

ship, but with disastrous results for everyone. When the tables turn, everything shatters. *Notes on a Scandal* is about loving what you can't have so desperately that you'd rather destroy it than go without. The rest of us would take the hint, of course, but that's what makes film so intriguing: *Notes on a Scandal* suggests Dench's Barbara, sexually out-cast but keenly intelligent, will live to ride again. (2/8/07)



9. Tristram Shandy: A Cock and Bull Story A dazzling, infuriating, but always entertaining version of the 1759 novel. If you like reading Thomas Pynchon, you'll love this three-layer cake of a movie, which contains no less than the following narratives: the period film proper, a running commentary by the lead actor (also in the film proper) and a quasi-documentary of the behind-the-scenes production. Vain actors, needy war historians and defensive film producers predominate. This is a film about the difficulties of filmmaking in general and of filming *Tristram Shandy* in particular, given the audacity required for both. More than a

film-within-a-film, *Tristram Shandy* goes further than other mockumentaries (à la *Spinal Tap*) in that several of the actors play themselves in the documentary, which allows them to criticize each other's prior work. (5/4/06)

10. Jesus Camp This is summer camp like you never imagined it, even if you went to church camp. *Jesus Camp* is the story of Becky Fischer, an evangelical pastor, and her efforts to create tiny soldiers for Christ. You might admire, as I did, Fischer's frankness and devotion, not to mention her marketing genius. You might even appreciate the spiritual focus of these children, some of whom are eerily charismatic. But the suffering in *Jesus Camp* is so abundant, the war imagery so embedded in their message, that you end up fearing for their very lives. Twenty years from now, will these kids be the solution or the problem? The film features Ted Haggard, the just-outed pastor of New Life Church in Colorado, as dismissive and overconfident.



THE OTHER 10

BY JASON BLAIR



Babel A complex film that deserves enormous praise for its uncompromising structure, not to mention its fearless performances (excluding Brad Pitt, whose attention is clearly elsewhere). Still, as impressive as *Babel* can be, Alejandro González Iñárritu (*21 Grams*, *Amores Perros*) is quickly becoming a master of brutal, depressive filmmaking. Impossible to ignore, but possessing an openly dismal outlook, Iñárritu earns praise despite the bleakness, not because of it. (11/9/06)

Brick Would you accept a stylized, noirish thriller set at a high school in Southern California? Me neither. But *Brick* works beautifully. The wise-guy language in this nimble adolescent fantasy is straight Dashiell Hammett with a chaser of Orange County slang. Joseph Gordon-Levitt plays the wounded gumshoe to perfection, and Lukas Haas hasn't been this good since *Witness*. There are virtually no adults present, but when they do intrude the movie is at its best. *Brick* is destined to be the next *Donnie Darko*. Get on board early. Tell your friends. (8/3/06)

Half Nelson A tough, compassionate film about trying to help others when you can't even help yourself. Ryan Gosling won't win Best Actor for his idealistic but addicted inner-city teacher, but his nomination proves the Academy is still awake. With this performance, he joins the likes of Joaquin Phoenix and Christian Bale as an actor who can do almost anything. Gosling's unlikely friend, young newcomer Shareeka Epps, amazes. (10/19/06)

Little Miss Sunshine

A film that restores your faith in filmmaking. It took years to cast and create, but the struggle clearly paid off. The movie veers toward silliness in parts, particularly when a deceased Alan Arkin "jumps the shark" out a hospital window, but the overall result is sweet, offbeat and funny. Abigail Breslin, who's popping up everywhere, gives a quirky, self-possessed performance. As with *Brokeback Mountain* in 2005, the Oscar hype is almost unfair to this little film. It may result in a backlash. (8/24/06)



Pan's Labyrinth An unclassifiable film. *Pan's Labyrinth* is a quest movie about a quest that goes astray (twice); a tale of survival in which nearly everyone dies; and a child's tale set against the horrors of fascism containing scenes of terrible violence. Original in almost every way but less than totally satisfying, given that the entire film chronicles Ofelia's attempts to penetrate the underworld — but not, crucially, her experience of the underworld itself. It's as if *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* were all about trying to pry the wardrobe open. Still, *Pan's Labyrinth* is a visual feast, and a moving ode to the joys and terrors of childhood. (2/8/07)

The Prestige For my money, this is how big-budget films should be made, with complex structures, puzzles in the center and star turns put to good use. Intellectually, *The Prestige* astounds. It may have been too clever for its own good, not that director Christopher Nolan (*Memento*, *Batman Begins*) would admit that. To my mind, *The Prestige* may have been confused with (and therefore doomed by) *The Illusionist*, in

that strange way Hollywood has of releasing movies in thematic pairs (*Tombstone* and *Wyatt Earp*, *Capote* and *Infamous*). Christian Bale continues to impress, filling the void left when Billy Crudup began voicing the MasterCard ads. Hugh Jackman finally gets his hands dirty. (10/26/06)



The Proposition A bleak but confident Western (*Western Australia*, that is) about three brothers and the cyclical nature of violence. The screenplay, by musician Nick Cave, has the qualities of great fiction: It's economical but emotionally complex. The landscape cinematography is the best in recent memory, reminiscent of Terrence Malick's classic

Days of Heaven. Nominated for virtually every award in Australia when released there in 2005, it was largely overlooked here. Guy Pearce mesmerizes, as always, although he seems to have entered semi-retirement. (6/15/06)

The Queen Helen Mirren gives a singular performance in a film that was more tedious and cautious than other critics would admit. The film's purposeful, jacketed qualities may have reflected the restraint of its subject. Still, there are a number of great turns here that elevate the material, although Mirren is in a class by herself. Her Queen Elizabeth II is the definitive on-screen version of Her Majesty. The stag in the film has engendered much debate — real or not? Diana or not? — but if it looks like a stag and acts like a stag ... (11/30/06)

Shut Up and Sing Stand up and clap. If you thought Natalie Maines' anti-war comments in 2003 were courageous, that was only the beginning. The incident, which prompted an unofficial boycott by fans and radio stations alike, still haunts the trio today. You'll be pumping your fists at the Dixie Chicks' utter defiance of redneck hypocrisy, even as they struggle with the prospect of re-inventing themselves. Maines' incessant soap-boxing grows wearisome, but almost everything she says is true. (12/21/06)

Stranger Than Fiction

Will Ferrell gets the *Eternal Sunshine* treatment, but that doesn't make *Stranger than Fiction* derivative. One hopes this marks a new direction for Ferrell, who's flirting with overexposure. In *Stranger than Fiction*, he plays someone you won't soon forget: Harold Crick, IRS agent and doomed hero (it appears) of writer Kay Eifel's (Emma Thompson) novel. Ferrell brings Crick to life, despite the fact that Crick doesn't have one. It's a vivid performance of a gentle genius who overcomes his fears to get the most unlikely girl, all while confronting almost certain death. In other words, it's not your typical Will Ferrell movie. For that reason alone, I rejoiced. (11/16/06)

