

Sight & Sound

THE INTERNATIONAL FILM MAGAZINE



January 09
Volume 19 Issue 1 £3.95



EVERY NEW
FILM
REVIEWED

The BEST of

2008

50 CRITICS 150 FILMS

Benicio del Toro: the **Che** interview | Cinema in **North Korea** | Georgia's **Otar Iosseliani** |
2009 preview | Hunter S. Thompson and **Gonzo** | Béla Tarr's **The Man from London**

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There Will Be Blood

GULNARA ABIKEYEVA

Festival programmer and critic, Kazakhstan

Two-legged Horse (*Samira Makhmalbaf, Iran*)

The most impressive film that I saw anywhere, this concerns a rich boy who hires a poor youth to carry him around. It brings together complex relationships.

Tulpan (*Sergey Dvortsevov, Kazakhstan*)

Winning the Un Certain Regard prize at Cannes only confirmed this film's great cinematic quality. Dvortsevov's documentary approach to fiction reflects the energy of life in inhospitable climates. It's a bitter and a beautiful portrait of Kazakhs living in the steppes.

There Will Be Blood (*Paul Thomas Anderson, USA*)

This combines the professional and the passionate to great effect.

The Gift to Stalin (*Rustem Abdrashev, Kazakhstan*)

Shown at the opening of the Pusan film festival, this is an important revelation of hidden events during the Stalinist era.

Mamma Mia! (*Phyllida Lloyd, USA*)

What a lovely and energising story built around ABBA's best songs!

GEOFF ANDREW

Head of film programme, BFI Southbank, UK

Che (*Steven Soderbergh, USA*)

The finest film by an American director this year, a monumental achievement of astonishing audacity and ambition best watched in one go.

Of Time and the City (*Terence Davies, UK*)

Best documentary – even richer than *La Vie moderne* (Raymond Depardon), *La Forteresse* (Fernand Melgar) and *Routes: Dancing to New Orleans* (Alex Reuben) – and a magisterial return to our screens by Britain's greatest living film-maker.

Still Walking (*Kore-eda Hirokazu, Japan*)

A witty, perceptive and affecting look at family life.

In the City of Sylvia (*José Luis Guerín, Spain*)

Experimental film-making at its most accessible and elegant: referencing Goethe, Velázquez, Hitchcock et al, Guerín creates a funny, sexy, poetic and surprisingly coherent whole.

Le Bonheur (*Agnès Varda, France, 1965*)

Of the 'old' films I very belatedly caught up with, this glittering, gloriously and unsettlingly ambivalent jewel just pipped *Cléo de 5 à 7* (also Varda) and *Classe tous risques* (Sautet) to the post.

MICHAEL ATKINSON

Critic, USA

My Winnipeg (*Guy Maddin, Canada*)

The crazed Winnipeggo-paleokino-chemist, no-budget magus caps his meta-autobiographical trilogy and scores his most moving film.



There Will Be Blood (*Paul Thomas Anderson, USA*)

Who saw this coming, from the smug artificer-auteur of *Magnolia*?
Textures no one's seen in a period film before.

4 Months, 3 Weeks and 2 Days (*Cristian Mungiu, Romania*)

A hyperrealist ordeal by anticipation and, with an earned closet of international awards, the best of the Romanian films.

The Flight of the Red Balloon (*Hou Hsiao-hsien, Taiwan/France*)

Everything everyone said it wasn't: sweet, humane, eloquent and natural as an afternoon stroll.

Half Moon (*Bahman Ghobadi, Iran, 2006*)

Ghobadi goes metaphysical, outright comedic and Kurdish-musical; the upshot is the best Iranian film seen on western screens in a while.



The Class

JAMES BELL

Assistant Editor, Sight & Sound

United Red Army (*Wakamatsu Koji, Japan*)

Wakamatsu Koji's gripping 3-hour docudrama account of Japan's Red Army Faction of the 1970s stands head and shoulders above *The Baader Meinhof Complex* as an insight into radical terrorist groups. There's no glamour here; instead the suffocating claustrophobia of life inside such a group, particularly the gruesome scenes of 'self-criticism', is almost unbearable to watch. It deserves far more international exposure than it's so far had.

Still Walking (*Kore-eda Hirokazu, Japan*)

Kore-eda Hirokazu's subtle family-reunion drama is full of poignant and truthful moments, and he's unafraid to show the uglier sides of his characters.

End of the Rainbow (*Robert Nugent, France/Australia*)

Australian documentary film-maker Robert Nugent's beautifully shot film perceptively exposes the devastating impact of the construction of a western-financed, industrial-sized goldmine in the dusty Sahel of the Guinea/Mali border on the local community, while never resorting to didactic reportage.

There Will be Blood (*Paul Thomas Anderson, USA*)

For its wordless opening, its wild ambition, Daniel Day-Lewis' barnstorming, and Jonny Greenwood's arresting score.

The Class (*Laurent Cantet, France*)

Though I felt it suffers with the onset of plotting in its second-half, the astonishing verisimilitude and energy of the classroom scenes impressed.

GUIDO BONSAVER

Academic, Oxford University, UK

Il Divo (*Paolo Sorrentino, Italy*)



Political cinema meets Fellini meets Tarantino. And if you think the plot is far fetched, you should follow Italian politics more closely.

Appaloosa (*Ed Harris, USA*)

An unpretentious but well-shot Western with great acting and fine dialogue.

Cliente (*Josiane Balasko, France*)

A working-class Parisian gigolo meets a sleek but ageing businesswoman. Even at its most clichéd, the film comes across as funny and warmhearted.

Gomorrah (*Matteo Garrone, Italy*)

This is the dirty underbelly of Italy, with no heroes and belles to write home about.

Rembrandt's J'accuse (*Peter Greenaway, Netherlands/UK*)

This documentary investigating a 'crime' at the heart of Rembrandt's *Nightwatch* should be compulsory screening for every teaching institution, and for every self-appointed artist too.

NICK BRADSHAW

Critic, UK

Taxi to the Dark Side (*Alex Gibney, USA*)

Alex Gibney's meticulous exposé of the war on terror traces the rotten apples right to the top.

The Solitary Life of Cranes (*Eva Weber, UK*)

Eva Weber's city symphony of London from above, brilliantly conceived, wonderfully executed.

The Class (*Laurent Cantet, France*)

Laurent Cantet's electrifying portrait of several bricks in the wall.

In the Woods (*Paul Vester, USA*)



Paul Vester's headspinning short: animated dance with Dubya, flowers, and the Israel-Palestine wall.

Wall•E (*Andrew Stanton, USA*)

Cute and eerie

PETER BRADSHAW

The Guardian, UK

Of Time and the City (*Terence Davies, UK*) There could hardly be a more satisfying comeback. Davies' docu-collage meditation on his Liverpool boyhood is uncliché, hilarious and moving.

Parque vía (*Enrique Rivero, Mexico*) This year's Locarno winner was an intriguing film, influenced by Reygadas, a slow-burner which stayed in my mind when flashier products had disappeared.

Before the Devil Knows You're Dead (*Sidney Lumet, UK/USA*)

If this cracking thriller were the work of a 20-something superbrat, everyone would be jabbering with excitement. They should be jabbering more at the fact that it's by 84-year-old Lumet.

Hunger (*Steve McQueen, UK*)

Rightly fêted, McQueen's film represents a tremendous leap from visual art to cinema. An exciting newcomer.

There Will Be Blood (*Paul Thomas Anderson, USA*)

It is a quality of uncompromising, faintly delirious excess in all departments that made this film so striking. Day-Lewis' performance was an old-fashioned barnstormer in the manner of Olivier.

MICHAEL BROOKE

BFI Screenonline, UK

Gomorra (*Matteo Garrone, Italy*)

The best believe-the-hype film I saw all year and welcome proof that cinema can still be urgent and relevant, while systematically deconstructing hoary old gangster myths dating back to Cagney, Paul Muni and beyond.

Import Export (*Ulrich Seidl, Austria*)

The most confrontational film I saw this year, Seidl's second feature was simultaneously revolting and riveting, lurid and tender, despairing and yet strangely respectful of human dignity.

My Winnipeg (*Guy Maddin, Canada*)

An utter delight, and probably the best beginners' introduction to the work of Canadian straitjacket-case Maddin, who pays tribute to his hometown in his usual inimitable fashion, with lashings of melodramatised autobiography.

You, the Living (*Roy Andersson, Sweden*)

A real surprise, since Andersson's *Songs for the Second Floor* left me fairly cold, but this tickled my funny-bone from the moment it pulled off a whip-smart reversal of the old tablecloth gag.

I Served the King of England (*Jirí Menzel, Czech Republic*)

Puffball (*Nicolas Roeg, UK*)

I can't make great claims for either, but seeing two of my favourite film-makers back behind a camera after insanely long hiatuses and on recognisable, if not full-strength form, was enough for me.



ED BUSCOMBE

Critic, UK

The Diving Bell and the Butterfly (*Julian Schnabel, France*)

One could scarcely imagine a less promising subject for a film than the story of a man totally paralysed except for his left eyelid, but Schnabel, aided by subtle acting from Mathieu Amalric and Anne Consigny, made something wonderfully inspiring while avoiding sentimentality.

No Country for Old Men (*Ethan Coen, Joel Coen, USA*)

Perhaps not quite as terrifying as Cormac McCarthy's novel, but the Coen brothers' film is by far the best screen version of this author's work to date, and in Javier Bardem's weird performance realised something genuinely scary.

Juno (*Jason Reitman, USA*)

Diablo Cody's screenplay is bracingly clear-eyed about the dilemmas of the teenage heroine who becomes unexpectedly pregnant. Ellen Page perfectly captures her boldly iconoclastic spirit.

California Dreamin' (Endless) (*Cristian Nemescu, Romania*)

The story of a Nato mission marooned in darkest Romania and a richly nuanced treatment of cultural misunderstanding, with a great performance by veteran Armand Assante as an exasperated American army captain.

Before the Devil Knows You're Dead (*Sidney Lumet, USA*)

Who would have thought that 84-year-old Lumet had such a movie in him? A perfect example of the truth of the maxim, "If you're in a hole, stop digging," as Philip Seymour Hoffman and Ethan Hawke lurch from one disaster to another in pursuit of ill-gotten gains.





The Wrestler

TOM CHARITY

Lovefilm and CNN.com, Canada

Appaloosa (*Ed Harris, USA*)

Ed Harris was born to make Westerns, and this one is a beaut: funny, laconic and sharp as a freshly oiled spur.

Hunger (*Steve McQueen, UK*)

For the smoke in the snow. For mopping up the piss. For daring to concentrate the words in the very heart of the movie.

The Wrestler (*Darren Aronofsky, USA*)

On the one hand there's Mickey Rourke's face – what's left of it. And on the other, there's the cavalier charm and gentility we remember from the old days.

Mad Detective (*Johnny To, Hong Kong*)

The most inspired (lunatic) twist on the detective genre since *Sherlock Jr.*

The Mist (*Frank Darabont, USA*)

The Happening (*M. Night Shyamalan, USA*)

These films are flawed and then some, but in the impending apocalypse – in black and white, and without Mark Wahlberg – we'll take Shyamalan's portents and Darabont's devastatingly bleak ending and run as if our lives depended on it.

IAN CHRISTIE

Professor of Film History, Birkbeck, UK

Hunger (*Steve McQueen, UK*)

An astonishing feature debut from Steve McQueen. Given the originality and variety of McQueen's 'gallery work' for more than a decade this shouldn't have come as a surprise, but I'm sure I wasn't alone in being surprised by its authority. This is a film that goes to the heart of the deep anger that has fuelled Northern Ireland's Troubles for over 40 years. With a minimum of historical scene-setting or relief from the hellish intensity of the Maze prison, McQueen and his collaborators take us to a time and place that already seems unimaginable, and give it moral depth and almost unbearable poignancy.

Hotel Diaries (*John Smith, UK*)

Nothing in John Smith's long career as Britain's wittiest maker of avant-garde films suggested that he would turn his deadpan gaze on the plight of the Palestinian people, yet this is the theme that slowly comes to dominate the diary pieces that Smith made during his travels around film festivals. Shandy-esque observations on his immediate surroundings gradually turn into a sustained reflection on what it would be like to be trapped in Palestine. Finally, Smith finds himself in Israel, able to see the territory that has begun to obsess him – the result is as powerful as Simone Bitton's *Mur* (Wall,



2004). A deeply engaging work that provokes an unexpected comparison with the master of oblique polemic, Chris Marker.

Waltz with Bashir (*Ari Folman, Israel*)

Ari Folman's extraordinary journey in search of his lost memory of taking part in Israel's invasion of Lebanon joins a select group of animated documentaries that use the graphic process to gain distance from what would otherwise be too painful to show on stage. However, the effect is anything but distanced from the horrors he witnessed, creating something closer to the psychoanalytic process of revisiting trauma than has been seen before in film.

Mongol (*Sergei Bodrov, Russia*)

Sergei Bodrov's spectacular *Mongol* was billed as potentially the first in a trilogy about the life of Genghis Khan. Having originally made his name as part of the Kazakh New Wave of the mid-1980s, it was fitting that Bodrov should return from living in the US to make this unusually intelligent and touching account of the young Temudjin emerging from clan-skirmishing to unite his people and begin his rise to world domination. The Kazakh and Mongolian landscapes are breathtaking, but it is the almost anthropological detail and delicacy of the film-making that impress in this truly intelligent epic.

In Bruges (*Martin McDonagh, UK/USA*)

Who would have thought that Martin McDonagh, enfant terrible of Irish theatre (though London born and bred) would manage to make his first feature as shockingly and hilariously unpredictable as his stage plays? McDonagh's take on the gangsters-on-the-run genre evokes earlier examples while bringing a startlingly fresh eye and ear to its plotting. Superb performances from Colin Farrell and Brendan Gleason, and ingenious use of Bruges' setting make for a triumphant reinvention of the 'existential thriller'.



MICHEL CIMENT

Positif, France

Couscous (*Abdelatif Kechiche, France*)

Abdelatif Kechiche's third feature is the outstanding French film of the year with its vitality, its pathos, its sense of humour and its exhilarating combination of the best of Pagnol and Pialat.

Gomorra (*Matteo Garrone, Italy*)

This exemplifies the return of the great Italian political cinema with its sense of places and faces and its exposure through a mosaic-style narrative of the wrongdoings of society.

Hunger (*Steve McQueen, UK*)

Undoubtedly the debut feature of the year, this reveals McQueen to be a powerful stylist capable of dealing with the contemporary issue of prison life without preaching and Manichaeism.

There Will Be Blood (*Paul Thomas Anderson, USA*)

This has an epic scope that relates to the great Hollywood films about America, from *Greed* to *Citizen Kane* and *Giant*. Daniel Day-Lewis' performance is on a par with Anderson's inspired direction.

Three Monkeys (*Nuri Bilge Ceylan, Turkey/France/Italy*)

This confirms Ceylan's status as one of the few new, great names that have emerged in the last decade. It is also a renewal of his talent in the *noir* genre.

KIERON CORLESS

Deputy Editor, Sight & Sound, UK

Le Genou d'Artémide (*Jean-Marie Straub, Italy*)

Itinéraire de Jean Bricard (*Jean-Marie Straub/Danièle Huillet, France*)



No question, the best two of the year. And the rest, in no particular order:

Our Beloved Month of August (*Miguel Gomes, Portugal/France*)

Uprise (*Sandro Aguilar, Portugal*)

Liverpool (*Lisandro Alonso, Argentina/Netherlands/France/Spain/Germany*)

Tout est pardonné (*Mia Hansen-Løve, France*)

MARK COUSINS

Prospect, UK

The Dark Knight (*Christopher Nolan, USA*)

This was fuelled by such anxiety about cities and what festers within them that it reminded me of the great anti-city films of the 1920s: as exciting as *Metropolis*.

Of Time and the City (*Terence Davies, UK*)

This showed a city where savvy, humour and memory is smelted.

Julia (*Erick Zonca, France*)

Zonca's exhilarating film treats its main character like a dung beetle scuttling through life. It made me think of Imamura's brilliant *The Insect Woman* (someone release this on DVD please).

Hunger (*Steve McQueen, UK*)

In *Hunger*, Bobby Sands is like an animal too. It took me back to Belfast in the early 1980s like no movie has done before.

The Class (*Laurent Cantet, France*)

As I watched *The Class*, I felt that I saw movies reborn. Its humanism is so passionate: it's bigger than cinema.



Persepolis

HAMID DABASHI

Columbia University, New York, USA

Offside (*Jafar Panahi, Iran, 2006*)

A fine film on gender discrimination in the Islamic Republic of Iran, in this case about women not being allowed to watch soccer games in sports stadiums. Panahi is now the heir-apparent to Abbas Kiarostami as the most intelligent film-maker of his generation. Politics is much more visibly embedded in his cinematic craftsmanship than in that of his mentor.

In the Valley of Elah (*Paul Haggis, USA*)

Haggis' quiet, subdued treatment of Hank Deerfield (Tommy Lee Jones) is one of the most memorable films of an otherwise mediocre bunch about 9/11 and its aftermath; American cinema is yet to produce anything remotely close to what it achieved in the 1970s in the aftermath of the Vietnam War. What will emerge out of the Afghan and Iraqi wars is yet to be seen. Here Haggis hits a mournful and incriminating note.

300 (*Zack Snyder, USA, 2006*)

This must be the most bizarre mixture of astonishing visual experiment with CGI and sheer political stupidity. If we ever forget what George W. Bush's America felt like, it will take only ten minutes of 300 to remind us.

Persepolis (Vincent Paronnaud/ Marjane Satrapi, France/USA)

The opposite of 300 – visually forgettable, politically progressive. Satrapi's original *bande dessinée* does not translate well into effective cinema because of its conflicting visual vocabulary.

Chop Shop (Ramin Bahrani, USA)

By far the best film I have seen this year.

CHRIS DARKE

Critic, UK

The Beaches of Agnès (Agnès Varda, France)

Supposedly her last feature, Varda's semi-encyclopaedic *ciné-mémoire* is an enchanting documentary self-portrait covering her life and work. The story will no doubt be filled out in the five-part, four-hour television version to be screened on ARTE in 2010.

Hunger (Steve McQueen, UK)

This devastatingly interior work closes round the viewer like the faeces-smearred walls of a hunger-striker's cell. Proof that McQueen's generation of film-mad artists has finally produced a real filmmaker.

A Christmas Tale (Arnaud Desplechin, France)

Desplechin claims Bergman and Wes Anderson as influences for his hyperactive family portrait, but it's neither mournful nor whimsical. A symphonic chamber movie emerges from the interplay of a great



cast, including an icy Catherine Deneuve as a mother who happily admits to hating her black-sheep son (Mathieu Amalric).

Sleep Furiously (*Gideon Koppel, UK*)

Too few films focus on the peregrinations of a mobile library. The exception is Koppel's delightful Welsh Valleys documentary, screened in competition at Locarno this year. Lyrical, meditative, funny and beautifully shot, it will have television commissioners tearing their hair out and is all the better for that.

On the Passage of a Few People through a Relatively Short Period of Time (*Guy Debord, France, 1959*)

This brilliantly titled pre-Situationist rarity screened at the London Film Festival and was a revelation. Oddly elegiac, it highlights Debord's talent as a manufacturer of Latinate jeremiads and made me wonder if it was from him that Godard nicked his chops. Also features the legendary soap-advertisement footage of a bathing Anna Karina that hit JLG so hard (and Debord too, it appears).

MARIA M. DELGADO

Academic and critic, UK

Liverpool (*Lisandro Alonso, Argentina/Netherlands/France/Spain/Germany*)

A Week Alone (*Celina Murga, Argentina*)

It was another strong year for Argentine cinema, but these two films stood out. *Liverpool* has shared concerns with Alonso's earlier *La libertad* and *Los muertos*, only here the narrative pull is stronger. Murga's detached take on the 'home alone' scenario follows the misadventures of a group of privileged children 'orphaned' for a week as their parents leave them in the care of their nanny. *A Week*



Alone offers an unsettling contemplation of social exclusion and institutional snobbery.

Parque vía (*Enrique Rivero, Mexico*)

A debut feature from the assistant director of last year's majestic *La Influencia*, *Parque vía* is a small but deftly crafted observation of an agoraphobic caretaker, Beto, facing change as the house he oversees is sold. The film shows a terrific eye for detail, crafting a portrait of both Beto and the social hierarchies of Mexican society without ever falling into the trap of overdramatisation.

Bullet in the Head (*Jaime Rosales, Spain*)

Rosales' third feature imagines the events leading up to the assassination of two plain-clothes policemen by supposed members of Basque separatist organisation, ETA. It's certainly not easy viewing, but asks pertinent questions about how we think about cinema and engages with the question of how film can represent and comment on the debates and dilemmas of our times.

Lazy Days (*Jesús Ponce, Spain*)

A welcome addition to the recent crop of Spanish slacker movies, *Lazy Days* goes beyond the bulls and flamenco clichés of Andalusia in depicting the ambling conversations of a trio of wasters who simply can't face 'selling out' by getting a job and joining 'the world' represented by their parents. The film is very funny and demonstrates a great ear for dialogue. The ending is rather too clean for comfort, but this is still a film that plays intelligently with the tropes of Spanish comedy while offering a warm and witty study of the changing boundaries of masculine relationships.



ANDREA DITTGEN

Critic, Germany

WALL•E (*Andrew Stanton, USA*)

Who could ever forget this cute little robot with eyes like E.T.? Never before did earth after the extinction of mankind look so peaceful, idyllic and fascinating. Enjoy the first 40 minutes without dialogue and smile to yourself – these emotions will stay in the subconscious.

RR (*James Benning, USA/Germany*)

The camera remains in a fixed position, as it did more than a hundred years ago with Edison and the Lumière Brothers, and watches the trains go by. 43 freight trains, some with up to 164 wagons, cross the valleys, mountains, bridges and towns of the USA during two hours of squeaking and clanging that bring you back to the essentials of the movies: watching and thinking about your life.

In Bruges (*Martin McDonagh, UK/USA*)

Two contract killers sent to Bruges in Belgium after a hit goes wrong are forced to face life and each other in a medieval town they weren't prepared for. It works like a screwball comedy from Hollywood's heyday, but this time with two men. It's also a brilliant thriller and a love story with very funny dialogue about life, death and tourism.

Couscous (*Abdelatif Kechiche, France*)

This story of an Arab family trying to open a restaurant in the port of Sète in France against all the odds finds a balance between joy, disappointments and suspense in a natural, touching way.

Let's Make Money (*Erwin Wagenhofer, Austria*)

An old-school documentary without commentary. Through simple, educative words and pictures of overwhelming intensity it explains how the tax haven of Jersey works, why there are 600,000 new



houses in Spain not meant for anyone to live in and other details of the worldwide market that have led to our present financial crisis.



United Red Army

THE FERRONI BRIGADE AKA OLAF MOLLER & CHRISTOPH HUBER

Critics, Germany, Austria

It's not that we think that 2008 was a lean year, just that we saw these five films for the first time on a big screen in 2008. They perfectly embody what we believe in, particularly in this combination:

United Red Army (*Wakamatsu Koji, Japan*)

Wakamatsu's film is a monument to an ambiguous but obstinate optimism.

Prisoner-Terrorist (*Adachi Masao, Japan, 2006*)

A philosophical exploitation/trash-tract about terrorism as self-realisation. It's astonishing that the two films above are so rarely screened together, old comrades-in-cinema as the two masters are.

And for our *entre'act*:

Itinéraire de Jean Bricard (*Jean-Marie Straub/Danièle Huillet, France*)

A monochrome ode to a landscape and a memoir of armed resistance.

Sacrificed Youth (*Zhang Nuanxin, China, 1985*)

The late Zhang's delicate magnum opus plays well with the above agit-triple, particularly in the way she says, in PRC-Modernist Socialist Realist terms, that although the Cultural Revolution was a disaster, the desire for change many then felt wasn't necessarily wrong.

Yuppi Du (*Adriano Celentano, Italy, 1975*)

Like nothing else that we saw this year, Italo-pop-God-cum-cunning-Berlusconi-basher Celentano's musical anarcho-comedy embodies a sense of radical freedom. Now that's what we call political film culture.

MARK FISHER

Acting Deputy Editor, The Wire, UK

The Dark Knight (*Christopher Nolan, USA*)

Enjoyable as a symptom as much as anything else, this is a depthless film, but that's good, since it means that it avoids Frank Miller's portentous psychologising. Instead it's about surfaces and masks, chance and justice.

Joy Division (*Grant Gee, UK*)

An evocation of a lost time and place, the film restores the exhilarating grandeur to Joy Division's music that *Control* failed to. It succeeds because it has what *Control* didn't: the voice and body of Ian Curtis.

Tyson (*James Toback, USA*)



How to throw away your life, twice – documentary as tragedy, life as a compulsion to repeat.

Wall•E (*Andrew Stanton, USA*)

Until the humans arrive this manages to combine silent-movie whimsy with a picturesque vision of extinction. After that it's ho-hum satire.

Heavy Metal In Baghdad (*Suroosh Alvi, Eddy Moretti, USA*)

A view of war-torn Iraq that goes where news cameras fear to tread that's moving, seemingly in spite of itself, or in spite of the too-cool-for-school posturing of its *Vice* magazine directors.

LIZZIE FRANCKE

Production development, UK Film Council

Waltz with Bashir (*Ari Folman, Israel*)

This powerful investigation of memory and history navigates the question of how to depict the undepictable as one former Israeli soldier struggles to remember his place in the Sabra-Shatila massacres of 1982. It's the kind of film I'd like to see on the sixth-form curriculum.

Hunger (*Steve McQueen, UK*)

Another film that returns to a bloody moment in recent history. Artist McQueen's outstanding film debut is such a physical piece of cinema that one feels the brutality as it depicts Bobby Sands' protest; stripped of everything, he has nothing but his body to challenge the powers that be.

WALL•E (*Andrew Stanton, USA*)



So witty and imaginative, this sweet tale of robots in love reminded me of the childhood pleasures of film. Those Pixar folks never fail to light up the darkness.

The Beaches of Agnès (*Agnès Varda, France*)

One of the gems of the festival circuit that I hope gets wider reach. On the lead-up to her 80th birthday Agnès Varda recreates her sentimental education as a director and artist out of the bric-à-brac of her personal film archive. She is such an inspiring and creative presence – this film should be given to all young hopeful film-makers.

I've Loved You So Long (*Philippe Claudel, France/Germany*)

This is a poignant, elegantly drawn story of redemption that pivots on exquisite characterisation and performances – most outstandingly the wonderful Kristin Scott Thomas.

JEAN-MICHEL FRODON

Cahiers du cinéma, France

Le Dernier maquis (*Rabah Ameur-Zaimeche, France/Algeria*)

A Christmas Tale (*Arnaud Desplechin, France*)

The Silence of Lorna (*Luc Dardenne/Jean-Pierre Dardenne, Belgium/France/Italy/Germany*)

35 Shots of Rum (*Claire Denis, France*)

Le Premier venu (*Jacques Doillon, France/Belgium*)

24 City (*Jia Zhangke, China*)

Shirin (*Abbas Kiarostami, Iran*)

Tokyo Sonata (*Kurosawa Kiyoshi, Japan/Netherlands/Hong Kong*)

The Headless Woman (*Lucrecia Martel, Argentina/France/Italy/Spain*)

Hunger (*Steve McQueen, UK*)



Serbis (*Brillante Mendoza, Philippines/France*)

Z32 (*Avi Mograbi, Israel/France*)

The Dark Knight (*Christopher Nolan, USA*)

Shine a Light (*Martin Scorsese, USA*)

GRAHAM FULLER

Critic, USA

Edge of Heaven (*Fatih Akin, Germany/Turkey*)

Moving away from the brutal energy of *Head-On*, Fatih Akin's latest is both reflective and gentle: forgive and connect are the messages of a film as concerned with healing generational conflicts as it is with crossing national boundaries. Its optimism only goes so far, though: turning the narrative gears are the murders of two women.

Extremist violence lurks on the periphery.

Flight of the Red Balloon (*Hou Hsiao-hsien, Taiwan/France*)

More than a dreamy paean to Albert Lamorrissette's children's classic, Hou Hsiao-hsien rejects the Paris of clichés in favour of a city equally vital in its plainer neighbourhoods. The struggles of Juliette Binoche's single mother to cope with her obnoxious tenants are especially upsetting in their normalcy. Mercifully, she has puppeteering to see her through, and the wonderful scene on the train in which she gives a treasured postcard to the Chinese puppetmaster obviates the need for language.

A Christmas Tale (*Arnaud Desplechin, France*)

The Arnaud Desplechin films that focus on friends and families redefine notions of communal dysfunctionality on screen. This is the story of a matriarch barely fazed by her 25 per cent chance of surviving leukaemia, a sister consumed by sibling hatred and her



near-suicidal adolescent son – and Desplechin wants us to have a good time. Hence the playful *mise en scène* and the overdue arrival of Emmanuelle Devos as the girlfriend who can barely keep a straight face.

Hunger (*Steve McQueen, UK*)

The Troubles acquire harrowing cinematic immediacy through the sustained concentration on surfaces, sounds, activities and, above all, the face and body of Bobby Sands (Michael Fassbender) during his protracted death. Much has been made of McQueen's strategic use of long takes, especially the dialectical play-within-the-film in which Sands and the parish priest (Liam Cunningham) debate the ethics of the hunger strike, but the film also owes its power to the switching of protagonists, undercutting conventional notions of the hero.

Vicky Cristina Barcelona (*Woody Allen, USA/Spain*)

The softly glowing palette of Woody Allen's four-way romance, set in the Barcelona demi-monde, suggests an animated *New Yorker* short story rather than a realistic film. So, too, do the voiceover narration and performances. Allen says nothing new or radical about love but it's how he doesn't that compels. He's less ambiguous on the importance of art, demonstrated most passionately by Penelope Cruz's half-mad painter.





Gomorrah

LEONARDO GARCIA-TSAO

Critic, Mexico

Gomorrah (*Matteo Garrone, Italy*)

An enthralling account of how the Camorra has seeped into every aspect of Neapolitan life. Through five separate narratives, the film creates an overpowering, cumulative effect.

Still Walking (*Kore-eda Hirokazu, Japan*)

In what is perhaps Kore-eda's best work to date, the nuanced depiction of a Japanese family's inner turmoil brought out justified comparisons with Ozu.

Three Monkeys (*Nuri Bilge Ceylan, Turkey/France/Italy*)

Although dismissed by some colleagues as a minor film, this is an intense and beautifully shot meditation of how moral compromise corrodes a family.

CHARLOTTE GARSON

Cahiers du cinéma, France

Le Premier venu (*Jacques Doillon, France/Belgium*)

Just Anybody (actually *Le Premier venu* is better translated as *The First One to Come Along*) is the most freeform French film of 2008. It's also the only one that left a lasting impression of its location (the Bay of Somme) upon me. Lastly, it highlights once more Gérald Thomassin, star of Doillon's *The Little Gangster* (1990).

Colossal Youth (*Pedro Costa, France/ Portugal/Switzerland, 2006*)

For Costa's work with (and in no way his documentary portrait of) the inhabitants of the Fontainhas district (now destroyed); the verses of French poet Robert Desnos have never sounded quite so relevant as they do here coming from the lips of protagonist Ventura.

No Country for Old Men (*Ethan Coen/Joel Coen, USA*)

Stunning for both its absolute linearity (it is a film of pure pursuit) and for the holes, skilfully cut into the screenplay, into which all causality disappears.

The Silence of Lorna (*Luc Dardenne/Jean-Pierre Dardenne, Belgium/France/Italy/Germany*)

Cannes audiences have come to expect excellence from the Dardennes, hence the fact that *The Silence of Lorna* was somewhat overlooked. Here, for the first time, murder enters into the Belgians' cinematic universe, while their handheld camera, calmer than ever before, is also much looser in its framing. *Lorna* outclasses *Rosetta*, which was still too influenced by Bresson's *Mouchette*.

Yumurta (*Semih Kaplanoglu, Turkey/Greece*)

The work inside its sequence shots is some of the least affected and least pretentious there is. Even the moment of the *coup de foudre* between the characters is full of uncertainty.



CHARLES GANT

Heat magazine, UK

The Class (*Laurent Cantet, France*)

There Will Be Blood (*Paul Thomas Anderson, USA*)

Gomorrah (*Matteo Garrone, Italy*)

Hunger (*Steve McQueen, UK*)

The Wrestler (*Darren Aronofsky, USA*)

The Cannes critics, who never pass up the chance for a good moan, built up their indignation in advance of the prize-giving ceremony. Jury head Sean Penn was bound to award the Palme D'Or to the flawed *Che* for political reasons, or to Clint Eastwood's solidly middlebrow *Changeling* for personal ones. In fact, the best two competition films, *The Class* and *Gomorrah*, won the top two prizes. Who knows what might have occurred had Steve McQueen's *Hunger* been selected to compete. Awards season is now kicking off once again. I've yet to see all the highly touted contenders, but I doubt I'll see a better performance than Mickey Rourke's in *The Wrestler*. It's up there with Daniel Day-Lewis in *There Will Be Blood*, which I saw too late to include in this process a year ago and include here thanks to its February 2008 release.

RYAN GILBEY

New Statesman, UK

Hunger (*Steve McQueen, UK*)

4 Months, 3 Weeks and 2 Days (*Cristian Mungiu, Romania*)

Unrelated (*Joanna Hogg, UK*)



Milk (*Gus Van Sant, USA*)

Rachel Getting Married (*Jonathan Demme, USA*)

CARMEN GRAY

Critic, UK

Adoration (*Atom Egoyan, Canada*)

A welcome return to the playfulness of *Exotica*, Egoyan's latest is about a kid who colludes with his teacher to invent a fictional story about his Arab father planting a bomb on his mother. Egoyan doesn't flatten his treatment of a topic even as touchy as terrorism into safe and tired constructs. Instead he uses his tried-and-true ploy of activating audience assumptions only to undercut them. The film displays an enchanting surrealism in scenes such as a woman in an ominous, full-face, glimmering silver burkha walking in snowy, Christmas-light-adorned suburbs at night.

The Class (*Laurent Cantet, France*)

This acutely insightful and realistic depiction of a year in a tough, multi-ethnic Paris school is nothing short of uncanny in the accuracy with which it captures the extremely subtle prejudices and misunderstandings that can underlie cross-cultural interaction. It's also a devastating depiction of how fear can make even the best-intentioned return to a default of self-preservation, as the tide of our sympathy turns slowly away from teacher Mr Marin, who is refreshingly not an inspirational saint.

Colossal Youth (*Pedro Costa, France/Portugal/Switzerland, 2006*)

The most striking and challenging film I saw this year. Set in the impoverished Fontainhas quarter of Lisbon, it achieves acute social observation while at the same time departing imaginatively from



stock gritty realism. The otherworldliness of its weary pace and its despairing dead-end dreaming is exemplified by the love letter the protagonist Ventura recites: “I wish I could give you a hundred thousand cigarettes, a dozen fancy dresses, a car, the little lava lamp you’ve always dreamed of, a four-penny bouquet.”

Hunger (*Steve McQueen, UK*)

This sparse, visually stunning evocation of the hardships faced by both IRA prisoners and their guards during the 1981 hunger strikes is another refreshing departure from gritty realism, for which McQueen’s background in video art has clearly prepared him. The verbal sparring that occurs between hunger striker Bobby Sands and a visiting priest on the ethics of dying for a cause adds to the film’s thematic weight and reveals McQueen’s deft command of structural components.

The Banishment (*Andrey Zvyagintsev, Russia*)

My fifth choice was a toss-up between this and *Gomorra*.

Zvyagintsev’s latest struck me more deeply and stayed with me longer – the reason isn’t just my entrenched Russophilia, or the film’s beautifully sombre Arvo Part soundtrack. This is a film that is most notable for its twist which, rather than being a mere trick, is at the film’s metaphysical core, as it becomes evident that Vera’s declaration to her husband (that she’s pregnant, but the child isn’t his) isn’t literally true, but is perhaps true on a more profound level.





Summer Hours

ALEXANDER HORWATH

Filmmuseum, Austria

Summer Hours (*Olivier Assayas, France*)

Summer Hours is the best film of 2008 and the best Chekhov production since 1904, to my knowledge – the only film to focus so fully and graciously on the very real life of things.

Gomorrah (*Matteo Garrone, Italy*)

Because, as a second and third viewing made clear, its greatness in matters of art and heart wasn't diluted by its surprising success with so many critics and non-critics (surprising only because I feared that cinephiles would give it an easy anti-realist bashing).

Our Beloved Month of August (*Miguel Gomes, Portugal/France*)

Because its closest filmic competitors in the field of real independence and fantastical freedom – Wakamatsu Koji's *United Red Army* and Guy Maddin's *My Winnipeg* – premiered in 2007.

Wendy and Lucy (*Kelly Reichardt, USA*)

Iron Man (*Jon Favreau, USA*)

Whatever their faults, and whatever history will say about the USA between November 2000 and November 2008, it was still the place with the richest, most varied film-making on Earth.

Revanche (Götz Spielmann, Austria)

New proof that Austria, from John Cook's *Slow Summer* (1976) to Norbert Pfaffenbichler's *Mosaik Mécanique* (2008, short), produces strong, untypical strands of film-making that should stand shoulder-to-shoulder internationally with so-called nationally typical ones.



Waltz with Bashir

ALI JAAFAR

Variety, UK

Waltz with Bashir (Ari Folman, Israel)

Gomorra (Matteo Garrone, Italy)

WALL•E (Andrew Stanton, USA)

Frost/Nixon (Ron Howard, USA/UK/France)

Laila's Birthday (Rashid Masharawi, Palestine/Tunisia/Netherlands)

Production of the year has to go to Barack Obama's campaign team.

NICK JAMES

Editor, Sight & Sound, UK

There Will Be Blood (*Paul Thomas Anderson, USA*)

Powerful large-scale cinematic drama such as very few film-makers are now capable of producing. On a par with many of the 70s greats such as *Apocalypse Now* and *Chinatown*. Day-Lewis knows how to overplay with conviction better than anyone I can think of. Here he is the Big Bad Wolf of Capital, harrowing America for his hard-gotten gains.

The Class (*Laurent Cantet, France*)

Laurent Cantet here is out-Loaching Ken and getting a more human as well as humanist result. The film's state-funded teaching environment feels completely authentic – so do the terrific bunch of kids involved; it's worth seeking out for them alone.

Gomorrah (*Matteo Garrone, Italy*)

Quotidian hell in the hinterland of Naples rendered realistically and therefore nihilistically. That said, the parts restricted to the Secondigliano housing estate are at times like a sci-fi spaceship-in-peril film, except that death comes swiftly without drama. A laconic crime epic for anti-romantic times.

The Lie of the Land (*Molly Dineen, UK*)

I saw this when serving on a documentary jury, and found it the most affecting film about England (with all due respect to Terence Davies) that I saw this year. So powerful is its gentle examination of the often brutalising lives of farmers that it's capable of changing minds on such divisive issues as animal welfare, fox-hunting and vegetarianism

The Headless Woman (*Lucrecia Martel, Argentina/France/Italy/Spain*)

I'm afraid this brilliant study of a pampered woman's feckless drift through a road accident, amnesia and recovery had me fulminating



at the many colleagues who didn't 'get it'. A film that really rewards close observation. It has very little truck with pleasing the audience.

KENT JONES

Film Comment, Lincoln Center, USA

Four years ago, Chris Marker sent around a cartoon predicting that Barack Obama would be the first African-American president of the United States. The only thing he got wrong was the year. We didn't have to wait until 2016.

On the night Obama was elected, we opened our windows and heard cheers and honking horns and victory whoops rising up from the street. We threw on our coats and ran out on to Broadway, which was shut down. We milled and chanted and clapped and jumped and somehow made way for an occasional bus or cab whose drivers honked their horns in jubilant solidarity, some with tears flowing down their cheeks. Later, as Obama gave his magnificently grave and calm acceptance speech, I thought of all the people who were no longer around to see this, to whom his victory would have meant so much. People like my father Dana, who has been gone for three years now, or Richard Rorty, a man I knew slightly and admired greatly, who passed away last year. Or my friend Manny Farber, who died in August and whose last days were brightened by Obama's presence. A couple of days after the election, I saw:

The Curious Case of Benjamin Button (*David Fincher, USA*)

"It's about time passing, just like *Zodiac*," said my son, quite rightly. It's a movie for any moment, but speaks to this specific one with great eloquence because its particular reflection on time carries both mourning *and* hope. *Benjamin Button* is so moving and so frank (about



mortality) yet so wondrous that you might almost forget that it also happens to be a technical feat of the highest order.

Other films that meant a great deal to me this year were:

RR (*James Benning, USA/Germany*)

His rapturously concentrated and exciting new 'train movie'.

The Headless Woman (*Lucrecia Martel, Argentina/France/Italy/Spain*)

An even more refined, mysterious and troubling film than *The Holy Girl*.

Generation Kill (*HBO television series, USA*)

This terrific exploration of soldiering as a blue-collar profession is a very intelligent look at the war in Iraq from the people who brought us *The Wire*.

Tokyo Sonata (*Kurosawa Kiyoshi, Japan/Netherlands/Hong Kong*)

A hair-raising and emotionally bracing account of a family's disintegration and tentative reconstitution.

Summer Hours (*Olivier Assayas, France*)

A Christmas Tale (*Arnaud Desplechin, France*)

Two very different family films set in two different keys, from two great French film-makers.

SHEILA JOHNSTON

Critic, UK

The Wrestler (*Darren Aronofsky, USA*)

Not just a bravura comeback for Mickey Rourke (though it is), but an intimate, funny look at a community – small-time pro-wrestlers – rarely seen on film.

Año uña (*Jonás Cuarón, Mexico*)



Still photographs are stitched together into a bittersweet love story with the help of great vocal performances and sound design. First-time director Jonás is the son of Alfonso Cuarón but decidedly his own man.

Lake Tahoe (*Fernando Eimbcke, Mexico*)

No apologies for including two Mexican movies here: this gorgeous-looking shaggy-dog story displays a highly original mix of humour and sadness.

Before the Devil Knows You're Dead (*Sidney Lumet, UK/USA*)

The passion and vigour of a newcomer, the effortless skill of a master: Lumet, 84, brings this exceptional combination to his pungent heist thriller.

Taxi to the Dark Side (*Alex Gibney, USA*)

Much more than an exposé of Abu Ghraib, Gibney's shattering documentary chronicles the enveloping shame of a nation. Let's hope it soon becomes distant history.



Of Time and the City

PHILIP KEMP

Critic, UK

Hunger (*Steve McQueen, UK*)

Powerful, uncompromising, stylistically audacious – the most striking British feature debut for years.

In Bruges (*Martin McDonagh, UK/USA*)

Scabrously funny and gloriously irreverent. Colin Farrell's eyebrows deserve an Oscar of their own.

Of Time and the City (*Terence Davies, UK*)

Our foremost cinematic poet back at last with a bitter-sweet tribute to his native city.

Lust, Caution (*Ang Lee, USA/ China/ Taiwan/ Hong Kong*)

Lee's wartime romantic tragedy builds slowly and confidently towards a shattering emotional climax.

Jar City (*Baltasar Kormákur, Iceland/ Germany/ Denmark*)

A dark, convoluted thriller, haunted by past misdeeds and played out against Iceland's stark landscape.



Happy-Go-Lucky

MARK LE FANU

Academic and critic, Denmark

Sight & Sound readers won't need persuading that to really grasp a particular film's quality it has to be seen in the cinema. Only two of the five films I've chosen approach anything near a big budget, but all of them come into their own by being experienced in proper conditions: darkness, quality projection, traditional screen size – and an alert, engaged audience.

La Rabia (*Albertina Carri, Argentina*)

This was shown in the Panorama in Berlin but few critics appeared to pay much attention to it – it certainly didn't win any prizes. Yet, for me, this study of a murderous dispute between neighbours in the remote Argentinian pampas was physical and psychological filmmaking at the highest level. A brilliant script, outstanding performances (particularly by two amazing child actors) and an unerring grasp of the feel of the landscape; in short, one of those films where from the very first frame you know you are in competent hands.

Si le vent soulève les sables (*Marion Hänsel, France*)

A fierce African landscape of scrub and brush and desert is the background of my second choice. A goat-herding family on the fringes of the Sahara leave their home and trek miles to find fertile feeding grounds, meeting terrible obstacles on the way. The story takes place today but might have been situated at any time in history: the tragic events are narrated with a quietly masterful serenity, with no concessions to a sentimental outcome. Each of the main characters is portrayed with beauty and dignity.

Le Deuxième souffle (*Alain Corneau, France*)



This majestic remake of Jean-Pierre Melville's 1966 film was expensive to make and failed at the box office, so it seems as if rather few people may have seen it. All the more reason to insist on its merits, foremost of which is its absolute artistic suavity in acting (Daniel Auteuil, Monica Bellucci, Jacques Dutronc, never mellow), decor, tone and diction. Melville's take on the heist genre was sophisticated in the first place; Corneau effortlessly matches that sophistication, in the process deepening the original's characterisation by making it more human.

None of these films has found UK distribution so far. Too bad.

Among the year's more visible titles:

Happy-Go-Lucky (*Mike Leigh, UK*)

I very much enjoyed this, aesthetically as well as morally. A real film, not just a television play.

There Will Be Blood (*Paul Thomas Anderson, USA*)

Only one adjective will do to describe this film's restless, epic imagination: magisterial!



In Bruges

COLIN MACGABE

Academic and critic, UK

Hunger (*Steve McQueen, UK*)

I went to mock and stayed to marvel. McQueen is a great film-maker who navigated the politics of Northern Ireland by studiously ignoring them.

Gomorrah (*Matteo Garrone, Italy*)

This great film showed how neorealism is always a potentially valuable method.

Of Time and the City (*Terence Davies, UK*)

Davies's film quotes great poetry and is great poetry.

In Bruges (*Martin McDonagh, UK/USA*)

Not a great film, but a very funny one with great performances all the way down the line.

The Changeling (*Clint Eastwood, USA*)

The movie that Barack Obama must have enjoyed most this year, for it showed that Eastwood, with his finger as always on the nation's pulse, knew that this was a year they were going "to throw out da bums".

GEOFFREY MACNAB

Critic, UK

The Wrestler (*Darren Aronofsky, USA*)

A grungy, lowish-budget yarn about a wrestler fallen on hard times, Aronofsky's film has the same pathos and gentleness as John Huston's *Fat City*. The wrestling scenes may be garish and violent but



the wrestlers treat each other with a respect that they can't find in the outside world. Mickey Rourke is immensely moving in a role tailor-made for him.

Happy-Go-Lucky (*Mike Leigh, UK*)

In the year of the credit crunch and the global economic slowdown, Sally Hawkins' irrepressible optimism seemed all the more of a tonic.

Tyson (*James Toback, USA*)

The former world heavyweight boxing champ Mike Tyson emerges as a complex, contradictory and at least partially sympathetic figure in Toback's rivetting documentary.

Bird Watchers (*Marco Bechis, Italy/Brazil*)

Bechis' subversive and lyrical drama about land ownership and colonial bad faith in Brazil.

Katyn (*Andrzej Wajda, Poland*)

British exhibitors apparently found Wajda's film about the Katyn massacre "old-fashioned", which is why it barely surfaced in cinemas here. Old-fashioned it may have been in its storytelling style, but it was also meticulously crafted and alerted audiences to a wartime atrocity that, even within Poland, hasn't always been acknowledged.

DEMETRIOS MATHEOU

Critic, Sunday Herald, UK

Hunger (*Steve McQueen, UK*)

McQueen's account of hunger striker Bobby Sands confidently lets the images do the talking – images that are by turn ravishing, bruising, haunting. In the middle of the film is a verbal stand-off,



between terrorist and priest, to rival that of Pacino and De Niro in *Heat*. Welcome a master.

Tony Manero (*Pablo Larraín, Chile/Brazil*)

Disco and dictatorship meet in this wickedly inspired prism on the Pinochet years by Chilean Larraín. Weaselly Raúl is a psychopath obsessed with Travolta's Jive Talkin' *Saturday Night Fever* character. While he murders all who bar his way to a disco dancefloor, his troupe risk their lives to plot against the regime. American culture waits to fill the void.

The Dark Knight (*Christopher Nolan, USA*)

Nolan and Bale's Batman reprise is unremittingly bleak to the point of genius. Action-packed, for sure, but at its chill heart Ledger's tour-de-force Joker turns comic strip into the last word in moral mindfuck. Funny too.

In Search of a Midnight Kiss (*Alex Holdridge, USA*)

Deliciously splenetic slice of US-indie romance, primed by a 'misanthrope-to-misanthrope' Craig's List plea for New Year's company, its two ill-crossed loners thawing in gorgeously shot downtown LA.

A Week Alone (*Celina Murga, Argentina*)

Murga is one of the unsung of the Argentine New Wave, her second film a super-smart prod at the soullessness of her country's bourgeoisie, viewed through the experience of rich kids living on a gated estate. A masterclass in directing children.

ADRIAN MARTIN

Critic, Australia

Our Beloved Month of August (*Miguel Gomes, Portugal/France*)



This Portuguese film is the revelation of the year – an idiosyncratic, very funny and moving blend of documentary, fiction and popular music.

The Silence of Lorna (*Luc Dardenne/Jean-Pierre Dardenne, Belgium/France/Italy/Germany*)

The Belgian brothers' best film since *Rosetta* shows, once and for all, how their supposed 'social realism' has much more to do with Bresson and philosophy.

We Own the Night (*James Gray, USA*)

Gray is the new Jerry Lee Lewis: the French love him and Americans hate him. Ignore complaints about his 'tin ear' and predilection for loony melodrama; this is far better than *The Departed*, *Miami Vice* and *There Will Be Blood* combined.

L'Aimée (*Arnaud Desplechin, France*)

A Christmas Tale is the one that has hooked audiences, but this smaller, more personal piece about family and memory reveals Desplechin's skill at weaving lyrical, poetic mystery into seemingly documentary material.

Good Cats (*Ying Liang, China*)

There is now a rather proper 'Jia Zhangke school' in Chinese cinema, but this film breaks free of it. A withering look at economic changes and their consequences in everyday life, it has a perverse sense of fun and a soundtrack to match its youthful energy.

HENRY K. MILLER

Academic, UK

I'm Not There (*Todd Haynes, USA*)

The British release came long after last year's poll deadline.



Step Brothers (Adam McKay, USA)

Will Ferrell's best performance since *Anchorman*.

Summer Hours (Olivier Assayas, France)

This is Assayas' best film since *Late August, Early September*.

Lawrence of Belgravia (Paul Kelly, UK)

The subject of this film, the world's greatest pop star, won't see it until it gets the premiere he feels due to him. Distributors, the call is on you.

Charlie Wilson's War (Mike Nichols, USA)

Some relief from what was a golden age for nihilism.



Let the Right One In

KIM NEWMAN

Critic, UK

The King of Kong: A Fistful of Quarters (Seth Lewis Gordon, USA)

I was at the big preview screenings of all this year's crowd-pleasing blockbusters, but the most engaged and enthusiastic audience I was part of was for this documentary on a subject I wouldn't have thought I could raise even a mild interest in: who holds a record on a

now-antiquated arcade videogame. It's a real-life Will Ferrell weird retro sports comedy-drama.

Let the Right One In (*Tomas Alfredson, Sweden*)

A Swedish council-estate vampire movie set in the early 1980s. Reading Jon Ajvide Lindquist's novel in the knowledge that it had been filmed, I mentally ticked off the scenes and elements which were liable to be blunted or dropped only to find them not just included but tactfully presented. This has the most heartwarming massacre of children I've ever seen in a movie. English language remake rights have been sold: see the original before it's buried.

James Batman (*Artemio Marquez, Philippines, 1966*)

I kind of liked both *The Dark Knight* and *Quantum of Solace* but felt they were both too committed to not being any fun at all. Meanwhile I was astonished and pleased to discover the existence of this 1966 Filipino comedy, which I saw in an unsubtitled Tagalog DVD, that scrambles the Bat and Bond franchises and features local comedian Dolphy (Rodolfo Vera Quizon) playing both a floppy-eared Batman and a loud-jacketed James Bond, tangling with an axis of evil that includes a slimmer Penguin, Fu Manchu (or nearest offer), Chinese-movie villainess Black Rose and a Dr Doom lookalike.

Happy-Go-Lucky (*Mike Leigh, UK*)

There was heated debate in the letters page of this magazine about Leigh's latest, but I found it wholly engaging. Sally Hawkins's Poppy strikes me as at once a genuine heroine and ever so slightly terrifying. As with many Leigh films it's impossible to tell from the brief description you get on the invite where exactly the story will go, which makes his movies peculiarly suspenseful.

WALL•E (*Andrew Stanton, USA*)

The most perfectly achieved mainstream big Hollywood production of the year. Finally, *Hello Dolly!* might turn a profit of the back of it.





The Headless Woman

JAMES QUANDT

Film programmer, Canada

Itinéraire de Jean Bricard (*Jean-Marie Straub/Danièle Huillet, France*)

Le Genou d'Artémide (*Jean-Marie Straub, Italy*)

The high point of Cannes and of the year, Jean-Marie Straub's twin farewells to a past in which political resistance was a matter of life and death, and to his beloved partner and co-director Danièle Huillet, achieve rending nobility.

The Headless Woman (*Lucrecia Martel, Argentina/France/Italy/Spain*)

Martel returns to her terrain of oblique unease among the rural bourgeoisie of Argentina in a trance film that leaves its audience as unmoored as its sleepwalking heroine.

Liverpool (*Lisandro Alonso, Argentina/Netherlands/France/Spain/Germany*)

One has come to expect formal precision from Alonso, with *Liverpool* completing his trilogy about intractable men journeying solo

through hinterland, but the film's emotional amplitude is both new and welcome.

Tony Manero (*Pablo Larraín, Chile/Brazil*)

A Travolta-obsessed psycho, fixated on *Saturday Night Fever*, lives out *Vengeance Is Mine* in Pinochet's Chile. Though director Larraín leans a little heavily on his political metaphors and cinematic influences (*Taxi Driver*, *The Conformist*), the film attains formidable, dank intensity.



Slumdog Millionaire

NAMAN RAMACHANDRAN

Critic, UK/India

Slumdog Millionaire (*Danny Boyle, UK/USA*)

Danny Boyle captures the energy of Mumbai in a way no other filmmaker has managed.

99 francs (*Jan Kounen, France*)

This hallucinogenic, vicious satire on the advertising industry has a haunting coda.

The Good, the Bad, the Weird (*Kim Ji-woon, South Korea*)

A thoroughly enjoyable homage to Sergio Leone's spaghetti Westerns that reaffirms Korea's pole position in current Asian cinema.

Hunger (*Steve McQueen, UK*)

McQueen's film is a starkly beautiful, spine-chilling, subtle political statement.

Subramanyapuram (*Sasi Kumar, India*)

The low-budget 1980s-set friendship saga that outperformed big-budget star vehicles and continues the renaissance of the Tamil indie industry.

NICOLAS RAPOLD

Film Comment, USA

The Films of Frederick Wiseman

Towering over my moviegoing this year was the experience of viewing or reviewing Wiseman's 34 documentaries. By fostering habits of observation and synthesis, his terrific work literally makes you a better movie watcher. Not to mention world watcher: walking on the street, I found the same habits coming to the fore. Forget Kino-Glaz – here's Wiseman-Eye!

Random rep-house highlights in a mixed year for new releases included the following at MOMA:

Peter Hutton's films

American Job (*Chris Smith, USA, 1996*)

At Alliance Française:

Une sale histoire (*Jean Eustache, France, 1977*)

Avoiding eye contact afterwards. And at Film Forum:

Série noire (*Alain Corneau, France, 1979*)



In which Patrick Dewaere virtually jumps off the screen. At the
Walter Reade:

The Oshima Nagisa Retrospective

Kim Ki-young

A Charlton Heston double bill

Seen in front of a Heston grandkid who, at 10 or 12-years-old, piped
up that he'd seen *Ben-Hur* "at least three times".

Casting a Glance (*James Benning, USA*)

The best biopic of an art object.

Hunger (*Steve McQueen, UK*) and...

The Headless Woman (*Lucrecia Martel, Argentina/France/Italy/Spain*)

...had me exiting the theatre staggering.

And in no particular order:

A Christmas Tale (*Arnaud Desplechin, France*)

Happy-Go-Lucky (*Mike Leigh, UK*)

Let the Right One In (*Tomas Alfredson, Sweden*)

Burn After Reading (*Ethan Coen/Joel Coen, USA*)

Redbelt (*David Mamet, USA*)

And...

Synecdoche, New York (*Charlie Kaufman, USA*)

...the perpetual-motion depression machine.

KONG RITHDEE

The Bangkok Post, Thailand

Synecdoche, New York (*Charlie Kaufman, USA*)



Kaufman's film is sad and oddly heartbreaking in its portrait of a man confronting his futility and insignificance of his existence and his art – or perhaps they're the same thing.

Let the Right One In (*Tomas Alfredson, Sweden*)

An underage vampire hooks up with an orphan boy in this cold, dark and moving film that's a teen love story, a blood-splashed horror, and the flipside of a fluffy fairytale, set in a nearly adult-free urban backwoods of Scandinavia.

Che (*Steven Soderbergh, USA*)

Soderbergh's bonus-pack is at once muscular and supple. It has a controlled heft that makes you stick with it and the two films' refusal to build up to climaxes also gives them an unlikely power.

Emerald (*Apichatpong Weerasethakul, Thailand*)

Ghosts gossip and reminisce in the rooms of an abandoned hotel where the debris of lost memories wafts through the static air.

WALL•E (*Andrew Stanton, USA*)

I'm not a robophilic; I just find WALL•E plucky and Eve very lovely.

TIM ROBEY

The Telegraph, UK

Hunger (*Steve McQueen, UK*)

The year's most formally impressive cinematic call-to-arms, not so much for that static dialogue scene as for McQueen's ferocious collisions of image and sound.

The Glass (*Laurent Cantet, France*)

Simply enthralling, and a Palme d'Or winner that's hard to knock, although it contains plenty to argue about.

A Christmas Tale (*Arnaud Desplechin, France*)



Some call Desplechin an acquired taste but I wolfed down this virtuoso ensemble piece, loving the in-joke of Emmanuelle Devos's late arrival.

Secret Sunshine (*Lee Chang-dong, South Korea*)

Further proof that Lee Chang-dong thinks deeply about what he's doing and gets astounding performances out of his lead actresses – yet he still can't get a theatrical release here?

Julia (*Erick Zonca, France*)

A kneejerk Berlin pariah, Zonca's *Gloria* homage goes off the rails far more excitingly than most movies stay on them, and the magnificently abrasive Tilda Swinton gives even Gena Rowlands a run for her money.

NICK RODDICK

Critic, UK

Stop-Loss (*Kimberly Peirce, USA*)

Sure, there are some hokey moments, but no other film has so precisely skewered the difference between the Iraq and Vietnam wars; both unpopular at home, but only Iraq was fought by volunteer soldiers for whom the army was one of very few employment options. This is an angry, bitter and emotional diatribe about the betrayal of the American working class.

Of Time and the City (*Terence Davies, UK*)

The first time, I wept; the second, I began to appreciate the exquisite artistry that Davies has put into combining found footage, music, quotations and personal reminiscence. Not since Humphrey Jennings has a British film-maker used all the tools of cinema with



such assurance and skill to rescue our sense of national identity from the Last Night of the Proms.

Love and Other Crimes (*Stefan Arsenijevic, Serbia/Germany/Austria/Slovenia*)

Set in the concrete wasteland of New Belgrade, an appropriately bleak tragedy of failed hopes held together by some of the best screen acting of the year – a powerful reminder of just how good ‘Yugoslav’ cinema used to be before the country fell apart and/or Kusturica monopolised the territory.

Nick & Norah’s Infinite Playlist (*Peter Sollett, USA*)

I love this film and don’t really care about my failure to convert those who don’t: a wonderfully energising poem to youth, love, music, human nature and the way New York used to be before it got Disneyfied. It also disproves Danny Boyle’s belief that only the British do toilet jokes.

A Christmas Tale (*Arnaud Desplechin, France*)

A Christmas cracker (sorry, couldn’t resist that) from France’s most atypical director: a modernist take on an old-fashioned family drama with two great performances (Amalric and Devos), some disconcerting but precisely managed shifts in tone and a deliciously wicked sense of humour.

JONATHAN ROMNEY

Independent on Sunday, UK

My Winnipeg (*Guy Maddin, Canada*)

This has been a vintage year for first-person memoir-diary-essay films, Terence Davies (*Of Time and the City*) and Agnès Varda (*The*



Beaches of Agnès) also leading the pack. But for sheer fabulist eccentricity, Maddin's essay in civic Freudianism was in a snowbound league of its own.

Johnny Mad Dog (*Jean-Stéphane Sauvaire, France/Belgium/Liberia*)

This year's most arresting revelation, Sauvaire's film is a troubling, intense drama about child soldiers in an African war zone. That it was shot in Liberia, with a cast including several young ex-soldiers, makes the enterprise both admirable and open to question, but Sauvaire's kinetic film also reimagines the language of war cinema in a way that makes it a film of the moment.

There Will Be Blood (*Paul Thomas Anderson, USA*)

This is an unexpected film from a director who never seemed to have this sort of intensity in him. Daniel Day-Lewis's performance is one of barnstorming eccentricity, but it may prove one for the ages. *There Will Be Blood* proved a rare vital sign in the currently anaemic body of US cinema.

Import Export (*Ulrich Seidl, Austria*)

Underrated in Cannes last year, Seidl's confrontational film came into its own again on its UK release. The Austrian director showed some signs of compassion after the seemingly wholehearted misanthropy of *Dog Days*. One of cinema's most trenchant statements about the new Europe.

Unrelated (*Joanna Hogg, UK*)

Hogg's low-budget drama showed more in common with European cinema, and perhaps the English novel of manners, than with any recent British film. This dissection of ordinary agonies among unexceptional people displayed a no-nonsense economy as well as a psychological acuity that made for one of the year's most intelligent offerings.



JONATHAN ROSENBAUM

Critic, USA

I retired from a 20-year stint of regular reviewing at the end of February. Apart from a few festivals since then, I haven't seen many new features and haven't experienced much sense of any loss. The current work that stirs me the most tends to interface non-fiction and fiction, usually with greater emphasis on the former:

24 City (*Jia Zhangke, China*)

Still the producer of our best global newspapers.

Of Time and the City (*Terence Davies, UK*)

England's greatest living film-maker gains a new dimension here through his performative voice.

The Beaches of Agnès (*Agnès Varda, France*)

Varda is another great chronicler, autobiographer, and indexer.

Trouble the Water (*Tia Lessen/Carl Deal, USA*)

This Hurricane Katrina documentary is most notable for its indefatigable star, 24-year-old Kimberly Rivers Roberts.

End of the Rainbow (*Robert Nugent, Australia/France*)

This is a beautifully conceived and constructed French documentary by an Australian about postcolonial global plunder in Guinea, West Africa – it won the international grand prize at DocLisboa, on whose jury I served.





Man on Wire

SUKHDEV SANDHU

Daily Telegraph, UK

Beijing Olympics Opening Ceremony (*Zhang Yimou, China*)

The drums; the LED paper scrolls; the dancers; the lip-synching and the CGI fireworks; the setting of Herzog and De Meuron's extraordinary Bird's Nest Stadium; the militant euphoria of it all. This wasn't just Zhang's best production for many years, it was also the most giddy, eye-popping spectacle of the year.

Patria mia, nomad direction (*Duska Zagorac, Bosnia & Herzegovina/UK*)

No documentary this year beguiled me more than this revelatory and quietly lyrical portrait of the sizeable Chinese population living in present-day Bosnia. Zagorac, returning to the country after 15 years of exile in London, sees these migrants as a "mirror of our own dislocation". She depicts with grace and empathy the reconstruction work they perform, as well as the kinds of crosscultural empathy needed by those locals wanting to get to know them, as the first and very vital stumbling steps to creating a nation free of ethnic hatred.

Stalags (*Ari Libsker, Israel*)

This is a look back at the pornographic pocketbooks describing at salacious length the torture of Jewish prisoners by gorgeous Nazi concentration-camp officers. These flourished in Israel at the start of the 1960s. It's both troubled and troubling, a valuable documentation of a perverse and long-repressed stratum of Israeli popular culture.

Man on Wire (*James Marsh, UK/USA*)

A great year for the cinematic exploration of verticality – Catherine Yass's *High Wire*, Eva Weber's *The Solitary Life of Cranes* – was capped by this heartbreakingly gorgeous and dramatic ode to the criminal artistry of tightrope walker Philippe Petit, whose conquering of the Manhattan skyline seems, in some mysteriously prescient fashion, to have anticipated Barack Obama's equally implausible, equally affirming presidential victory last month.

Sporty Cat

With each year that passes I spend more of my viewing life in front of a computer screen. Nothing I saw there delighted me more than the intrepid moggy who can be found online at:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hPzNl6NKAG0>

JASPER SHARP

Midnight Eye, France/Japan

United Red Army (*Wakamatsu Koji, Japan*)

With this year's May 1968 anniversary celebrations all but completely glossing over events in the east, Wakamatsu's gripping 3-hour docudrama charting the birth of the radical Japanese left-wing outfit through its violent internal ideological purges to its bloody implosion several years later cries out for wider international exposure.



Fine, Totally Fine (*Fujita Yosuke, Japan*)

A touching portrait of a group of loveable losers that repeatedly knocks the viewer off guard with its ridiculous physical comedy.

Persepolis (*Vincent Paronnaud/ Marjane Satrapi, France/USA*) Inventive adaptation of Satrapi's own graphic novel whose specific historical content belies its universal appeal.

JCVD (*Mabrouk El Mechri, Belgium/Luxembourg/France*)

Van Damme returns to the big screen in full self-mocking mode and, my God, he can actually act!

Let the Right One In (*Tomas Alfredson, Sweden*)

Like all the best horror films, this bleak tale of a teenage misfit who falls for the vampire next door is really about so much else.

ANNA SMITH

Critic, UK

In Bruges (*Martin McDonagh, UK/USA*)

Witty, gloriously irreverent and black as night, with a career-best performance from Colin Farrell.

Gone Baby Gone (*Ben Affleck, USA*)

This confident, engaging and emotionally complex drama deserved to be a bigger hit when it was finally released in June. I'd have loved to have seen it trounce the lazy, patronising cash-in that was *Sex And The City: The Movie*. It'll be interesting to see if director Ben Affleck can follow this.

In Search of a Midnight Kiss (*Alex Holdridge, USA*)

One of those wonderfully surprisingly, low-budget American indies, this was a romantic comedy with real edge as well as heart.

Let the Right One In (*Tomas Alfredson, Sweden*)



I was lucky enough to see this snowy Swedish thriller without knowing anything about the story, and it blew me away. A delicate tale with a killer punch.

Frost/Nixon (*Ron Howard, USA/ UK/ France*)

Suspenseful and entertaining – and Frank Langella was superb. For once, someone stole Michael Sheen’s show.

PAUL JULIAN SMITH

University of Cambridge, UK

Cloverfield (*Matt Reeves, USA*)

Shows that monster movies look better through a camcorder.

WALL•E (*Andrew Stanton, USA*)

For the first 40 minutes it’s the best wordless comedy since the silent era.

The Dark Knight (*Christopher Nolan, USA*)

This is a truly disturbing dystopia with an unforgettable performance from Heath Ledger.

Los Bastardos (*Amat Escalante, Mexico/France/USA*)

A home-invasion movie, both brutal and subtle, which subverts all the stereotypes of Mexico and the USA.

The Orphanage (*Juan Antonio Bayona, Spain/France, 2006*)

A Spanish horror film that shows you need no gore and no special effects to scare and to move an audience.

FERNANDA SOLORZANO

Critic, Mexico

Bullet in the Head (*Jaime Rosales, Spain*)



Rosales' take on the activities of Basque terrorist organisation ETA is daring and unbashful. By leaving out any discernible dialogue, his re-creation of a bloody incident manages to send the audience a message on the absurdity of 'explaining' death.

Be Kind, Rewind (*Michel Gondry, USA*)

Only Gondry could have pulled this off. His display of homemade filming techniques is both a charming homage to pop-culture myths and a jaw-dropping lesson in the art of fooling the eye.

Still Walking (*Kore-eda Hirokazu, Japan*)

That you don't see it coming might be part of its emotional impact. Subtle to the point of deceit, Kore-eda's tale about a family reunion is a powerful essay on memory, inherited traits and fleeting time.

Camino (*Javier Fesser, Spain*)

Incisive, unsettling and confident enough to play as a fable, *Camino* calls into question the modus operandi of radical catholic group Opus Dei. Based on the recent beatification of a Spanish girl, Fesser's haunting story touches a cultural nerve.

Lake Tahoe (*Fernando Eimbcke, Mexico*)

Eimbcke's second feature proves that his use of still compositions, introvert characters and understated dialogue is a language in which he succeeds in portraying complex inner lives.

KATE STABLES

Critic, UK

There Will Be Blood (*Paul Thomas Anderson, USA*)

This lean, dusty epic, breathtakingly ambitious in every aspect, includes a towering performance from Day-Lewis. It's a classic for our peak oil era.



Lars and the Real Girl (*Craig Gillespie, USA*)

Not just your average boy-meets-sex-doll love story. This whip-smart, big-hearted comedy of small town salvation brought Capraesque charm back into the movies in spades.

Lust, Caution (*Ang Lee, USA/China/Taiwan/Hong Kong*)

Lee at the peak of his powers, making his audience wait and work for their reward: a dense, richly complex, finely played and cruelly erotic thriller.

Persepolis (*Vincent Paronnaud/ Marjane Satrapi, France/USA*) This marvellously bittersweet, monochrome, animated memoir rolled together a *Bildungsroman*, an Iranian history lesson and a feminist fable into one irresistible, original whole.

Sweeney Todd (*Tim Burton, USA*)

Burton reinvented Sondheim's murderous masterpiece for the screen, magnificently and simultaneously reinvigorating the movie musical with his dark materials.

BRAD STEVENS

Critic, UK

The Flight of the Red Balloon (*Hou Hsiao-hsien, Taiwan/France*)

This sublime example of humanist cinema reinforces Hou's status as one of the world's greatest film-makers.

Chelsea on the Rocks (*Abel Ferrara, USA*)

Any year with both a new Hou and a new Ferrara must be a good one. Amid the bombast and pompousness of many of today's acclaimed films, the dismissal of Ferrara's latest as a minor work suggests the nature of its importance.

Heartbeat Detector (*Nicolas Klotz, France*)



The year's biggest surprise: a masterpiece that uncompromisingly examines the ideological connections between fascism and contemporary corporate culture. Klotz is clearly a director to watch.

The Romance of Astrea and Celadon (*Eric Rohmer, France*)

Rohmer's probable farewell to cinema is a typical late work, its surface simplicity concealing inner complexity.

La Terza madre (*Dario Argento, Italy/USA*)

Another late work, though of a very different kind. Argento's conclusion to his *Three Mothers* trilogy has appalled many former admirers, but this relentlessly illogical dream text, with its outbursts of savage misogyny, confirms the director as a genuine surrealist.



WALL•E

AMY TAUBIN

Critic, USA

Che (*Steven Soderbergh, USA*)

Milk (*Gus Van Sant, USA*)

The Curious Case of Benjamin Button (*David Fincher, USA*)

Ballast (*Lance Hammer, USA*)

WALL•E (*Andrew Stanton, USA*)

Notwithstanding such stunning movies as *Ashes of Time Redux*, *Tulpan*, *The Headless Woman*, and *Waltz with Bashir*, this was a year for Americans every which way. My top five are listed above in no particular order. The most beautifully formed among them – Hammer’s lyrical evocation of an African-American family’s struggle to survive in rural Mississippi – is also the smallest. The others are played out on Hollywood-sized canvases, but in their relationship to representation and/or their politics they challenge the values of both the industry and of the ‘art film’. If this makes them impure and rough around the edges, so be it. The audacity of their visions shines through.

DAVID THOMPSON

Critic and film-maker, UK

There will be Blood (*Paul Thomas Anderson, USA*)

Magnificent – in a class of its own, proving that Anderson and Daniel Day-Lewis are among the supreme talents of today.

Summer Hours (*Olivier Assayas, France*)

Poignant – Assayas makes his most mature and Renoiresque film, with a top cast.

My Winnipeg (*Guy Maddin, Canada*)

Hilarious – finally a film from Maddin that sustains its length with a brilliant parade of fantasy and invention.

Wall•E (*Andrew Stanton, USA*)

Beautiful – animation has never been more sublime, with a breathtakingly silent first section and an unexpectedly satirical second.

Rachel Getting Married (*Jonathan Demme, USA*)



Exhilarating – Demme combines documentary punch with the deep understanding of American life he showed us in the 1980s.

ALEXIS A. TIOSECO

Critic, Philippines

Bontoc Eulogy (*Marlon Fuentes, USA/Philippines*)

Bontoc Eulogy was made in 1995, but I first saw it – first heard about it – this past March, in Paris of all places at Cinema du Reel. Telling the story of Markod, one of many “Filipino savages” put on display in the St. Louis World Fair of 1904, the film is a stunning feat of borrowing and appropriation (Edison films, Burton Holmes travel footage), a sincere fake-documentary, and a meditation on the nature of images, memory, identity, and cinema. It is easily one of the best and most intelligent Filipino films in the last 20 years.

Le Genou d’Artémide (*Jean-Marie Straub, Italy*)

There is an undeniable surge of emotion that comes with seeing this, Straub’s first film after Danièle Huillet’s passing.

Death in the Land of Encantos/Melancholia (*Lav Diaz, Philippines*)

I had not seen Lav Diaz’s *Death in the Land of Encantos* when I was asked to submit my list last year, so this time round the film is paired with the director’s latest offering. *Death in the Land of Encantos* is as much a landscape film as it is a talkie, and with protagonists for the first time as erudite and well spoken as their creator, this is Diaz’s most personal work. In *Encantos* Mt. Mayon and the destruction it wrought on the town of Bicol lingers in the background. In *Melancholia* the force that haunts the characters is felt but not seen; it is the ghosts of what has been lost and not yet reconciled. When a director makes films of 9 hours and 7 ½ hours,



his audience will be limited even at festivals that believe they are really about cinema but very slowly people are getting to know one of the best film-makers in the world today.

United Red Army (*Wakamatsu Koji, Japan*)

A monumental and sprawling work. A film of this scope, production, preparation, depth and candour comes along once in a lifetime.

Surreal Random MMS Texts for a Mother, a Sister, and a Wife Who Longs for You: Landscape with Figures (*Christopher Gozum, Philippines*)

An expatriate working in Saudi Arabia takes photos with his cell phone to send back to his family in Manila. A camera records an eye-operation in close-up. A Pangasinan-language translation of Filipino-American writer Carlos Bulosan's poem "Landscape with Figures" serves as narration (Gozum is from the province of Pangasinan). The film lives up to its title. A collage of images both random and beautiful, an eye distressed, a heart aching, a voice caught between trembling and defiance. In 15 intense minutes, Christopher Gozum leaves us feeling more than most are able to in hours.

Bulosan's poem, in its original English. Indulge me, please:

Landscape with Figures

Homeward again under foreign stars,
history was a strange gush of wind from memory
that came to echo waterfalls of those years:
home to find the place lost among
galaxies of signs. The hills were gone. The river
trail was forgotten... Trying to remember meadowlark
and those who perished in the vanishing land
(bones in the earth where our parents died poor),



the journey fell into heavy tides of flowing
scorn that echoed and reechoed time there.

The sun was most unkind to the place:
history: names of men: patterns of life:
all that distant floodtide heaved and moved,
breaking familiar names that immortal tongues
clipped for the heart to cry, 'Home is a foreign address,
every step toward it is a step toward three hundred years
of exile from the truth...'
It was not homeward
to the first known land, nor escape
to white sea sprays blossoming on inland shore,
nor love leaping the boundaries naked in the soul,
but a vast heritage of war and destruction breaking
too soon for the living and willing to die.

Life is a foreign language. Every man mispronounced it...

KENNETH TURAN

LA Times, USA

A Christmas Tale (*Arnaud Desplechin, France*)

Few situations sound more banal than a film about a Christmas family reunion, and few things are more exciting than what Desplechin has done with it.

Man on Wire (*James Marsh, UK/USA*)

Even if seeing is believing, this exhilarating documentary will make you doubt what your eyes are telling you; it really will.



Rachel Getting Married (*Jonathan Demme, USA*)

Jonathan Demme's gratifying return to his independent-film roots, and for actress Anne Hathaway, of all people, a career-changing performance.

Slumdog Millionaire (*Danny Boyle, UK/USA*)

Boyle adroitly mixes slick, modern film-making with a story that the original Warner brothers would no doubt recognise and applaud.

Stranded: I Have Come from a Plane That Crashed in the Mountains (*Gonzalo Arijón, Spain/France*)

A documentary about one of the 20th century's best-known tales of survival, the 1972 Andes plane crash, that shows us that we haven't really known it at all.



Hellboy 2

NOEL VERA

Critic, After Dark, Philippines

Altar (*Rico Ilarde, Philippines*)

Ilarde is too in love with horror to win the respect of arthouse audiences, yet too smart and subtle and stylish to hold the

microscopic attention spans of hardcore gorehounds. His latest no-budget effort mixes Latin spells and demonic possession with a hero straight out of John Ford's *The Quiet Man* and a sidekick with the warmth and earthy humour of Sancho Panza. The results are distinctively Ilardean and altogether inimitable.

Hellboy II: The Golden Army (*Guillermo del Toro, USA/Germany*)

Big-budget comic-book adaptation aside, this is easily the mainstream film of the year precisely because so much of it isn't mainstream. Where else can you find a movie where the emotional highlights are the passing of a forest god and the singing of a Barry Manilow song? Where else can you find such esoteric and eclectic CGI creations? And where else can you find as sharp a workplace comedy tucked away inside a multimillion-dollar digital extravaganza (essentially *The Office*, with supernatural forces at work)?

Years When I Was a Child Outside (*John Torres, Philippines*)

Torres makes short vignettes that he pulls together to form a feature; takes documentary techniques and found footage to weave a personal, possibly fictional, narrative; uses voiceovers and flashed texts cinematically, like Godardian exclamation points; gives us a series of failed film projects that in the act of enumeration reveals a completed film. At one point Torres says: "I'm not a simple person." You can't help but agree.

The Girl Who Leapt Through Time (*Hosada Mamoru, Japan, 2006*)

Made in 2006 but screened in the UK in 2008 (and still largely unavailable in the USA), Hosada's film is easily the best rom-com of several years. More interesting than the romance or comedy, however, is the delicate moral observation that interference has consequences, mostly unintentional, and that life has an ever-accelerating motion that is difficult to slow down or revise: no



matter how good you are at time travel. Both narrative and visual storytelling emphasise this through the film's – and heroine's – ever-quickening pace, leaping here and there and taking ever more violent pratfalls through time.

Tropic Thunder (*Ben Stiller, USA*)

At a time when film-makers assume that people crave only gigantic CGI effects or digital animation or pictures catering to the sensitive side of 40-something slackers, Stiller still knows how to go for the jugular, at least when it comes to the ridiculous activity that is movie-making. The film shoots its wad early, comically speaking, but there's enough in this story to make one keep watching.



Be Kind Rewind

BEN WALTERS

Critic, US

Man On Wire (*James Marsh, UK/USA*)

The wondrous true story of a tightrope walk between the Twin Towers becomes a wonderful melée of heist flick, *joie de vivre* and *memento mori* in Marsh's superlative documentary.

Be Kind Rewind (*Michel Gondry, USA*)

Nostalgie de la boue (literally, 'nostalgia for the mud') meets community activism in Gondry's typically scattershot attempt at VHS revivalism.

Frownland (*Ronald Bronstein, USA*)

An uncomfortable and rewarding lo-fi debut from Brooklynite Bronstein, whose 16mm feature obliges us to spend time with people you'd cross the road to avoid, with fruitful results.

Savage Grace (*Tom Kalin, Spain/USA/France*)

Kalin's languid account of the Bakelite-family murder scandal uses a sardonically sunny palette and characters as beautiful and unageing as vampires to conjure a wasteland of narcissism.

Happy-Go-Lucky (*Mike Leigh, UK*)

This temporary exile couldn't have asked for a sweeter postcard from London.

JAY WEISSER

Variety, Italy/USA

Il Divo (*Paolo Sorrentino, Italy*)

While *Gomorra* gets all the attention, the better film, *Il Divo*, is marginalised as too opaque for non-Italian audiences. For those in the know, every name mentioned is like a kick in the stomach, but anyone with a sense of cinematic language will be bowled over by Paulo Sorrentino's bold, witty and devastating critique of Italy's deformed political landscape.

Waltz with Bashir (*Ari Folman, Israel*)



I went in thinking it's impossible to make a profound animated documentary, let alone one about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. I was wrong; Folman expands the parameters of the format.

35 Shots of Rum (*Claire Denis, France*)

Rejected by Cannes, relegated to the nebulous 'out of competition' section of Venice: what were they thinking? Even in a good year (and let's face it, 2008 was not a good year) Denis' warm, adult depiction of a functional family who actually love each other is a blast of fresh air among so many stagnant currents.

1908 Films

Since 2003, Bologna's Cinema Ritrovato festival has screened a selection of films from 100 years ago. This year, more than 100 films from 1908 were shown, ranging from literary adaptations to actualities to trick films. No other project demonstrates so clearly the astonishing range and sophistication of early cinema. They're primitive only in the way Duccio and Giotto are primitive.

The Battle of the Sexes (*D.W. Griffith, USA, 1928*)

The Pordenone Silent Film Festival reached the end of its 12-year project to screen the entire available corpus of Griffith films. Some do not hold up well, while others can now be re-evaluated – such as *The Battle of the Sexes*, a racy comedy that collapses our sense of Griffith's supposed limitations and easily stands alongside last year's discovery: Frank Urson's *Chicago*.

CATHERINE WHEATLEY

Critic, UK

Unrelated (*Joanna Hogg, UK*)



Snow (*Aida Begic, Bosnia & Herzegovina/ Germany/France/Iran*)

Persepolis (*Vincent Paronnaud/ Marjane Satrapi, France/USA*)

Caramel (*Nadine Labaki, France/Lebanon*)

I've Loved You So Long (*Philippe Claudel, France*)

2008 seemed to me to be a particularly vibrant year for women filmmakers, with great works coming from old hands, such as Catherine Breillat, Laetitia Masson, Sandrine Bonnaire and Agnès Varda, and newcomers (at least to these shores), including Pia Marais, Lucía Puenzo, Céline Sciamma and Joanna Hogg. While Sciamma's *Waterlilies* was perhaps the disappointment of the year for me, Hogg's *Unrelated* in many ways exemplified what made many of these works so exciting, combining as they did elegant and often innovative aesthetics with a tender yet by no means always flattering portrait of female experience.

ARMOND WHITE

New York Post, USA

The Witnesses (*André Téchiné, France/Spain*)

A period piece that feels utterly contemporary as Téchiné observes his AIDS-era characters bearing witness to love, compromise and fate.

Happy-Go-Lucky (*Mike Leigh, UK*)

The story of a good soul, like Fellini's *Nights of Cabiria* or *Candide*, and socially conscious as Leigh always is, but here at his most exuberant and engaging.

Chaos Theory (*Marcos Siega, USA*)



Siega and writer Daniel Taplitz offer a double-barrelled screwball comedy about the blended families and complicated choices of our open-sex society. It is as ingeniously plotted as it is visually alluring: discovery of the year.

Rachel Getting Married (*Jonathan Demme, USA*)

Demme uses the home-movie format to capture the joy and struggle of human diversity and creates the first true digital-video masterpiece.

The Romance of Astrea and Celadon (*Eric Rohmer, France, 2006*)

What looks old-fashioned in Rohmer's 5th-century love story is actually radical classicism. It's a daring exploration of modern morality and aesthetics.

CHARLES WHITEHOUSE

Writer, UK/France

The Wire series 1-4 (I'm saving 5) (*David Simon, USA*)

Probably saved my marriage by filling Saturday nights with so much passive mutual pleasure. Television more like a great engrossing novel than visual pastime. What actors! What a buzz! And casually multi-ethnic like a 'so what?' shrug.

I'm Going to Explode (*Gerardo Naranjo, Mexico*)

All that Mexican cinema energy is given a mildly Godardian short circuit here as two unlikely young lovers pretend to go on the run while camping out of the roof of the boy's rich parents' place. A great conceit and how I envied them their prank time.

Let the Right One In (*Tomas Alfredson, Sweden*)

Caught this at a festival's dismal DVD library and still sucked it up. The moody teen vampire, so excellently incarnated, strongly



resembles a friend's daughter. So, like the geeky boy, I was on her side no matter what the cost in human blood. A delicate horror film. I wish there were more like it.

Man On Wire (*James Marsh, UK/USA*)

I get elated just thinking about that glorious stunt. And how does a documentary that doesn't even have moving-image footage of the big moment make you feel it so in your guts? It makes the 1970s look like a lost paradise of adventure (though I know it wasn't quite).

La Vie Moderne (*Raymond Depardon, France*)

Farmers from the Cevennes talk (or rather, avoid talking) about their vanishing way of life to Depardon's infinitely patient camera, their facial expressions and wind-blasted eyes implying more than the words pulled from their mouths like teeth.

JASON WOOD

City Screen, UK

Helen (*Joe Lawlor, Christine Molloy, UK/Ireland*)

Beautifully constructed, *Helen* offers further evidence of the continuing renaissance in arthouse British cinema.

My Winnipeg (*Guy Maddin, Canada*)

An extraordinary homage to Maddin's hometown, like the equally accomplished *Of Time and the City*, this beguiling 'Docufantasia' explores the nature of memory and mythology.

Heartbeat Detector (*Nicolas Klotz, France*)

Klotz's socially and politically engaged comment on modern capitalism features a tremendous performance from Mathieu Amalric.

Waltz with Bashir (*Ari Folman, Israel*)



A film of potent imagination and power and deserving of every ounce of praise it has accumulated.

The Class (*Laurent Cantet, France*)

An engrossing look at classroom ethics in which Cantet's objectivity is impeccable.

I'd also like to briefly mention Albertina Carri's *La Rabia*, an uncompromising and vividly realised work that confirms the current brilliance in Argentinean cinema.

Some critics' votes arrived too late for them to be counted for the Top Ten list published in the magazine. Had we received all of the above submissions at the time of going to press, 'My Winnipeg' would also have entered the Top Ten.

