

lowing Tony Blair's election and the death of Princess Diana. Mirren has an exquisite ability to translate her character's thoughts to her face with only the slightest shift in expression, but *The Queen* has depth beyond her subtle performance. Duty struggles with feeling, change with tradition. Like *Marie Antoinette*, *The Queen* made me sym-



pathize with super-privileged royalty, but where Marie, in Sofia Coppola's film, exists in a bubble, Mirren's queen has to make the choice not to, even when it goes against everything she believes her country wants from her. But she is not the only one adjusting her beliefs. A wonderful supporting cast, including Michael Sheen as an enthusiastic Tony Blair, backs up Mirren, every one of them perfectly in time with the film's many slyly comic moments. (11/30/06)

10. Marie Antoinette To my surprise, I find myself on the side of those who find Sofia Coppola's third film beautiful, striking and misunderstood. It is not a historical film, despite having the lush trappings of a period piece. It is an imaginative character study, a moody, thoughtful confection that suggests Marie Antoinette (the perfectly girlish Kirsten Dunst) as a young woman overwhelmed by her position. For the first hour, the film seems barely to register the gilded rooms and extravagant wardrobes, but as Marie is reminded again and again that she is of no value unless she produces an heir, both the girl and the film begin to focus on the pretty things, on the privileges, on the ways she can turn her isolated existence into a fairytale because there is little else for her to do. Coppola's film becomes somehow of the past and present, inevitably suggesting today's starlets and celebs but also commenting on feminism, propriety, expectations of women and different kinds of freedom throughout the ages. (10/26/06)



THE OTHER 10

BY MOLLY TEMPLETON

Babel Alejandro González Iñárritu's divisive third film keeps being read as a political piece, but I see it as a story about family, in all its painful, beautiful, trying forms. The global links all connect across family ties; terrible, believable things befall characters defined, in large part, by connections to their parents or children. *Babel* is heartbreaking and lush, a strange, alluring combination in the hands of Iñárritu and his astonishing cast. Despite it being the Year of Jennifer Hudson, Rinko Kikuchi should earn an Oscar for her supporting performance as a grief-stricken Tokyo teen. (11/9/06)

Casino Royale Sure, it's still a Bond movie: occasionally preposterous and a showcase for scantily clad ladies. But this reboot of the Bond formula works wonders, thanks in large part to Daniel Craig, who brings a much-needed gravitas to the film's just-minted 007. It also helps that Eva Green's character is more than just a pretty face. When Bond finds her fully clothed and crying with horror in a shower, the movie pauses for a dark second to consider the brutality in Bond's life. It's not always a pretty picture. (11/22/06)



Dave Chappelle's Block Party Comedian Chappelle's block party, deep in Brooklyn in front of a strange house that's home to a pair of eccentrics who'd seem more at home in Eugene, is an exuberant celebration of African-American talent, including the music of Mos Def, Kanye West and a reunited Fugees, to name just a few. Despite the involvement of so many big names and a star director, Michel Gondry, the whole thing feels homegrown and giddily gleeful: It's clearly Chappelle's pet project, but he just as clearly wants to share. It is, after all, a party.



Hard Candy It's a simple notion, executed against a glossy, stylized background: Fourteen-year-old Hayley (Ellen Page) agrees to meet, in person, a 30-something photographer (Patrick Wilson) she's encountered online. Back at his place, she's in turn shy, teasing ... and ferocious, once she turns on its ear the notion that she's the vulnerable one. Page's performance as Hayley is one for the ages: She's terrifying, beguiling and too smart for her own good.

Infamous This second Truman Capote biopic doubtless suffered from being the second version of the writer's life to arrive on screen. Which is a shame. Funny, sharply observed and unusually affecting, *Infamous* offers some of the year's best atypical relationships in the friendship between Capote (a spectacular Toby Jones) and Harper Lee (a restrained yet tart Sandra Bullock) and the tension between Capote and killer Perry Smith (smoldering, scary Daniel Craig). (11/2/06)

Old Joy Like *Hard Candy*, this small film has just two characters, but director Kelly Reichardt goes in a very different direction, following Mark (Daniel London) and Kurt (Will Oldham) on a trip to the woods. The old friends try, subtly and awkwardly, to revitalize their friendship, but by the time they return to Portland it seems something intangible has been left behind. An ode to change and love. (10/26/06)

The Painted Veil This film was a labor of love for those involved, and it shows: Gracefully, luxuriously paced, it looks at an uncomfortable truth of relationships — that often, one person loves more than the other — against a striking setting that, rather than simply being an exotic backdrop, shapes and shakes up the protagonists, Kitty and Walter Fane (Naomi Watts and Edward Norton). (1/18/07)

Pan's Labyrinth Guillermo del Toro juxtaposes his fantastic visions of an underworld kingdom with the vicious reality of a military outpost in the Spanish woods. Life and death, birth and rebirth, magic and horror color the life of Ofelia (Ivana Baquero), who wanders into a labyrinth and is given three tasks and the promise that she's a long-lost princess. An enormous toad, a temperamental faun and insect-like fairies are just some of the indelible images of *Pan's Labyrinth*; others come from the dirty, cruel world on this side of the magical doors. Using one world to turn a lens on the other, del Toro casts a carefully woven spell. (2/8/07)



Thank You For Smoking Every time I thought about cutting this from my list, I came back to the deliciously evil dinner scenes, in which Aaron Eckhart's tobacco shill, Maria Bello's booze pusher and David Koechner's gun spokesman dish about their dirty jobs. These biting funny moments are some of the best in Jason Reitman's satire of spin, which lets Eckhart's character have plenty of rope with which to hang himself — and the tobacco industry. (4/13/06)

Wordplay & An Inconvenient Truth Yes, I'm cheating with two films in one slot, but otherwise there's not room for both documentaries, which turn potentially dry subjects into engaging stories by weaving the personal into the informative. Al Gore's PowerPoint presentation about climate crisis is lifted from its humble beginnings by the inclusion of Gore's personal journey from politician to activist (and back again?). *New York Times* crossword guru Will Shortz is ostensibly at the center of *Wordplay*, but the characters who linger are the competitors in the annual crossword championship. *Wordplay* is a divine look at a subculture that's not really all that sub. (7/20/06, 6/15/06)