**Artists in the Movies: The Ten Best Films**

*by*[*Gary Jason*](http://www.libertyunbound.com/node/382)  |  Posted January 05, 2011

I’m not sure why I consider artists so fascinating. Perhaps it is the especially acute way they see the world — vision being for me only a weak sensory modality. Perhaps it is the fact that they use more of the right side of the brain than I typically use in my own work. But whatever the reason, apparently I am not alone in my fascination, since movies about artists are fairly numerous in the history of cinema. In this essay I want to review ten of the best such movies ever made.

I will confine myself to artists in the narrow sense of painters, as opposed to creative writers, photographers, or musicians. I will even put aside sculptors, even though that rules out reviewing such interesting films as *Camille Claudel*(1988), the good if depressing bioflick about the sculptress who worked with and was the mistress of Auguste Rodin.

I will also confine myself to standard movies, as opposed to documentaries. There are many fine documentaries about individual artists and artistic movements. One particularly worth noting is *My Kid Could Paint That*” (2007), a film that honestly explores the brief career of four-year-old Marla Olmstead, who caused a sensation when her abstract paintings caught the attention of the media and the public, and started selling them for many thousands of dollars each. After an expose on CBS News, the public began to wonder if she had really produced her own work. That is the fascinating question the film investigates, but in the background is another, equally fascinating question — whether abstract art has any intrinsic quality, or whether it is all a matter of the perception of the critics.

But to return. One other restriction I will adopt is to consider feature films only, as opposed to TV series. This causes me some grief, since one of my favorite portrayals of painters on screen will have to be skipped — the delightful three-part BBC miniseries *The Impressionists* (2006). This series is TV at its finest. It is a historically accurate portrayal of the French impressionist school of painters (Manet, Monet, Renoir, Bazille, Degas, and Cézanne) that is compelling and entertaining story telling. It is structured as a series of memory flashbacks that occur to Claude Monet as he is interviewed late in his life by a journalist about the artistic movement he and his circle created.

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But what does a good movie about an artist include? Such a film can take many forms. It can be a straight bioflick recounting a person’s life and achievements — as in *Lust for Life, The Agony and the Ecstasy, and Seraphine*. It can explore a controversy, such as the merit of abstract art (*Local Color*). It can explore some of the ways artists interact with other artists — competition or romantic involvement (*Modigliani, Frida,* and *Lust for Life* again). It can examine the interaction between artists and mentors (*Local Color*), or patrons or art critics (*The Agony and the Ecstasy, Girl with a Pearl Earring*), or other intellectuals (*Little Ashes*). It can dramatize relationships between artists and family members (*Lust for Life, Moulin Rouge*). It can try to meaningfully convey the inspiration for or the process of artistic creation (*The Agony and the Ecstasy, Rembrandt, Girl with a Pearl Earring*). Finally, it can analyze the personality of an artist (*The Moon and Sixpence, Moulin Rouge, Seraphine*).

My criteria for ranking these movies are not much different from those I use to judge any other movies: quality of ideas, story, acting, dialogue, and cinematography. In theory, it shouldn’t be any more difficult to produce a decent movie about a painter than about any other subject, but in practice, there are pitfalls that can ensnare you.

In particular, it seems that many directors, in trying to make a movie about art, try to make the movie artsy. One thinks of the disastrously bad film *Klimt* (2007), an internationally produced bioflick about the Viennese artist Gustav Klimt (1862–1918), played by John Malkovich. The flick is tedious and hard to follow, with numerous hallucinatory scenes interspersed in the action. Malkovich gives a listless performance, portraying the artist as bereft of any charm. The result is risible.

I expect art, not artsiness. And I will mention one other thing I look for in movies about painters: if it accords with the story line, I like to see the artist’s work displayed. If a person is supposed to be great about doing something, one naturally wants to see the evidence.

To build suspense, I’ll present the movies that made my top ten in reverse order of my judgments of their importance and quality.

Number ten on the list is *The Agony and the Ecstasy* (1965). This lavishly produced film is based Irving Stone’s best seller of the same title, but actually just focusing on part of the story — Michelangelo (1475–1564, portrayed by Charlton Heston) painting the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel at the prodding of his patron, Pope Julius II (Rex Harrison). The eminent director Carol Reed directed the movie, and it was nominated for five Academy Awards, including those for cinematography, art direction, and score. In each of those areas the film is indeed excellent. Especially effective is the scene in which Michelangelo gets his key inspiration for his ceiling mural from observing the beauty of the clouds. The interesting idea explored in the movie is the way in which influence of a patron can help even a highly individual artist elevate the artistic level of his work. The pope insisted that Michelangelo do the job, even though he initially demurred, viewing himself primarily as a sculptor.

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The acting in this film isn’t as good as one would expect of the two leads. Heston and Harrison, both recipients of the Oscar for best actor in other movies, seem somehow miscast in their roles. But the movie transcends this weakness; the glory of Michelangelo’s art is on full display in a beautiful color production.

Number nine is *Frida* (2002), directed by Julie Traynor and starring Selma Hayek (who also coproduced the movie). This is an unvarnished look at the life of Frida Kahlo (1907–1954), focusing on the accident that made her a semi-invalid and caused her lifelong pain, and on her tempestuous marriage to the painter Diego Rivera. Rivera was already famous when they met, and her career grew alongside his. His numerous adulterous affairs are not hidden, nor are her affairs with other women (as well as Leon Trotsky). Both Rivera and Kahlo were devout socialists, as the movie emphasizes.

Selma Hayek’s performance is extraordinary — it is obvious she was completely devoted to the project. She convincingly conveys the physical suffering Kahlo endured, along with the mental anguish caused by Rivera’s endless philandering. She was nominated for an Oscar for her performance. Alfred Molina is excellent as Diego Rivera, and Edward Norton gives a nice performance as Nelson Rockefeller (who, ironically, commissioned Rivera to do a mural for him), as does Antonio Banderas (playing the painter David Alfaro Siqueiros). The cinematography is also excellent, and we get to see quite a few of the artist’s paintings. Traynor does a good job of integrating the history of the times with the story line.

Number eight is *Local Color* (2006). Written and directed by George Gallo, it is a fictionalized account of his friendship with the landscape painter George Cherepov (1909–1987), an artist he met while he was hoping to pursue art, before turning in his twenties to screenwriting and directing. Gallo’s earliest success was writing the screenplay for “Midnight Run.”

In the movie, the Gallo figure John Talia Jr. (Trevor Morgan) is thinking about what to do after high school. His father (perfectly played by Ray Liotta) hopes he will get a regular job, but young John wants to be a painter. He manages to gain the friendship of a crusty, profane, but gifted older Russian painter, here called Nicoli Seroff (played brilliantly by Armin Mueller-Stahl). Seroff invites John to spend the summer at his house, much to the worry of John’s father, who is concerned that Seroff is gay and will “take advantage” of his son. After some tension between the two, Seroff finally breaks down and shows John how to paint.

Besides being a nice meditation on the role a mentor can play in an artist’s life, the movie has as a subtext an exploration of two related and important questions about contemporary art: is there great artistic merit in abstract art, and should art divide the elites from the ordinary public? This subtext plays out in the exchanges between the prickly Seroff and a pompous local art critic Curtis Sunday (played exquisitely by Ron Perlman, of *Hellboy* and *Beauty and the Beast*). Their dispute culminates in a hilarious scene in which Seroff shows Sunday a painting produced by an emotionally disturbed child with whom Seroff has worked. Seroff shows Sunday the painting without revealing who made it, and asks for Sunday’s opinion about the artist. Sunday then begins to talk earnestly about the virtues of the artist, thinking he must be a contemporary painter. When Seroff tells Sunday the truth, Sunday storms off to the howls of Seroff’s laughter. The movie has excellent cinematography — which gathers interest from the fact that all the oil paintings shown in the film were painted by Gallo himself.

***In the film Frida, Diego Rivera's numerous adulterous affairs are not hidden, nor are Kahlo's affairs with other women — as well as with Leon Trotsky.***

Number seven on my list will be a surprise. It is *The Moon and Sixpence* (1942). The movie is a superb adaption of W. Somerset Maugham’s brilliant short novel of the same name. The story is about a fictional painter, Charles Strickland, and is loosely based on the life of Paul Gauguin (1848–1903). Strickland (well played by the underrated actor George Sanders, who could play the cad well) is a stockbroker who suddenly and unexpectedly leaves his wife and family in midlife to pursue his vision of beauty — his painting. He is followed by a family friend, Geoffrey Wolfe (a character I suspect Maugham based on himself, and beautifully portrayed by Herbert Marshall), who narrates as he tries to make sense of Strickland’s ethical worldview.

What we see is a man who is an egotist to the core, but we realize that this is an egotism driven by a desire to create. A key scene in this regard is the one in which Strickland explains to Wolfe that he doesn’t choose to paint, but he *has*to paint. Maugham doesn’t make it easy on us by portraying Strickland as also driven to flee civilization — by, for instance, a bad marriage or family. In fact, the title seems to indicate that in the end he himself fails to appreciate Strickland’s choice: it comes from a Cockney phrase about somebody who is so struck by the moon that he steps over sixpence: by focusing on something abstract — such as artistic beauty—one misses out on something that may be more worthwhile, such as rich human relationships.

But what makes this film powerful is its exploration of the idea that a person can be an egoist—even immoral by conventional standards — but still be a creative genius. Indeed, I recommend this film in my ethical theory classes as an example of Nietzsche’s brand of egoism.

Number six is *Girl with a Pearl Earring* (2003), a tale from the historical novel by Tracy Chevalier about the life of Johannes Vermeer (1632–1675). It imagines the story of a young woman, Griet, who comes to the Vermeer household as a maid. Griet’s father was a painter, but went blind, forcing her to support herself by working as a domestic servant. The Vermeer household is dominated by his all-too-fecund and extremely jealous (not to say shrewish) wife Catharina, along with her mother Maria Thins.

Griet is fascinated by Vermeer’s work, the colors and composition. Noticing her interest, Vermeer befriends her, letting her mix his paints in the morning. The viewer suspects that this friendship involves a romantic interest, at least on his part. He is careful to keep the friendship from Catharina’s notice. While shopping with the chief maid, Griet meets the butcher’s son Pieter, who is very attracted to her, and we suspect that the feeling is mutual.

As if this incipient romantic triangle weren’t enough excitement for poor Griet, Vermeer’s concupiscent patron Van Ruijven sees her and pushes Vermeer to let her work in his house. Faced with Vermeer’s refusal, Van Ruijven commissions him to paint her, which Vermeer agrees to do. Van Ruijven, obviously, isn’t motivated by art so much as by lust — he even attempts to rape Griet. All this culminates, however, in her becoming the model for Vermeer’s most famous masterpiece, “Girl with a Pearl Earring.” The earring, which is one of a pair borrowed from Catharina, making her extremely jealous, goes with Griet as she leaves Vermeer’s household, ending her adventure with an interesting memento.

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The art direction is superb. It is executed in colors reminiscent of the painter’s method (dark background with vivid tones in the key objects). Appropriately, the film received Oscar nominations for both best art direction and best cinematography. The acting was almost entirely excellent, with Essie Davis playing a very irascible Catharina, Tom Wilkinson a randy Van Ruijven, Judy Parfitt a practical Maria, and Cillian Murphy a supportive Pieter. Especially outstanding is Scarlett Johannson as a very self-contained Griet. She bears an uncanny resemblance to the girl in the actual painting. The sole disappointment is Colin Firth as Vermeer. He plays the role in a very inexpressive way — more constipated than contemplative, to put it bluntly.

Number five is a film about the life and work of a controversial modern artist,*Pollock* (2000).

Jackson Pollock (1912–1956) was a major figure in the abstract art scene in post-WWII America. He grew up in Arizona and California, was expelled from a couple of high schools in the 1920s, and studied in the early 1930s at the Art Students League of New York. From 1935 to 1943 he did work for the WPA Federal Art Project. During this period, as throughout his life, he was also battling alcoholism.

Receiving favorable notice in the early 1940s, in 1945, he married another abstract artist, Lee Krasner. Using money lent to them by Peggy Guggenheim, they bought what is now called the Pollock-Krasner House in Springs (Long Island), New York. Pollock turned a nearby barn into his studio and started a period of painting that lasted 11 years. It was here he developed his technique of letting paint drip onto the canvas. As he put it, “I continue to get further away from the usual painters’ tools such as easel, palette, brushes, etc. I prefer sticks, trowels, knives, and dripping fluid paint or heavy impasto with sand, broken glass or other foreign matter added.” He would typically have the canvas on the floor and walk around it, dripping or flicking paint.

In 1950, Pollock allowed the photographer Hans Namuth to photograph him at work. In the same year he was the subject of a four-page article in Life, making him a celebrity. During the peak of his popularity (1950–1955), buyers who were pressing him for more paintings, making demands that may have intensified his alcoholism.

He stopped painting in 1956, and his marriage broke up (he was running around with a younger girlfriend, Ruth Kligman). On August 11, 1956, he had an accident while driving drunk that killed both him and a friend of Ruth, and severely injured her. But after his death, Krasner managed his estate and worked to promote his art. She and he are buried side by side in Springs.

Critics have been divided over Pollock’s work. Clement Greenberg praised him as the ultimate phase in the evolution of art, moving from painting full of historical content to pure form. But Craig Brown said that he was astonished that “decorative wallpaper” could gain a place in art history. However one might view Pollock’s work, it has commanded high prices. In 2006, one of his paintings sold for $140 million.

The movie tracks the history fairly closely, starting in the early 1940s, when Pollock attracted the attention of Krasner and Guggenheim, and moving through his marriage to Krasner, his pinnacle as the center of the abstract art world, and the unraveling of his personal life. Throughout, we see him angry, sullen, and inarticulate, whether drunk or sober.

Ed Harris, who directed the film and played the lead, is fascinating (if depressing) to watch. He plays a generally narcissistic Pollock, with the problem of alcoholism featured prominently. He was nominated for a best actor award for this role. Especially good is Marcia Gay Hardin as Lee Krasner, who won a best actress Oscar for her performance. The main defect of the movie is that it gives us no idea why Pollock was angry and alcoholic. Was it lack of respect for his own work? Did he feel it wasn’t really worthy of the praise it received? We get no clue.

Number four is a piece of classic British cinema, “Rembrandt” (1936), meaning, of course, Rembrandt van Rijn (1606–1669), who is generally held to be the greatest painter of the Dutch Golden Age (an era that included Vermeer, his younger contemporary). Rembrandt achieved great success fairly early in life with his portrait painting, then expanded to self-portraits, paintings about important contemporaries, and paintings of Biblical stories. In the latter, his work was informed by a profound knowledge of the Bible.

But his mature years were characterized by personal tragedy: a first marriage in which three of his four children died young, followed by the death of his wife Saskia. A second relationship with his housekeeper Geertje ended bitterly; and a third, common law, marriage to his greatest love, Hendrickje Stoffels, ended with her death. Finally, Titus, his only child to have reached adulthood, died. Despite his early success, Rembrandt’s later years were characterized by economic hardship, including a bankruptcy in which he was forced to sell his house and most of his paintings. The cause appears to have been his imprudence in investing in collectables, including other artists’ work.

Rembrandt’s painting was more lively and his subjects more varied than was common at the time, when it was common to paint extremely flattering portraits of successful people. One of his pieces proved especially provocative: “The Militia Company of Captain Frans Banning Cocq,” often called “The Night Watch,”an unconventional rendition of a civic militia, showing its members preparing for action, rather than standing elegantly in a formal line up. Later stories had it that the men who commissioned the piece felt themselves to have been pictured disrespectfully, though these stories appear to be apocryphal.

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The movie is fairly faithful to historical reality, except that it doesn’t explore Rembrandt’s financial imprudence, attributing his later poverty to his painting of “The Night Watch*”* as an exercise in truth-telling. The movie shows him painting these middle-class poseurs for what they were, and their outrage then leading to a cessation of high-price commissions from other burghers. The direction is excellent, as one would expect from Alexander Korda, one of the finest directors Britain ever had. The support acting is first rate, especially Elsa Lanchester as Rembrandt’s last wife Hendrickje, Gertrude Lawrence as the scheming housekeeper and lover Geertje, and John Bryning as the son Titus. Charles Laughton’s performance as Rembrandt is masterful. There are great actors, and then there are legends, and he was both. Unlike his loud and dominating performances in such classics as *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* and *Mutiny on the Bounty,* his role in this film is that of a wise and decent man, devoted to his art and his family, and he makes it even more interesting. The main flaw in the film is that we don’t see much of the artist painting or of his paintings, but that is a comparatively minor flaw in an otherwise great film.

Number three is the great *Moulin Rouge* (1952), based on the life of Henri Marie de Toulouse-Lautrec-Monfa (1864–1901). Toulouse-Lautrec was born into an aristocratic family. At an early age he lived in Paris with his mother, and showed promise as an artist. But also early in his life he showed an infirmity. At ages 13 and 14 he broke first one leg than the other, and they both failed to heal properly. As an adult, he had the torso of a man and the legs of a boy, and he was barely 5 feet tall. A lonely and deformed adolescent, he threw himself into art.

He spent most of his adult life in the Montmartre area of Paris, during a time when it was a center of bohemian and artistic life. He moved there in the early 1880s to study art, meeting van Gogh and Emile Bernard at about this time. After his studies ended in 1887, he started exhibiting in Paris and elsewhere (with one exhibition featuring his works along with van Gogh’s).

He focused on painting Paris on the wild side, including portraits of prostitutes and cabaret dancers. In the late 1880s, the famous cabaret Moulin Rouge opened (it is still in Montmartre to this day), and commissioned Toulouse-Lautrec to do its posters. These brought him to public attention and notoriety, and won him a reserved table at the cabaret, which also displayed his paintings prominently. Many of his best known paintings are of the entertainers he met there, such as Jane Avril and La Goulue (who created the can-can).

By the 1890s, however, his alcoholism was taking its toll on him, as was, apparently, syphilis (not unknown among artists of the time). He died before his 37th birthday, at his parent’s estate. In a brief 20 years, he had created an enormous amount of art — over seven hundred canvases and five thousand drawings.

The movie, directed (and co-written) by John Huston, was a lavish production fairly true to history. It should not be confused with the grotesque 2001 musical of the same name. The cinematography and art direction are superb, showing us scenes of the Moulin Rouge in particular and Paris in general, as captured by the artist. The film won the Oscar for best art direction and best costume design.

The directing and acting are tremendous. (Huston was nominated for best director, and his film for best picture.) Zsa Zsa Gabor is great as Jane Avril, as are Katherine Kath as La Goulue and Claude Nollier as Toulouse-Lautrec’s mother. And Colette Marchand is perfect as Marie Charlet, the prostitute with whom Toulouse-Lautrec becomes involved. She wa nominated for an Academy Award as best supporting actress, and won the Golden Globe, for her performance. But most amazing is the work of the lead, Joses Ferrer, who plays both Toulouse-Lautrec *père* and *fils.*Playing Toulouse-Lautrec the artist required Ferrer (always a compelling actor) to stand on his knees. His was a bravura performance, making the artist both admirable and pitiable. Ferrer was nominated for an award as best actor, but unfortunately did not win.

If there is one flaw in the film, it is an unneeded sentimentality, well illustrated by the final scene. With Henri on his deathbed, his father cries to him that he finally appreciates his art, while figures from Henri’s memory bid him goodbye. Huston, one of the greatest directors in the history of film, especially adept at coldly realistic *film noir* (e.g., “The Maltese Falcon”), should have toned this down. My suspicion is that the studio wanted something emotionally “epic,” and Huston obliged.

Number two on my list is a small independent flick, *Modigliani* (2004). The story explores the art scene in Paris just after WWI, with artists such as Pablo Picasso, Amedeo Modigliani, Diego Rivera, Jean Cocteau, Juan Gris, Max Jacob, Chaim Soutine, Henri Matisse, Marie Vorobyev-Stebeslka, and Maurice Utrillo living in the Montparnasse district.

***We meet Modigliani as he enters the café Rotonde, stepping from tabletop to tabletop as the patrons applaud.***

Amedeo Modigliani (1884–1920) was born into a poor Jewish family in Italy. He grew up sickly, contracting tuberculosis when he was 16. He showed interest and talent in art at an early age, and went to art school, first at his hometown of Livorno, then later in Florence and Venice. He was fairly well read, especially in the writings of Nietzsche. He moved to Paris in 1906, settling in Montmartre. Here he met Picasso, and spent a lot of time with Utrillo and Soutine. He also rapidly became an alcoholic and drug addict, especially fond of absinthe and hashish (beloved by many artists then). He adapted rapidly to the Bohemian lifestyle, indulging in numerous affairs and spending many wild nights at local bars. Yet he managed to work a lot, sketching constantly. He was influenced by Toulouse-Lautrec and Cezanne but soon developed his own style (including his distinctive figures with very elongated heads). After a brief return home to Italy in 1909 for rest, he returned to Paris, this time moving to Montparnasse. He is said to have had a brief affair with Russian poetess Anna Akhmatova in 1910, and worked in sculpture until the outbreak of WWI. He then focused on painting, among other things painting portraits of any of other artists.

In 1916, he was introduced to a beautiful young art student, Jeanne Hebuterne. They fell in love, and she moved in with him, much to the anger of her parents, who were conservative Catholics, not fond of the fact their daughter was involved with a poor, drunken, struggling Jewish artist.

And struggle they did. While Modigliani sold a fair number of pieces, the prices he got were very low. He often traded paintings for meals just to survive. In January 1920, Modigliani was found by a neighbor delirious, clutching his pregnant wife. He died form tubercular meningitis, no doubt exacerbated by alcoholism, overwork, and poor nourishment.

His funeral attracted a gathering of artists from Paris’ two centers of art (Montmartre and Montparnasse). It was all very Nietzschean: brilliant young man does art his way, defies all slave moral conventions, and dies in poverty. The genius is spurned by hoi polloi too addled by slave morality to appreciate the works of the übermensch. Jeanne died two days later by throwing herself out a window at her parents’ house, killing herself and her unborn child. It was only in 1930 that the family allowed her to be reburied by his side.

The movie takes place in the pivotal year 1919. We meet Modigliani as he enters the café Rotonde, stepping from tabletop to tabletop as the patrons applaud. He winds up at Picasso’s table, where he kisses Picasso. This bravura entry invites us to focus where we should — on the relationship between these two artists, both important in a new era of art. The relationship is complex. On the one hand, they are obviously friends — and friends of a sort that Aristotle would have approved: their friendship is based on appreciation of each other’s intellectual virtue, their art. But there is a darker side to it: they are also rivals, competitors for the crown of king of the new artists.

Modigliani and Jeanne are struggling to pay rent, and Jeanne’s father has sent their little girl away to a convent to be raised. Modigliani sees a chance to get his child back, and provide for Jeanne. He will enter a work in the annual Paris art competition, one that, so far, he and his circle have scorned. Picasso, feeling challenged, enters also, with other members of the circle joining him. Modigliani knows that the competition will be tough, so by force of will he works to produce a masterpiece. This challenges Picasso as well, and we see the artists vying to see who will win.

But the denouement is tragic. Modigliani finishes, and asks Picasso to take his piece to the show. He goes to City Hall to marry Jeanne. After leaving late, he stops at a bar for a drink. And that foolish act leads to an ending whose bittersweet drama I don’t want to spoil.

The acting is excellent throughout. Hippolyte Girardot is notable as Maurice Utrillo, and Elsa Zylberstein is superb as Jeanne. But the best support is given by Omid Djalili as a smoldering, intense Picasso, who succeeds where Modigliani fails, but understands that his success did not result from greater genius. The amazing Andy Garcia gives a fabulous performance as Modigliani.

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The critics panned this movie mercilessly, and it has some flaws — most importantly, you cannot appreciate the film without a knowledge of Modigliani’s biography, because it focuses only on his last year. (It also takes some liberties with the facts.) But the film powerfully conveys a unique friendship and rivalry, and explores an artist’s self-destructiveness. Very instructive, though not the makings of a box office bonanza.

And now — drum roll please! — coming in as number one on my list is a classic that holds up well, more than a generation after its making: *Lust for Life* (1956).

Like *The Agony and the Ecstasy*, this movie was based on a best-selling novel by Irving Stone. The director was the brilliant Vincente Minnelli. The film tells the tragic story of the life of Vincent van Gogh (1853–1890), with lavish attention to the man’s magnificent art. It follows the life of van Gogh from his youth, during which he his struggled to find a place as a missionary, to his mature years, during which he struggled to find a place as an artist. (The van Gogh family lineage was full of both artists and ministers.) Van Gogh is usually categorized with Gauguin, Cézanne, and Toulouse-Lautrec as the great post-impressionists.

Van Gogh is played by Kirk Douglas, who was primarily known as an action lead — adept at playing the tough guy outlaw or soldier (helped by his buff physique and chiseled handsome face). This was a casting gamble, but it paid off, with Douglas giving one of the best performances of his career, if not *the*best performance. He was nominated for a Best Actor Oscar and won the Golden Globe for playing the mentally tormented van Gogh with credibility.

The support acting just doesn’t get any better. Most notable is Anthony Quinn as a young, egoistic, and arrogant Paul Gauguin, who for a brief time was van Gogh’s roommate, but couldn’t handle van Gogh’s emotional intensity and instability. Quinn rightly received an Oscar for best supporting acting. Also excellent is James Donald as van Gogh’s loyal brother Theo.

The story development and dialogue are first rate (the screenwriter Norman Corwin was nominated for an Oscar), as is the art direction (also nominated for an Oscar).

The movie showcases many of van Gogh’s paintings. It also explores the crucial role his brother played in keeping him painting, supporting him financially as well as emotionally. If it were not for Theo van Gogh, the world would likely have never known Vincent. The contrast with *Moulin Rouge* is stark: Toulouse-Lautrec never got the support of his father until it was too late.

Five films that did not make my list deserve honorable mention. The first must be of a picture I have reviewed for Liberty (October 2009), *Seraphine* (2009). It is a wonderfully filmed, historically accurate bioflick of the French “Naïve” painter Seraphine Louis (1864–1942). She was discovered by an art critic, flourished for a brief period after World War I, but with the Depression her career ended, and she was eventually confined to an asylum. The relatively unknown actress Yolande Moreau is simply wonderful in the lead role.

The second honorable mention is *Convicts 4* (1962), which tells the true story of artist John Resko. Resko was condemned to death after he robbed and unintentionally killed a pawnshop owner while attempting to steal a stuffed toy for a Christmas gift for his daughter. He was given a reprieve shortly before his scheduled execution, and with the help of some fellow inmates adapted to prison life. In prison, he learned to paint, and came to the notice of art critic Carl Calmer, who fought for — and eventually, with the help of the family of the man Resko killed won Resko’s release. Ben Gazzara is outstanding as Resko, and Vincent Price (in real life an art critic and a major art collector) convincing as Calmer.

***If the producers had wished to fictionalize the story, they should have done so, and changed the names.***

Third honorable mention goes to the television movie *Georgia O’Keeffe* (2009). Again, since I recently reviewed this movie for Liberty (August 2010), I will be brief. The film gives a nice account of one of the first American artists to win international acclaim, Georgia O’Keeffe (1887–1986). It focuses on her most important romantic and professional relationship, the one with Alfred Stieglitz, the famous photographer and art impresario. O’Keefe (played superlatively by Joan Allen) was hurt by Stieglitz’s philandering, but they remained mutually supportive professionally, even after a painful parting. Jeremy Irons is superb as Stieglitz.

As I noted in my review, at the end of the movie, one is left to wonder why Stieglitz was so callous in his treatment of O’Keeffe (in flouting his adultery, and in one scene bragging about his new paramour’s having his child to O’Keeffe, with whom he had earlier angrily dismissed the idea of having children). Was this merely the blindness of narcissism, or was there an undercurrent of profound envy at his wife’s success as an artist — one greater than his?

Fourth honorable mention is *Artemisia* (1998), based on the life of Artemisia Gentileschi (1593–1656). She was one of the earliest women painters to win widespread acclaim, being the first woman artist accepted into Florence’s Accademia di Arte del Disegno. The film is gorgeously produced, with a first-rate performance by Valentina Cervi as Artemisia and Miki Manojlovic as Agostino Tassi. Its major flaw is its historical inaccuracy, portraying Tassi as Artemisia’s chosen lover, while in fact he was her rapist. If the producers had wished to fictionalize the story, they should have done so, and changed the names. Stretching or selectively omitting history in a bioflick can make sense, but a total inversion of a pivotal event is a major flaw.

***Watching a large number of movies about artists over a short period of time can be a recipe for depression.***

The fifth film receiving honorable mention is *Basquiat* (1996), a good movie about the sad life of Jean-Michel Basquiat (1960–1988), who was one of the earliest African-Americans to become an internationally known artist. He was born in Brooklyn, and despite his aptitude for art and evident intelligence (including fluency in several languages and widespread reading in poetry and history), he dropped out of high school. He survived on the street by selling t-shirts and postcards, and got his earliest notice as a graffiti artist using the moniker “SAMO.” In the late 1970s, he was a member of the band Gray. In the early 1980s his paintings began to attract notice, especially when he became part of Andy Warhol’s circle. In the mid-1980s, he became extremely successful, but also got more caught up in drugs, which led to his early demise from a heroin overdose. Jeffrey Wright is superb as Basquiat, as are David Bowie as Andy Warhol and Dennis Hopper as the international art dealer and gallerist Bruno Bischofberger. Also compelling is Gary Oldman as artist Albert Milo, a fictionalized version of the director Julian Schnabel.

Watching a large number of movies about artists over a short period of time can be a recipe for depression, given the amount of tragedy and pain on display. Often this pain was caused by a lack of public and critical recognition or support, leading great painters to experience genuine deprivation and what must have been the torment of self-doubt. Worse, the pain was sometimes self-inflicted or inflicted on others, because of the narcissism or lack of self-control that made such messy lives for so many artists.

But watching these films is intellectually as well as visually rewarding. You see the triumph of creative will over unfavorable conditions and outright opposition — and the beauty that unique individuals have contributed to the world.

**About this Author**

Gary Jason is an academic philosopher and a senior editor of *Liberty*. His recent books, *Disturbing Thoughts: Unorthodox Writings on Timely Issues*and *Philosophic Thoughts: Essays on Logic and Philosophy*are both available through Amazon.

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