

# DIP INTO THE BLEAK SIDE OF THINGS — AND SHINE IN THE LIGHT

by Molly Templeton

The first thing I did when I finally put these films in order was let out a huge — and not a little bit surprised — sigh. It didn't feel like *quite* such a bleak year in movies until now. Last year my great love was the decaying future; now, it's the brutal past lined up next to the dark present. (Of course, it's also an animated rat and a quiet love story.) In truth, the theme here (if there is one) isn't so much bleakness, as many murders and as much darkness as these films hold; it's fascination, obsession, fixation, devotion. These characters are fixated on their work, their talents, their futures, their pasts, their own identities. They twist and shift in the gaze of others, be it the look of an admirer, a jealous child, an outsider trying to parse the layers of disguise.

I didn't put these top ten films together with a theme in mind any more than I grouped as the second ten those that didn't suit the theme. I made a list, and then I looked at it. And what it said to me was that we're in a dark and beautiful time (though it's also a time in which, as Manohla Dargis aptly noted in *The New York Times*, many of "the finest American directors working now ... [make] little on-screen time for women" — but that's a topic that deserves more space than I have here). There wasn't an end of year film like last year's *Children of Men* that left me teetering on the edge of my seat; instead, there was a spring film that, though it already won an Oscar, was easily the best thing released this past year. There was a lush adaptation of a beloved book and a slow build of films that impressed their images and characters on my mind. Like last year, the last few weeks offered a few new loves, films that crept in under the last-minute deadline to join the club. And as ever, there are the films I sadly never saw. It takes years to explore all the cinematic offerings of one single year, but here's a start.

## 1. *The Lives of Others*



It wasn't until I found myself comparing everything else I saw to Florian Henckel von Donnersmark's Best Foreign Film Oscar-winning debut film that I realized it was simply the most perfect movie of the year. Subtle performances, precise details, gorgeous colors, a gripping story: this film has it all. *Others* is a reflection of a time that wasn't really all that long ago and a reminder of the things, both horrible and astonishing, people will do for what they believe in. The film's golden year was made bittersweet in July when its star,



Ulrich Mühe, died of stomach cancer. When the Oscar memorial runs through faces familiar and less so, look for his serious eyes and remember: This was the man who drew on his past as someone being watched to play the one watching, the one changed by observation as Georg Dreyman (Sebastian Koch) changed by being observed. (Reviewed 3/8/07)

## 2. *There Will Be Blood*

If there is a flaw in Paul Thomas Anderson's epic, filthy, distinctly told story of an obsessed oilman, it's the slight flaw of familiarity: As good as Daniel Day-Lewis is, I felt like I'd seen him do something similar before. But here, Day-Lewis' Daniel Plainview has a dangerous and unforgettable foil in Eli Sunday (Paul Dano), a young preacher. As full of piss and vinegar as Plainview is, Sunday can match him; his pious face and solemn manner can only mask the younger man's dark heart for so long. Anderson's long, stunning film is, like *The Lives of Others*, both of another time and wholly pertinent. When Plainview gives a speech to the citizens of the small California town he's essentially just purchased, my skin crawls. He promises them everything: education, brighter futures for their children, jobs, improvements to their lives. And every word he says is as empty as the show Sunday puts on while claiming to cure a woman's arthritis. Capitalism and religion, twined and at each other's throats: This isn't a movie from a century ago. This is a movie for and about now. (1/31/08)

## 3. *Once*



John Carney's intimate portrait of a gentle falling and a glorious shared talent arrived bearing laurels and streamers of

praise from those who'd already seen it. *Once* deserved every word. There are a million love stories in which there's just no reason for the characters to fall in love with each other, but here's one in which we see just how they fall into harmony with each other, how their mirrored talents bring out the best in each of them — and how a leap of faith is often required in love and life, even if your last leap found you wounded upon landing. It's compelling and sweet, and I only hope it wins the lone Oscar for which it was nominated (for the beautiful "Falling Slowly"). (7/26/07)

## 4. *Ratatouille*



The story of Remy (Patton Oswalt), a rat with dreams too big for his small, furry body, *Ratatouille* is a joyous, exuberant tale that borrows a few standbys of animated, kid-friendly fare (Remy doesn't have a mother, like all too many Disney characters, and his separation from and reunion with his human friend are quite familiar) while exploring relatively grown-up notions about striving for greatness from yourself and acceptance from those around you. Rats, humans, even critics get their moments in a movie that's a delight on so many levels that it, like a good book, encourages multiple viewings; it's as funny, sweet and inspired the second time you see Remy running through the sewers of Paris and the kitchen of Gasteau's as it is the first. (7/12/07)

## 5. *The Assassination of Jesse James By the Coward Robert Ford*

Give yourself over to Andrew Dominik's introspective, involving exploration of the relationship between Jesse James (Brad Pitt,

magnetic and a little scary) and Robert Ford (Casey Affleck, reserved and observant). Roger Deakins' beautiful cinematography wraps up landscapes and houses, faces and figures, with such clarity and such wide skies that you become certain that somewhere in this country a place exists that is as empty now as it was a century ago. *Assassination* rewards patience and a willingness to indulge its slightly dreamy tone (emphasized by Nick Cave and Warren Ellis' beautiful, haunting score) and meandering narrative. But focus on Ford, who worshipped James only to find he was just another man, and you'll uncover a story about hero worship and American mythology, about those we reward for standing outside the law and those we resent for changing the course of an unforgettable story.

## 6. *I'm Not There*

Todd Haynes' dizzying take on the life and times of Bob Dylan actually might make an interesting double feature with the previous film — one a fairly straightforward look at a real but mythologized figure, the other a splintered vision of the characters one artist suggested over the years as he reinvented himself in the public eye. Haynes, whose six characters in search of one singular man's essence are, for the most part, cleverly cast, made a divisive movie that some say only Dylan fans can appreciate while others argue that Dylan fans would be the first to dismiss the film. For my part, I'm a casual Dylan fan who saw in *I'm Not There* a fantastical work of creativity and inspiration, a cover version whose melody of oddness and poetry is a compliment (and complement?) to the man who stands unseen at the film's center and whose name is never mentioned. (12/6/07)

## 7. *Eastern Promises*



David Cronenberg can't seem to look away from the darker sides of humanity, and he won't let his audience look away from some of the nastiest bits, either. Viggo Mortensen's naked bathhouse brawl is not the sort of jaw-dropping fight that usually gets talked about, all smooth choreography and clever stunts, but a messy piece of work that's not even the most vicious moment in the film. Set in the underworld of the Russian mafia, *Eastern Promises* is a story about loyalty, secrets, honor and the

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