

THERE WILL BE DARKNESS

THE YEAR'S BEST FILMS

by Jason Blair

Ranking films is like ranking your friends: It's imprecise, indefensible and bound to stir up trouble. It's a bewildering, even juvenile activity, this ordering of favorites — does anyone over 20 ever talk about their favorite color? — which may explain, when applied to movies, why we take such universal pleasure in doing so. But for all their selectivity, their air of authority, these "Best Of" lists do serve one worthy purpose, which is, if Anthony Lane is to be believed, also the chief aim of a film critic: Simply put, to start an argument.

We rank films throughout the year on how well they accomplish what they're trying to accomplish — at least, to the extent we can determine either — not how well, say, an astronaut documentary measures up against a Coen brothers caper. Sorting out the best films of 2007 isn't so difficult; like your friends, the variety is overwhelming, but you know unmistakably who the keepers are, if only by your instinct. But grading their relative worth is something else. Look anywhere up and down these lists, and you'll note how interchangeable, how fluid these films are in terms of their positions. We don't pretend our opinions are sacred. We're simply more organized in how we present them.

It was a slow year, 2007. Then it wasn't. Then it was slow once again. The first film worthy of top-tier consideration, apart from *Once* and *The Lives of Others*, didn't release here until July (*La Vie en Rose*). Then, for the most part, other than *Ratatouille* and *Hairspray*, nothing astonished us until the fall. In what I can only describe as an avalanche of quality films, the final weeks of the year buried filmgoers with worthwhile options of which only the most dedicated could stay abreast. I'm not ashamed to say that I've only just finished reviewing the last few inches of this mass, the results of which are summarized below. But don't take our word for it. See them for yourself.

1. *La Vie en Rose*



This is the only unqualified masterpiece of 2007, a feat largely, but not only, due to the performance of Marion Cotillard as Edith Piaf. Playing a role that would have shattered a lesser actress, so physically and psychologically demanding was Piaf's life, Cotillard instead gives a dazzling performance, occupying



every register of emotional experience imaginable, including fear, tenderness, joy, defiance and — ultimately, ever so briefly — regret. To those who say the performance overwhelms the film, I would say you can't have a train wreck without the train. Piaf's self-destruction, so finely communicated by Cotillard, is given full expression by every aspect of the production, which folds multiple and fractured storylines into a single elegant narrative. (Reviewed 7/19/07)

2. *The Lives of Others*

Set during the resurgence of Stalinism, *The Lives of Others* depicts the covert world of the Stasi, the highly repressive East German secret police. At the center of the film is Wiesler (Ulrich Mühe), the methodical and deeply committed Stasi agent assigned to monitor a prominent playwright. It's a straightforward surveillance operation, but the results are anything but: When his boss turns out to be shallow and self-interested, Wiesler, feeling betrayed, indulges himself in some of the playwright's simple pleasures, such as music, a Brecht book and sex. The more human he becomes, the more he intervenes in the life of the playwright, putting everyone, but especially himself, at great risk. A sinister, shattering film that is nearly faultless in every way, with a magnificent performance by Mühe, a German actor whose wife, in a terrible irony, informed on him to the Stasi throughout their marriage. (3/8/07)

3. *There Will Be Blood*

The story of a great and terrible man, *There Will Be Blood* is a giant leap forward for Paul Thomas Anderson, the director behind the ambitious but imperfect *Magnolia*. With *There Will Be Blood*, he's close to perfection, due in large part to two collaborators: Jonny Greenwood of Radiohead, who provides the original score, and Daniel Day-Lewis, arguably the best male actor working today. Greenwood's tense, wrenching score sounds like a violin being ripped apart, reinforcing the destructive tendencies of Day-Lewis' Daniel Plainview, an oilman who gains a fortune but loses his mind. He's a wretched man, but the performance is so precise that *There Will Be Blood* becomes a bracing

and extraordinary experience. Paul Dano, wiry and self-possessed, holds his own as a transparently false prophet. His baptism of Day-Lewis is a battle of wills for the ages. We'll never know what Day-Lewis whispers to Dano afterward, but based on what happens later it isn't hard to speculate: There will be blood. (1/31/08)

4. *No Country for Old Men*

Old-timers get their comeuppance in this electrifying adaptation of the Cormac McCarthy novel, a story about the diversification of evil in a small west Texas town. As a sheriff who doesn't know the score until it's too late, Tommy Lee Jones seems composed of Texas topsoil itself, so perfectly at home does he seem in this landscape. Vocally and physically, he's in absolute control, delivering a performance to be measured against the very best of the year, including his Oscar-nominated role as a grieving father in *In the Valley of Elah*. Javier Bardem, as a philosophical sociopath, is a similar revelation. Watch his face as he strangles the deputy: He's somewhere else completely. Josh Brolin concludes a busy year with a lean, resolute portrayal of a man whose conscience will be his undoing. For the dialogue alone, *No Country* is a considerable achievement. Great sound. Great photography. Classic film. (11/29/07)

5. *The Diving Bell and the Butterfly*



It begins simply, behind eyelids opening and closing like butterfly wings, at which point we recognize that we're trapped inside a hospital patient. Images come into focus and voices begin to register, but in *The Diving Bell and the Butterfly*, the protagonist can't reciprocate: We are looking through the eyes of Jean-Dominique Bauby, a stroke victim who emerges without the ability to

move or speak. Flooded with regret, this former playboy undertakes a memoir by using eye-blinks to communicate with his speech therapist. In director Julian Schnabel's hands, we feel the fatigue, the imprisonment, even if Bauby cannot. Based on a true story, the film asks, What makes a life? Where is our true nature to be found: in our success or in our response to adversity? *The Diving Bell and the Butterfly* is a powerful, beautiful and funny film that must be seen to be believed. (1/24/08)

6. *Once*

A truly modern musical, *Once* features musicians Glen Hansard and Marketa Irglova as two soulful but broken-hearted musicians in Dublin. (John Carney, an old bandmate of Hansard's, directs.) Over the course of one week, they become friends, create some unforgettable music and — to me, the great joy of the film — heal their busted hearts through song. *Once* breaks records for naturalism, given that the actors perform their own music, wear their own clothes and incorporate background elements into the film (note the kids on scooters as Irglova sings "If You Want Me"). Thus *Once* has the improvised feel of a documentary but the composure of a classic drama. It's a new direction for musicals. To watch *Once* is to hope desperately for a happy ending for the couple, so strong is their in-film chemistry. But *Once* gives us something better, something bold, unexpected and true. (7/26/07)

7. *I'm Not There*



Loose in structure but extravagant in imagination, *I'm Not There*, to me, is a new kind of movie. Director Todd Haynes (*Far From Heaven*) offers us not one Bob Dylan, but three Bob Dylans — folkie, intellectual, misfit — plus three figures Dylan absorbed into his persona: Arthur Rimbaud, Woody Guthrie and Billy the Kid. Haynes presses each layer of Dylan against the others, each one distinct yet inescapably part of the whole of this most prismatic artist. No biopic has ever captured so many echoes of its subject or come closer to the true multiplicity of one figure. The structure alone is breathtaking, using a circles-within-circles approach to examine the same event, in one case bumping two Dylans into each other. The film starts to crawl when it settles on Cate Blanchett (intellectual Dylan) for long stretches, but to my mind, the film deserves universal praise for bringing to life a tiny

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