



Inside Comics and KidsPost pullout

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DEAL HUNTER

Spend \$50, get a \$10 gift card to a retail store or restaurant? It's a great deal, and a great stocking stuffer, for loyal customers. **Page 4**

THE SCENE

Not your ordinary brunch: Recipients of the Kennedy Center Honors noshed at the Mandarin Oriental Hotel before the gala ceremony. **Page 9**



MOVIES

Gary Oldman is back, and at full strength, in "Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy."

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BEST OF 2011

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THE CRITICS WERE DRIVEN HALF-MAD
by this year's Best Of selections. The movie and theater offerings were so good 10 picks weren't enough, they fretted. Visual arts were scattered, and TV faves are so, well, personal. Nevertheless, they did it. Enjoy. Pages 10-16.

KIM MAXWELL VU/THE WASHINGTON POST

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Television

BY HANK STUEVER

Job hazard: At Christmas parties, everyone wants me to tell them what TV shows they really should be watching. Depending on the strength of the nog, I sometimes draw a complete blank. So this is the list I'll keep in my inside pocket for just such moments...

1. "Downton Abbey" (PBS). Who would have thought that in a year so ripe with class animosity from the 99 percent that our favorite show would be a purely British crunchy-gravel saga of an aristocratic family (and their servants) living in a countryside estate circa 1912? *Second season begins Jan. 8.*

2. "Enlightened" (HBO). A difficult case to make, but I stand by it. Sometimes the "best" TV show is not necessarily the most entertaining. The concluding two episodes of Mike White and Laura Dern's psychological character study have made this show a worthwhile gem — and a hauntingly lovely comment on the conflict between our higher, yoga-toned selves and corporate cubicle culture. *Season finale airs Monday.*

3. "Homeland" (Showtime). Addictively perfect anti-terrorism thriller, set in our own spooky NoVa, held together by a stunningly edgy performance from Claire Danes as a borderline psychotic CIA agent.



KENT SMITH/SHOWTIME

"HOMELAND": Addictive thriller with Claire Danes and Mandy Patinkin.

Season finale Dec. 18.

4. "Storage Wars" (A&E). I never tire of seeing what's in those abandoned storage units, though the cooked-up auction drama is easily overblown — to say nothing of the utter disregard for the misfortunes that resulted in the auctions to begin with. Is it recession escapism or recession denial?

5. "Breaking Bad" (AMC). Sent me over the edge of anxiety this season. "Breaking Bad" just keeps outdoing itself, this time thanks to the unforgettable Giancarlo

Esposito as Gus Fring. *Returns in 2012.*

6. "The Walking Dead" (AMC). Gets my "most improved" award for a gripping second season as the survivors sought temporary refuge from the zombies at a mysterious farm. *Resumes Feb. 12.*

7. "American Horror Story" (IFX). Ryan Murphy's haunted house romp became just as hokey as I predicted it would, but it's still buzzworthy. There's something in every episode that's a great hoot, if not quite a holler. *Season finale Dec. 21.*

8. "Game of Thrones" (HBO). I came around to this adaptation of George R.R. Martin's best-selling fantasy series, but it wasn't (and still isn't) easy. Hardcore fans, tell me — does winter ever come to Westeros? *Returns in April.*

9. "Modern Family" (ABC). Felt a little wobbly there after the season-opening dude-ranch vacation trip but still the most satisfying half-hour of my week — and probably yours, too.

10. "The Office" (NBC). Nobody has said much about this, but, um — *Steve who?* The cast and writers have quietly rallied, filling the Dunder Mifflin power vacuum with Ed Helms and James Spader. An episode a couple weeks ago, in which Helms's Andrew Bernard struggled to placate Spader's Robert California by not-not giving California's wife (Maura Tierney) a job, proves that the awkward quality that made "The Office" work before is still very much intact.

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Movies

BY ANN HORNADAY

A glance at this year's top box office performers might trigger a case of deep cinematic depression, suggesting a future bounded by "Transformers" sequels on one side and "Hangover" sequels on the other. But this year, I could easily have made a list of Top 20 films, including "The Artist," "The Way, Way Back," "Of Gods and Men," "In a Better World," and the documentaries "Incendary" and "Cave of Forgotten Dreams." Tough cuts, all. Here's the final list:

1. "Meek's Cutoff" Kelly Reichardt's mesmerizing story of 19th-century settlers traveling to Oregon radically redefined the Western, stripping it to its most raw elements and reinvigorating it with immersive realism.

2. "The Descendants" Comedy, tragedy, satire and humanism danced a delicate gavotte in Alexander Payne's affecting family drama, which starred a dressed-down George Clooney as a distant husband and father trying to reconnect with his family, both past and present.

3. "Moneyball" Bennett Miller's thoroughly satisfying adaptation of Michael Lewis's book featured Brad Pitt as baseball manager Billy Beane in a funny, moving homage to utility players — both on the field and off.



RICHARD FOREMAN JR.

"DRIVE": Ryan Gosling didn't say much, but his performance spoke to audiences.

4. "Buck" One of the most riveting films of the year, this gorgeously filmed documentary revolved around Buck Brannaman, the real-life "horse whisperer" whose work with horses takes on transcendent, life-healing dimensions.

5. "Beginners" Mike Mills's autobiographically inspired comedy-drama about a grown son and his father was sweet without being sappy and used bold visual graphics to give the storytelling verve and punch.

6. "Take Shelter" This superbly crafted thriller featured a career-making performance from Michael Shannon as a man haunted by visions of a coming apocalypse that may or may not be real.

7. "Nostalgia for Light" Patricio Guzman's stirring documentary set in Chile's Atacama Desert, engaged the Big Questions that occupied so many filmmakers this year, including memory, history, cosmic truths and the meaning of life — with the most rigor, insight and poetic lyricism.

8. "The Trip" Steve Coogan and Rob Brydon hammed it up through the gastro-pubs and literary waysides of northern England in Michael Winterbottom's hilarious picaresque about friendship, ego and the sensuous pleasures of a really great meal.

9. "Drive" Nicolas Winding Refn's quietly contained genre piece actually didn't involve much driving, but it moved nonetheless, propelled by a transfixing lead performance by Ryan Gosling and Refn's unimpeachable sense of style. Even when the film erupted into cartoonishly graphic violence, the wheels didn't come off.

10. "Win Win" Tom McCarthy's observantly funny film about a lawyer (Paul Giamatti) driven to comically dark lengths to support his family captured the economic anxieties of the year with compassion and warmth.

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Pop Music

BY CHRIS RICHARDS

If a good pop album is like a sonic bubble bath — a little act of mental hygiene that lets us get away from it all — then a great pop album is like a visit to one of those isolation tanks that cost \$75 an hour at the day spa. And who had that kind of money this year?

In 2011, pop artists helped us make sense of our world by pulling us deep into theirs. R&B crooners took us on hallucination tours. Rock bands offered tutorials in lucid dreaming. And instead of inviting us into her double-wide for a beer, the most magnetic singer in Nashville tried to get us to sign the lease.

Each of the year's best recordings demanded our time, our patience and the entirety of our imagination. Here they are, ranked one through 10, but almost all equally deep. Close your eyes, pinch your nose and submerge.

1. The Weeknd, "House of Balloons"

The last time R&B felt this darkly erotic, it was being made by a tiny purple sphinx from Minneapolis. Abel Tesfaye, the 21-year-old Toronto singer who records as the Weeknd, already seems every bit as enigmatic as Prince — and his dreamy-draggy-sexy-scary-superlative debut was nearly as seductive.



THE WEEKND

2. Jay-Z and Kanye West, "Watch the Throne" Instead of blushing over their embarrassment of riches, pop's most intriguing partnership delivered a self-congratulatory opus that was adventurous enough to remind us that they're rap visionaries first, 1 percent bazillionaires second.



3. Pistol Annies, "Hell on Heels" On their debut album, Miranda Lambert and her songwriting buddies go hunting for the contact point between humor and heartbreak.



4. Katy B, "On a Mission" So you think you can dance (and would prefer to do it while listening to a British singer narrate youth in 21st-century clubland with an honesty that you wish American pop stars would emulate)? This one's for you.



5. Drake, "Take Care"

He's not really a rapper. Or a singer. Drake simply spills his guts at the blurry intersection where words meet melody. On his stunningly self-aware sophomore effort, he speak-sings, "I think I like who I'm becoming." Everyone should.



6. Bluebrain, "The National Mail"

The Washington duo's first "location aware album" was the year's most innovative pop release — a smartphone app that used Global Positioning System technology to trigger changes in the band's music depending on where you strolled on the Mall. It was like using GPS to navigate a dream.



7. Bon Iver, "Bon Iver"

There's hard rock, there's soft rock, and now there's this. Listen closely to Wisconsinite Justin Vernon's vaporous ballads and you'll hear rock-and-roll sublimating like a block of dry ice.



8. Real Estate, "Days"

These Jersey boys pen casually gorgeous rock tunes about suburbia that actually resemble suburbia — they're very clean, sorta sad and way too easy to get lost in.



9. James Blake, "James Blake"

Inventive and emotive, this young Londoner's avant love songs sound like they were pressed from an undiscovered corner of the human heart.



10. Fauna, "Manshines"

As electronic dance music hyperventilated its way across the United States, this Argentinian duo kept things slow and low, continuing their reinvention of cumbia by adding a splash of psychotropic futurism.



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DANIELA EDBURG

Art

BY PHILIP KENNICOTT

It was a year without theme or focus, haunted by financial and political anxieties, but culturally diffuse. Which is to say, a year like most others in this age of no discernible isms or movements, no dominant ideologies. The opening of major Sept. 11 memorials gave the late summer an elegiac quality, but that was a mere punctuation in a year best remembered as another annum of too much stuff and too little time. Pity the artist when noise rather than harmony is dominant. It's hard to be heard. But the best always stands out:

National September 11 Memorial in New York City Michael Arad's memorial to those lost on Sept. 11, 2001, had an enormous price tag, and it went through the usual sausage-making of memorial design and construction, with some major changes to the architect's initial vision. But the results are still powerful: a study in grandeur and serenity that is unlikely to be matched anytime soon.

Frank Gehry concert hall for the New World Symphony in Miami With major improvements to the dark science of acoustics, and a new understanding of how audiences can relate to classical music, we may be in a golden age of building concert halls. If that golden age has an exemplar, Frank Gehry's new concert hall for the New World Symphony could be it. The design turns the trademark Gehry twists and curves inward, brings the audience closer to the music, and incorporates state of the art video projections without distracting.

Tom Price's "Meltdown" at Industry Gallery A lot of stuff melts, especially

plastic. Tom Price's chairs, created by melting mounds of polypropylene rope, PVC tubing, cheap plastic rugs and old fleece clothing, were a highlight of the local gallery scene this fall, a clever recycling of material that we often condescend to... with results that look delightfully perverse and comfortable.

"Warhol: Headlines"/"Andy Warhol: Shadows" Two exhibitions devoted to Andy Warhol, opening simultaneously at the National Gallery of Art and the Hirshhorn, sent sparks of welcome synergy. The National Gallery took a brainy look at Warhol's response to the news and media, while the Hirshhorn allowed visitors to bask in the visual splendor of his enormously long and variegated Shadows series from 1978-79.

"Unbuilt Washington" The National Building Museum tapped into Washingtonians' strange desire to constantly refashion their city. Focusing on architectural might-have-beens and the near-misses that would have radically changed our sense of the District, "Unbuilt Washington" also raised deeper questions about the basic assumptions underlying our architecture of democracy.

"de Kooning: A Retrospective" This was the annual blockbuster at New York's Museum of Modern Art. Room after room of works by Willem de Kooning, tracing his origins back to juvenilia and through to the very end, the strange, controversial bursts of colored line he made with the help of assistants. In between was a powerful argument that his stock needs to be reevaluated, that he was an artist of greater depth and variety than we

"POSSIBLE WORLDS": The camera doesn't lie, but in the Art Museum of the Americas exhibit, works such as Daniela Edburg's "Atomic Picnic" meld photography and fiction to arrive at greater truths.

remember.

"Xu Bing: Tobacco Project" at Virginia Museum of Fine Arts It was called the "Tobacco Project," and it sounded as if it might be one of those earnest and didactic shows that flogs a theme (tobacco as a cultural commodity) to death. But Xu Bing is an artist of great imaginative resources, and his show was rich in pure visual delight, including an enormous rug made entirely of cigarettes.

"Gauguin: Maker of Myth" at the National Gallery of Art It had been more than 20 years since the great Gauguin blockbuster at the National Gallery in 1988. The smaller but more focused exhibition that opened in February was a welcome reappraisal, organized around narrative, biographical fantasies and the artist's self-conscious manipulation of his myth. And then there were those magnificent, terrifying paintings.

"Baroque.me: Bach Cello Suites No. 1, Prelude" visualized by Alexander Chen Someday, all art will be on the Internet. Maybe or maybe not. But what is emerging online today is increasingly polished and sometimes, as with this work, which visualizes a movement from Bach's first cello suite in geometric form, wildly popular. Alexander Chen's video went viral this year, and it deserves the acclaim.

"Possible Worlds: Photography and Fiction in Mexican Contemporary Art" Wry and slyly subversive, literate and referential, full of the absurd and the apocalyptic, there was something haunting about this summer exhibition of contemporary Mexican photography at the Art Museum of the Americas. Artists such as Mauricio Alejo and Daniela Edburg were standouts in this strangely memorable show.

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