



DELAYED GRATIFICATION
Two two-year-old foreign films arrived here this year with barely a splash: Russia's *NIGHT WATCH* (3/9/06), the first in a spectacularly imaginative horror/fantasy trilogy, and France's *DISTRICT B13* (7/13/06), an action piece set in the future, in a walled-off Paris ghetto, just might, begin to fill the hole left by the conclusion of *The Lord of the Rings*. The second is an exhilarating piece of work that puts "gritty" American action films to shame with its balletic choreography and impossible footraces. If you liked that first chase in *Casino Royale*, *District B13* should be next on your rental list. — MT



GREAT JOB, BAD MOVIE

In *The Black Dahlia*, HILARY SWANK smolders even as Josh Hartnett stumbles and fumbles for her bra strap. Swank seems possessed as femme fatale Madeleine Linscott, as does SEAN PENN as Gov. Huey Long in *All the King's Men*. Both actors raised the profile of these poorly conceived films but not enough to pull them out of the muck. (9/21/06, 9/28/06) — JB



BEAUTIFUL TANGLE

It doesn't all add up. But Darren Aronofsky's *THE FOUNTAIN* is nevertheless one of the most visually stunning things to appear on screens last year. A lot of it has to do with the film's vision of space, which was created using microphotographs of chemical reactions. But it also has to do with the film's golden light, deep earth tones, patterns and slightly askew way of looking at the world. Add to that Clint Mansell's evocative score and you have, though not a fully satisfying film, an experience of strange beauty. (11/30/06) — MT

NECESSARY RE-VIEW

As I predicted, *NACHO LIBRE* was widely quoted all last summer, particularly among 12-year-olds and their parents. Unable to resist, I watched it again. And again. In my initial review, I was either too harsh or — more likely — too demanding of my hero Jack Black, who may never make the truly great film he deserves. *Nacho* isn't *Young Frankenstein*, but it's the best slapstick we've got right now. (6/22/06) — JB



BIGGEST LETDOWN

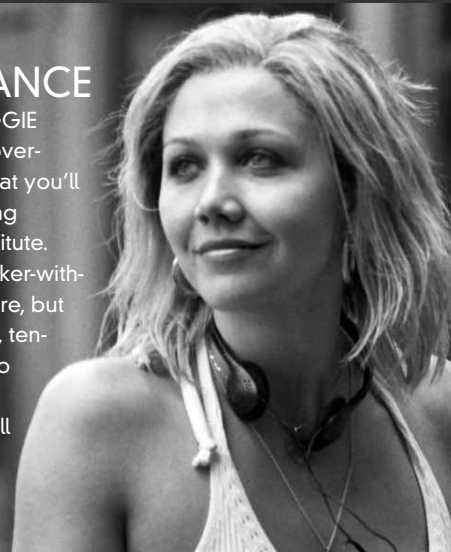


Enough critics defended *MARIE ANTOINETTE*, Sofia Coppola's third film, to make me think that a re-assessment is inevitable. But turning Antoinette into a flaky but sweet confection was a disservice to theatergoers everywhere. As a music video, it works; as a film, it's dull and hollow. Runner-up: *PIRATES OF THE CARIBBEAN 2*, a dumbed-down follow-up to the fine first installment. May *Pirates 3* be more ship-shape. (10/26/06, 7/13/06) — JB

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OVERLOOKED PERFORMANCE

In *Sherrybaby*, MAGGIE GYLLENHAAL is so overwhelmingly good that you'll catch yourself thinking Gyllenhaal is a prostitute. We've seen the hooker-with-a-heart-of-gold before, but never one so strong, tender and manic, not to mention habitually self-destructive. You'll pull for her all the way. — JB



PAINFUL HILARITY

Though Sacha Baron Cohen staked a considerable claim to the it's-funny-'cause-it-hurts market this year, nothing made me cry with laughter like *JACKASS NUMBER TWO*, which I should have given four stars, not three. Everything is bigger and better this time around, and the added pathos of Bam Margera's growing resistance to injuring himself for the sake of our amusement somehow just makes it all ... funnier. (10/5/06) — MT



UNSUNG EXCELLENCE

Her smile as wide as can be, GRETCHEN MOL carries *The Notorious Bettie Page*, disappearing into the role of the sweet-faced beauty queen whose work was held up in court as obscene. Also: *Little Miss Sunshine*'s STEVE CARELL and PAUL DANO, whom I adore for the scene in which Carell's depressed Proust scholar explains to Dano's frustrated teen that if he sleeps through high school, he'll miss all that beautiful, inspirational pain. Bravo. (6/1/06, 8/24/06) — MT