecia Martel, 2008, Argentina) " and "'Love Exposure' (Shion Sono, 2008, Japan)"

Easy to imagine what kind of "Experts" made these lists

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[tonyjustin](#)

tonyjustin

Typical "Modernist" movie critics who mainly refer to movies that no one will ever see. I am glad that these reviewers are so incredibly intellectual and superior to everyone else.

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[scroufus](#)

scroufus

No Hurt Locker? That movie was awesome. I think the lead actor in that film deserved to be nominated for an award or two.

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[daveso](#)

daveso

perhaps if you haven't eve heard of a movie picked, you should watch it. It ma blow your mind, or maybe not. I rarely agree with the movie critics, or most of you guys :)

We all have our own taste in movies, what we like to watch, the acting, the dialog, etc etc

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[Whatever09](#)

Whatever09

My goodness, are these "film critics" pretentious or what?

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Crookers

what about "UP"? that movie was genius!

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[Xavier1216](#)

Xavier1216

I have never even heard of most of this junk, and I'd be surprised if anyone cared about most of these movies. I'm going to see "Avatar" tonight and "The Hangover" was a C+ movie at best, but that's about it from this list. What happened to "Up" and "Fantastic Mr. Fox"?

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[Nincro](#)

Nincro

These so called "Critics shouldnt be payed a dime for there reviews it also seems like they only reviewed movies in the past month

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[theLisa](#)

theLisa

Hmm...these "experts" seem to have forgotten about the first 6 months of 2009. Most notable is the lack of love for animated films. Coraline and Up should most definitely be on a top 20 list for 2009. They were visually stunning and the stories were far better than most live action films. When are c ...more

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facondor

They were good and I enjoyed both of the films you said but I didn't feel they pushed the boundaries. I also think that you're right in that critics don't give animated films the credit they deserve.

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BlackReign

BlackReign

I totally agree with you, theLisa; Both Coraline and Up were excellent films (although Coraline was a little too much for my 6 year old)...It seems that all you have to do is watch a movie these days and you could be considered a critic...

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