The Silence of the Lambs And Beauty And The Beast Top the Crew of 1991 Films

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It's time again for another totally subjective list of the best films of the year, but first, a few disclaimers. Most importantly, there are probably some grave omissions from this list simply because I never had a chance to see some reportedly great movies, including Life Is Sweet, My Father's Glory, My Mother's Castle, An Angel At My Table, Paris Is Burning, Rawling Race and The Commitments. Also, this was a fairly strong year for movies, and as a result there were many very good features that didn't rank with the ten best, such as In the Mood, Flames and Hot Shots, to name three wildly different offerings. What follows are the ten most engaging, moving, intelligent and exhilarating films that I saw in 1991.

1. The Silence of the Lambs

No movie succeeded on as many levels last year as this amazing thriller from director Jonathan Demme. As a psychological shocker, The Silence of the Lambs was immensely more effective than typical serial killer fare, thanks primarily to Anthony Hopkins' great performance as Dr. Hannibal Lecter, a vision of evil inscrutability whose gruesomeness is demonstrated most directly by his astonishing intellect and insight. Jodie Foster delivered what was probably the best acting by anyone in 1991 as FBI trainee Clarice Starling. Foster created a woman who was both fiercely motivated and deeply pained, and her transformation from a cold and tempestuous recluse to a kind and caring soul was genuinely touching. The fluidity, energy and beauty of Disney animation is evident here as it rarely has been before.

2. Beauty and the Beast

With respect to animation alone, Beauty and the Beast ranks with breathtaking brilliance of such classics as Fantasia and Fantasia, and the excellent score and songs by Alan Menken and the late Howard Ashman were book-plates enough for kids and witty and inventive enough for adults. But Disney's latest film will be remembered most for the warmth and gentleness of the story. This is one of the most sophisticated works that Disney has ever released, and the characters were wonderfully drawn and realized. Belle's independence and charm were irresistible, and Beast's transformation from a cold and tempestuous recluse to a kind and caring soul was genuinely touching. The fluidity, energy and beauty of Disney animation is evident here as it rarely has been before.

3. Barton Fink

Easily the most hallucinatory film of the year, Barton Fink is a movie to be surrendered to more afterthought than understood. The talented team of Joel and Ethan Cohen said an alternately funny and frightening story of a Hollywood screenwriter suffering from writer's block and deeply isolated, and their intricate and subtle performance was astounding. Demme's film is much more than a good nightmare, though. A great deal of the story focuses on society's objectification of women and examines how such warped views lead to sexual violence. The Silence of the Lambs was the one unexpurgated masterpiece of the year.

4. JFK

Steve Martin spent years writing this film, which is definitely his most personal. It was brought to the screen perfectly by British director Mick Jackson and almost no one saw it at the theater for reasons that totally escape me. JFK was really one of the year's finest movies, with wall-to-wall gags presented in the rapid-fire style of The Naked Gun. But what set the film apart as truly great was the wonderful balancing act of tone between hilarious comedy and delicate fantasy. Martin's vision of L.A. was not one of a geographical location, but of an attitude in which people surround themselves with their dreams as a way to shield out all of the less pleasant aspects of life. The search that Martin's character undergoes for true happiness in an illusory setting was thoroughly enchanting.

5. Thelma & Louise

In a year of strong women in such movies as The Silence of the Lambs, Mortal Thoughts and La Femme Nikita, this film bypassed the subtle approach and literally blew away the competition. As feminist escapism, Thelma & Louise was long overdue, and as a generic road film it was great entertainment. Susan Sarandon and Geena Davis were both stellar in the title roles, bringing humor and passion to their characters. The best thing about the story, which many audiences seemed to overlook, was that it wasn't afraid of moral ambiguities. I've seen the movie movie times, and although I still don't think the opening murder was warranted, I am fascinated by the total lack of options that the patriarchal structure of society afforded these two women.

6. JFK

Definitely the most controversial film of 1991, JFK was also the most skillfully made. Of course, the movie wasn't the totally engrossing piece of propaganda that it is, then none of the controversy would have existed. Oliver Stone's villainous barrage of conspiracy theories seemed to implicate everyone in the assassination of John Kennedy, but the group most harshly accused consisted of those people who would blindly follow their leaders. The depth of information crammed into a hypnotic and very fast three hours, the universally-impressive cast, and the amazing filmmaking talent of Stone generated nearly all criticisms of the movie.

7. Naked Lunch

The perfect companion piece to Barton Fink, David Cronenberg's adaptation of William S. Burroughs novel focused on the creative process.