



4. *Seven Psychopaths*

If you have yet to see Irish playwright Martin McDonagh's debut film, *In Bruges* (2008), and if you have yet to behold the raw genius of actor Sam Rockwell's recent performance in *Moon* (2009), don't bother with McDonagh's latest, an extremely weird, cartoonishly violent meta-fable about Hollywood, hit men, insanity and the pains of creativity. If, however, you're already acquainted — and are ready for another whoop-de-doo performance by Christopher Walken and another queasy eye-popper by Tom Waits — then, by all means, let yourself fall into the surreal ghastliness of McDonagh's sick existential humor. *Seven Psychopaths* is a peyote trip into the darkest corners of American hell. Hip filmsters and high college kids will be quoting this free-wheeling movie for years to come.



5. *Moonrise Kingdom*

Like W.D. Griffith, Federico Fellini, Stanley Kubrick and Terry Gilliam before him, writer/director Wes Anderson is forging a body of work so idiosyncratic and stylized that it is becoming a kind of hermetic cinematic universe. And in *Moonrise Kingdom*, a prosaic adventure story-cum-romance that pairs a precocious geek who defects from his scout troop and an emotionally distanced girl who could be an adolescent Margot Tenenbaum, Anderson has created a latter day Oz — or perhaps anti-Oz, where the dreamers remain wide awake.



6. *Magic Mike*

By now, we shouldn't be surprised that director Steven Soderbergh — the guy who practically kick-started modern indie films with 1989's *sex, lies and videotape* — can pull off any and all cinematic sleights-of-hand. And yet, this year he expertly tackled the outwardly ghetto-rific subject of a homoerotic/heterocentric conglomerate of young bucks working a Tampa strip club whose maverick proprietor, Dallas (Matthew McConaughey), has empiric aspirations extending toward Miami. Hoo-ya! And just behind the low-rent glamour and fantastic dance routines runs a really sweet, really funny po-mo rom-com centered on the oddly melodic waltz between the characters nicely played by Channing Tatum and Cody Horn.



7. *Chronicle*

The superhero flick is turned topsy-turvy, upside-down and inside-out by first-time director Josh Trank in this wicked little story about a trio of high-school friends who stumble upon a glowing blue meteorite. It's the archetypal comic origin myth, presented from the hackneyed perspective of the most troubled teen's (Dane DeHaan) video footage of his life. But, unlike most *Blair Witch* derivatives, *Chronicle* leans strongly on its narrative, which combines the searing myth of Icarus with the Shakespearean tragedy of absolute power's corrupting spark.



8. *Looper*

One of the most satisfying sci-fi/speculative mind-bogglers in a long while, *Looper* — about criminal assassins who are sent targets from the future, where time-travel is feasible but simple killing is not — transcended the merely clever to become a queasily existential fable reminiscent of temporally twisted thrillers like *12 Monkeys* or *Memento*. Emily Blunt, as usual, is fantastic, but this film belongs to Joseph Gordon-Levitt and Bruce Willis, who, as younger/older versions of the main “looper,” maintain a dark, often funny symbiosis that becomes a fine kind of Christ complex, with the tick-tock clock playing Holy Ghost. Written and craftily directed by Rian Johnson, whose debut film was 2005's indie sleeper *Brick*.



9. *The Raid*

Swift, economical and filthy violent, *The Raid: Redemption* is a police procedural martial-arts action movie set on the edge of madness. Written and helmed by Welsh director Gareth Evans, this lean, brutal story of a SWAT-like raid on a high rise held by a Jakarta drug lord plays out like an adrenalized nightmare by the young John Woo: The movie is unrepentant in its depiction of a Hobbesian world where survival is moot and death is dealt out at the speed of eye-blinks. And yet, thanks to an excellent cast (led by Iko Uwais) and the excellent bird's-eye cinematography of Matt Flannery, *The Raid* is redeemed from pure nihilism by a gritty adherence to violence as a last-ditch moral code that harkens back to the hellish humanity of John Ford and Sam Peckinpah.



10. *The Avengers*

At first, director Joss Whedon's genre offering to the comic-book universe feels a tad bloated and logy, like an idea whose time has come, overfed, overstayed its welcome and then unionized its component parts. But we're talking Whedon, here, and what at first seems sleepy is simply the wind-up for one ass-kicking punch of transcendent superhero fun, leading to a balls-to-the-vortex finale that is unimprovably impressive. Yes, Robert Downey Jr. is marvelous, but it's Mark Ruffalo who really takes the cake as the good Dr. Bruce Banner gone green under the subatomic gills.