

EW'S MOVIE CRITICS PICK THE BEST OF 2006

BY MOLLY TEMPLETON

In 2006, we suffered a fairly enjoyable fate: an overabundance of good movies. Just plain good movies; the kind you like, but that don't give you fodder for discussions that continue long after you've left the theater. When *EW* instituted our star rating system in late September, I found myself doling out three and three-and-a-half star ratings with alarming regularity. Was it just me? Or were the movies just ... well ... good? From Michel Gondry's pretty, uncertain *The Science of Sleep* to those average films that showcased great performances (*The Last King of Scotland*, *The Notorious Bettie Page*) to ambitious pieces that didn't quite reach such great heights (*Letters From Iwo Jima*), 2006 was a year for good films.

But there were great movies, as there always are. And it was difficult to choose one single great film above the others. In some years, something clearly stands out: I mentioned Michel Gondry above because in 2004, *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* was the movie of the year. This year, my top three films changed places with bothersome frequency. But eventually, a decision had to be made.

Like the two Truman Capote movies released in 2005 and 2006, many of my top 10 films come in pairs. Two queens; two indelible, violent films that discover beauty in stark landscapes; two looks at recent events, one fiction, one non. You could even pair Rian Johnson's teen noir, *Brick*, with Andrew Bujalski's *Mutual Appreciation*, an intimate portrait of twentysomethings: Something about the affection each filmmaker shows for his subjects links the two very different films in my mind. More than anything, these are the movies that moved me. Freedom, terror, privilege, power, grief, love: It is the particular take on the universal that gives these, like most great films, their unforgettable strength.



1. Children of Men The poster reads "from visionary director Alfonso Cuarón," and for once the "visionary" tag is not an exaggeration. Watching Cuarón's film was a singularly physical experience; I perched on my seat, hands over my mouth, for the last hour. With a perfect cast, stunning camerawork, a dead-gray palette and a riveting premise — the world is self-destructing because soon there will be no one left to live in it — Cuarón creates a fable for any time. The intrusive government, endless violence, widespread ennui — it's a deadly future and a commentary on today, all wrapped tightly around a tiny, warm kernel of hope. What makes Cuarón's work all the more astonishing is that he (and a team of writers) developed this breathtaking film from a 1992 novel by P.D. James that, its fascinating central concept aside, is rather middling. To read the book is to appreciate anew what film can be. (1/11/07)

2. Tristram Shandy: A Cock and Bull Story Michael Winterbottom's



movie about making a movie about making a movie is a great, layered romp, equal parts wildly funny and impossibly perceptive. On the set of an adaptation of Laurence Sterne's novel *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman*, actors compete, production assistants flirt, directors and writers waffle and the outside world (often in the form of the charming Kelly McDonald) has a hard time finding a foothold. Inventive and sharp, *Tristram Shandy* is a deeply creative look at the process of creating, missteps (a black page in the book becomes, amusingly and briefly, a black screen), moments of brilliance and all. (5/4/06)

3. Brick Writer-director Rian Johnson melds film noir and teen movie to great effect in his pitch-perfect first film. As Brendan, a loner with John Lennon glasses and perpetually slumped shoulders, Joseph Gordon-Levitt seems to wander through his own story, trying to figure out what's happened to his ex, the elfin Emilie de Ravin.



Drug lords, thugs, femme fatales, plots and revelations, they're all here, the motor-mouthed noir language bouncing off the bare cinder blocks of a California high school. (8/3/06)

4. Mutual Appreciation The second movie from writer-director Andrew Bujalski, who also co-stars, begins and ends with almost the same image: Two or three twentysomethings, sprawled in an apartment, talking. That describes more scenes than not in this warm and charming film, which observes the uncertainty of post-college life, for a certain kind of person, with accuracy and awkward, fantastic humor. *Mutual Appreciation* gets it all right: the characters, the delivery, the dimly lit corners of Brooklyn's music scene, the way romantic relationships shift and adjust to the people around them.



5. Shut Up and Sing Don't skip this movie because you don't like the Dixie Chicks. While *Shut Up and Sing* is a movie about country music, it's about far more than that, and freedom of speech is just the start. It's about friendship, family, confidence, truth and love, and part of its considerable charm is that the movie lets you see these themes for yourself. There are no talking heads, no formal interviews; the filmmakers, Barbara Kopple and Cecilia Peck, are unseen. The result is both a surprisingly intimate portrait of extremely successful musicians and a smart commentary on the intersection of politics, pop and the personal. It's also simply and wonderfully triumphant. (12/21/06)

6. United 93 Everything that Oliver Stone did wrong with the glossy, faux-inspirational *World Trade Center*, Paul Greengrass did right with *United 93*, a taut, simple, careful memorial in the shape of a film. In an interview with *Film Comment* magazine, Greengrass said "It's a catharsis, it's a reliving, it's a reconstruction. It's a hypothesis." *United 93* is gripping and painful to watch, but it's also, somehow, cleansing; it puts front and center the people who were working like crazy to understand what was happening, and those who, left alone on the flight, tried their best to do what they could. There is no grandstanding, no one trying to take credit, no one turning a tragedy into a chance at political gain. There is only a theory about what happened in the air, and an inside look at what happened on the ground. And that is more than enough. (5/4/06)



7. The Prestige In a year without boy wizards, hobbits or Christ-figure lions, we got a



different kind of magic: competing stage magicians, once friends and allies, trapped by their own secrets and desires into a deadly battle of wills. Director Christopher Nolan (*Memento*) once again plays with timelines and narrative structure, piecing together his movie using the three parts of a magician's trick, and stars Christian Bale and Hugh Jackman (with Michael Caine in one of his always-able assists) are

magnetic in their respective roles as the ingenious magician with no patience for the stage and the showman with no patience for working on a trick. Adapted from a novel by Christopher Priest, *The Prestige* is a film about deception and obsession in which those who are deceived are too often the magicians' loved ones — and sometimes the tricksters themselves. (10/26/06)

8. The Proposition Bleak, brutal and arresting, John Hillcoat's Australian Western (from a screenplay by Nick Cave) is a story of colonialism as seen through the particular existence of a trio of outlaw brothers and the sheriff trying to bring them in. Not to be forgotten is Emily Watson as the sheriff's wife, a delicate Englishwoman out of place in the spare Australian outback. Like *Children of Men*, *The Proposition* is at times painfully violent, but never without cause. Hillcoat's film looks unflinchingly at the line between the horrible actions of the individual and the horrible actions done ostensibly in the name of justice, and asks whether that line might not be so clear. (6/15/06)

9. The Queen It's almost shocking to see beautiful, regal Helen Mirren done up plain — though still regal — as Elizabeth II, a monarch struggling with her changing country fol-

CONTINUED ON PAGE 15