

difficulty of maintaining one's character and self in a brutal and foreign world. The ruthlessness beneath the surface of a seemingly kind man and the humanity behind the eyes of a killer are both a shock to Naomi Watts' character, an outsider to the mob, whose job is to bring life into the world, not to take it out. (9/27/07)

## 8. *Zodiac*

Director David Fincher often makes slick, indulgent films, horrifyingly violent but impressively watchable, but here, with the story of the men pursuing California's Zodiac killer, he's restrained and formal — to his benefit. The film's fantastic cast (this year was full of stellar ensembles) doesn't hit a single wrong note in the careful, obsessive hunt for the killer — a hunt which may or may not have proven fruitless. *Zodiac* is a story staring right at futility, at failure and at the damage a singular fixation can have on a life. But it also, as Elbert Ventura points out on Slate.com, comes down on the side of justice



done right, done fairly, done methodically. "What makes *Zodiac* truly — and sneakily — subversive," Ventura writes, is that "it's a Hollywood movie that champions due process." (3/8/07)

## 9. *Atonement*

Like my number one movie, *Atonement* is a story about using fiction to change things, though *The Lives of Others'* writer is considerably more successful than *Atonement's*. More than that, I'm unwilling

to say. The Ian McEwan novel on which this film is based seemed an unlikely candidate for a successful adaptation; with its quiet yet shocking close, it seemed too psychological and interior to transfer to the screen. But director Joe Wright and screenwriter Christopher Hampton untangled it neatly, and the resulting film, though it sometimes comes on too strong, managed to break my heart completely — not with the story of the troubled lovers, but with the story of a young girl who never grows away from the

irreparable damage she did by telling a story she shouldn't have. (1/10/08)

## 10. *Michael Clayton*

If I'm going to comment on the relative familiarity of Daniel Day-Lewis' performance in *There Will Be Blood*, I should, to be fair, note that George Clooney can do the composed smart guy in a suit in his sleep. But *Michael Clayton*, written and directed by first-time director Tony Gilroy (who also wrote or co-wrote the *Bourne* films), plays off that strength, setting Clooney up as the calm, understated center around which less stable characters revolve, chief among them Tom Wilkinson as a lawyer having a crisis of conscience that coincides with his decision to go off his medication and Tilda Swinton as another corporate lawyer who will go to horrific lengths to keep her case under control. *Michael Clayton* is an elegant piece of work, a subtle thriller that never panders to its audience or slips to let a character tell us what exactly is going on. (10/25/07)

# ELEVEN MORE



**The Bourne Ultimatum** Paul Greengrass knows how to make a smart, swift, compelling action film even when the story is familiar from the previous two in the series. Eager to make the most of jittery cameras, smart stunts and a juxtaposition of glossy film and gritty streets, *Ultimatum* is grounded in Matt Damon's ability to look totally ordinary yet pull off the extraordinary over and over again. (8/9/07)

**Gone Baby Gone** A surprisingly deft directorial debut from Ben Affleck, *Gone Baby Gone* has almost too much in common with *Mystic River*, another adaptation of a novel by Dennis Lehane. But Casey Affleck truly comes of age here, leaving behind his stammering, reluctant younger roles while playing a private investigator for whom the flashy story — the abducted child — is only the beginning.

**Hot Fuzz** No, it wasn't *Shaun of the Dead*. You can only create the rom-zom-com genre once. But this clever send-up and appreciation of action films is its own kind of genius. You just have to be patient. Let Edgar Wright and his all-star cast lull you into thinking it's a quieter, gentler kind of comedy — until the point at which they, er, stop doing that. Quite convincingly. (4/26/07)



**In the Shadow of the Moon** There's a striking humility to the men of the Apollo missions as they tell stories about their lives in this graceful, affecting documentary. As one astronaut points out, one day he was an ordinary pilot, the next a hero, and nothing, really, had changed. Perceptive and charming, simple and inspiring, *Moon* offers a firsthand look at the uniting qualities of an accomplishment like the moon landing — and a reminder that the rest of the universe is still out there, waiting. (10/11/07)

**The King of Kong: A Fistful of Quarters** The year's least likely villain is a restaurant owner and hot sauce salesman from Florida who also, as it happens, long held the world Donkey Kong record. His nemesis, in Seth Gordon's wildly funny film, is a Washington science teacher whose life has been a long chain of alms. *King of Kong* is an engrossing peek at a subculture full of conspiracies and connections, competitions and inspirations. All the better is the fact that the story continues offscreen. Was Billy Mitchell really so negative? Did Steve Wiebe hold the record for a longer period? Watch the movie, then hit Google: There's enough material out there for a sequel and then some.



in the mix. What makes the film tick to its surprisingly calm end is the other pair of actors: Tommy Lee Jones as a careworn sheriff and the incredible Javier Bardem as a magnetic sociopath. (11/29/07)

**No Country for Old Men** Every critic — every viewer — has their hangups, and I'll admit that one of mine is that I tend to be exceptionally hard on movies in which the plot hinges on a main character doing something incredibly stupid. And in the Coen brothers' latest film, the actions of Llewelyn Moss (Josh Brolin) solidly fit that bill. But Moss, though the character around which others revolve, is the least interesting fellow



**No End in Sight** Charles Ferguson's documentary about the missteps and failures of the Iraq invasion is systematic and sharp, and it takes plenty of time to listen to the men who were on the ground and knew of what they spoke — which happens to be one of the things the damning, incendiary doc points out that the Bush administration failed to do. *No End in Sight* should stand as a defining document of our era. (9/13/07)

**Paprika and Persepolis** These are two very different animated films, one flashy with color and one elegant in black and white, one exploring the fantasies, fetishes and hangups of our dreaming selves while the other tells of growing up in wartime and under a repressive government. *Persepolis*, based on Marjane Satrapi's graphic novel memoirs, has literary cachet and undeniable relevance to the present, but *Paprika*, futuristic and imaginative, might just linger in your memory a touch longer. Both, though, are unmissable pieces of art. (7/5/07; 1/31/08)



**Stardust** Working from Neil Gaiman and Charles Vess' lovely illustrated novel, director Matthew Vaughn (*Layer Cake*) reinvigorated fantasy filmmaking with this sprawling, sprightly caper of a fairy tale about a fallen star, murderous princes and a young man



who's more than he thinks he is. *The Golden Compass* may have had the bigger budget, but *Stardust* has the magic that marquee adaptation sadly lacked. (8/9/07)

**Waitress** Sweet and tart, Adrienne Shelly's story about an unexpected pregnancy was the smallest of the year's three films on the topic — but it had an enormous heart. As the titular waitress, Keri Russell pulled off a performance that buoyed and seasoned the film; her bottomless frustration with her lot in life didn't get in the way of her affection for her friends and colleagues, or her attraction to the handsome local doc played winningly by Nathan Fillion. This is what a romantic comedy should be. (5/24/07)

