Iraq ruled not only the news but movie screens as well in 2006, as George W. Bush's war was analyzed and attacked from myriad angles by documentarians intent on delivering "embedded" on-the-ground reports free from Rummy spin. *The War Tapes*, *Iraq in Fragments*, and *The Ground Truth* (among others) provided bracingly immediate perspectives that blew away the sterility of cable news coverage, their raw, blistering tactics getting intimately inside the complex conflict. Interiority was also the hallmark of two of the year's preeminent fictional efforts, as Michel Gondry's dream-drenched *The Science of Sleep* and David Lynch's magnum opus *Inland Empire* both burrowed so deeply into their characters' fractured psyches that they became fanciful, terrifying, hallucinatory portraits of the mind's tangled subconscious. Gondry and Lynch's playful and/or rigorous experimentalism weren't isolated examples, with Michael Mann (*Miami Vice*), Sofia Coppola (*Marie Antoinette*), and Darren Aronofsky (*The Fountain*) similarly revisiting favorite thematic fixations while pushing the boundaries of their particular aesthetic methods to new, idiosyncratic heights. And amidst the usual glut of studio-produced junk, a few subversive figures—such as Sacha Baron Cohen's infamous Kazakhstan reporter—managed to shake up the system from within. In some cases, however, triumph came not from daring risk-taking but, rather, from the cultivation and refinement of familiar ground, a fact breathtakingly demonstrated by masters like The Dardenne Brothers (*L'Enfant*), Pedro Almodóvar (*Volver*), and Hou Hsiao-Hsien (*Three Times*)—and, as well, by the late Robert Altman, whose heartfelt tribute to showbiz and melancholy rumination on mortality, *A Prairie Home Companion*, proved one of the auteur's trademark ensemble pieces, and a fitting coda to one of the medium's most distinguished and vital careers. *Nick Schager*
**Inland Empire** is now out of its cage and critics are beginning to struggle with it. Or not. Avant-garde chickenshits have already tossed up their weapons, leaving Lynch’s meta-monster and its fucking-brutal clicking parts to please no one except for fans of the director’s previous freak-outs. Their loss is our gain. But how do you describe the indescribable to those wanting in? For one thing, you don’t. Lynch, pace Björk, leaves logic and reason to the arms of unconsciousness, but he never abandons compassion, because every corridor of this serpentine hall of mirrors is alive with a bug-eyed exaltation for the in-too-deep thesping that obsesses Laura Dern’s actress as she pushes and bleeds her way through a grungy view-askew of the Dream Factory. J. Hoberman, comparing the film to *Meshes of the Afternoon*, has said that the film “has no logic apart from its movie-ness.” A friend likens it to an STD, only one that’s worth getting—which is to say, it’s not easily forgotten. Sweet.

The Dardenne Brothers are religious men, but their detached style is so munificent their films defy easy categorization; these works of art can just as easily be read as Christian allegories or visions of socialist-humanist daring. Indeed, every remarkable composition and movement in *L’Enfant* exudes compassion and remorse, evoking a profound sense of transcendent, existential, spiritual, or emotional unease (take your pick, or take them all, because the brothers’ vision is nothing if not absolute), and its incredible, gut-punching finale, can be looked at as a male pieta or, more simply (but just as powerfully), an eruptive demonstration of a child finally becoming an adult. Either way, the film is nothing short of a miracle.

Another of Hou Hsiao-Hsien’s hypnotic ruminations on the symbiotic union between the past and the present, the personal and the political, *Three Times* finds the Taiwanese director revisiting and expanding upon his favorite milieus and themes via a triptych of love stories told in different eras with the same lead actors. A self-reflexive tour-de-force whose point of reference is Hou’s own canon, the film sumptuously segues from a vibrantly erotic 1966 affair, to a 1911 relationship between a courtesan and a revolutionary newspaperman, to a modern portrait of cold, chaotic passion. Tonally dissimilar but all interested in the powerful influence of yesteryear on the here and now, the three stories combine to form a comprehensive study of emotional expression and inhibition, their varying modes of formalism—the opening segment’s airy lyricism, the middle section’s self-conscious rigidity, the finale’s frazzled electricity—deftly mirroring Hou’s commentary on the inextricable links tethering Taiwan’s citizens to both their individual and national histories.

Despite its verisimilitude, Jean-Pierre Melville’s classic 1969 WWII tale of the French Resistance—never before released in the U.S.—ultimately exists in the underworld of his American crime pics, a dark, hidden realm of furtive meetings and dangerous diplomacy. An unsentimental vision of war as an arena in which men and women achieve self-actualization, suffer moral decay, and do (or, disastrously, do not do) whatever a given situation necessitates, Melville’s superlative drama fixates on unspoken codes of conduct, in the process offering a stark reminder that, for better and worse, what war creates is not simple heroes or villains but, rather,
Jean-Pierre Melville’s *Army of Shadows* resurrects the existential noir. Almost 40 years old, this impeccably designed house of cards hinges on a perpetual mood of paranoia, with characters brokering spaces wide and small like rooks laid out across an intimidating and immaculate chessboard. Know thy enemy, but also know thy friend. The wind is its own character—and so are the falling rain and the ticking of clocks. A certain determinist pall encases everything, yet the film’s cool is not without purpose. A smoky commentary on liberty, equality, and fraternity, the film acknowledges that the bell tolls for us all.

Carlos Reygadas has a gift for weighty parallelism and his Cannes flamethrower *Battle in Heaven* not only comes with one but two sets of bookends: a pair of blowjobs. Early on, the Mexican flag is hoisted into the air; later, when the main character’s fate has been sealed, the flag goes flaccid. Beyond these two scenes appear two recapitulations of the same oral sex scene. In one, the beautiful general’s daughter goes down on her driver, his cock sheathed in a condom; in the second, no condom is involved, but the cock is a prosthetic. To the very end, the film is committed to conveying a modern tragedy of personal and political negation through sexual pageantry.

As with HBO’s *Deadwood*, Nick Cave and John Hillcoat’s revisionist Aussie Western is coated in flies, mud, and sweat while exuding an appreciation for—and fearful awe of—the near-mythic savagery that constitutes enlightened society’s flip-side. Guy Pearce, decked out in a *High Plains Drifter* duster as an agent of fratricidal conflict, is blackmailed into saving one brother by killing another, a mission that’s colored by the unavoidable (and problematic) process of civilization encroaching into the wild and, specifically, the subjugation of the Outback’s aboriginal inhabitants. A conflicted elegy for a brutal past, it’s also a superb torchbearer for the fading Western genre.

The difference between *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* and *The Science of Sleep* is the difference between a good pop song and a great punk record, a fluid Escher-like mindbender and a kaleidoscopic Jackson Pollock drip. This is the first Gondry film...
that feels completely born of the pop magpie's own imagination—fabulously homegrown and devoted unpretentiously to an oddball way of looking at and appreciating the world and the people who run through it, a blissfully cluttered vision instantly and affectionately recognizable from Gondry's groundbreaking music videos for The Chemical Brothers, Foo Fighters, Kyle Minogue, and Björk.

Mr. Lazarescu's first name isn't Dante for nothing. From hell and back, the man is subjected to a series of unfortunate events that represents a purgatory of exasperating ineffectuality and inaction. But Cristi Puiu never overplays this symbolism or loses sight of a larger humanist picture. Forcibly directed, the film—something of a state of the union address—rarely looks away from its main character, and when it does (not least of which when the lights go out over and over again outside the old man's apartment), his absence is felt like a punch to the gut, or a beating heart ripped out from a body politic that's slowly begun to give out on itself.

Sofia Coppola is obsessed with Marie Antoinette's pleasure, holding out her hand and contriving for her a series of mini revolutions (she claps, to everyone's shock, after a court performance and, later, carries on an affair with a gorgeous and virile soldier) in order to hint at the girl's desire to react against that which was preordained. Cynics will reduce these moments to feminist fiddling, but they are, in fact, very humane considerations of the corset-like effect ritual had on Marie Antoinette's will. The film is a great fashion show but it is also constitutes a great makeover—an elegy to frustration, where every color and sound evokes the longing and rapture of a girl who did not understand her adult responsibility.

The purest, most evocative distillation yet of Michael Mann's fascination with the thin line separating cops and crooks, identity confusion, the cold remoteness of (and subsequent alienation generated by) modern metropolises, and rigid masculine codes of honor, Miami Vice thrums with a raw, fierce, jazzy soul. Utilizing DV cinematography that's always loose and yet firmly assured, the film's lithe, slithering aesthetic turns the action both sensually supple and violently muscular. The afterglow left by Mann's anti-blockbuster, however, isn't one of shotgun-blasted excitement but of bittersweet melancholy—primarily for the lives we desire but can never quite attain.

Exhilarating, infuriating, mesmerizing, baffling, and out-and-out crazy, Ilya Khrjanovsky's debut doesn't lack for ambition and outrageousness. Local censors objected to its vision of Russia as a cesspool of moral, spiritual, and physical degeneration, but this truly gonzo effort thrives precisely because of its assaultive allegory. From jackhammering metal drills and conversations about genetic engineering, to round piglet meat, drunken naked old ladies and constant allusions to the titular numeral, Khrjanovsky seeks a mood of entrancing disorientation—an effect in keeping with his astonishing portrait of a
Michael Mann's stylish exercises in existentialist dick-swagger can be off-putting, almost hysterical, but *Miami Vice* is something special, materializing and soaring out of a splendiferous, almost sci-fi ether. Mann treats Miami like some dead thing, flipping it over so he won't have to look at its tacky-pastel surface—essentially the only side of the city people who've never been there are familiar with. Every time Mann lingers on one of his actor's intense expressions, he is considering the secret language the film's world-traveling undercover agents use to scan their environment, and the pain and pleasure their silent tongue rouses. The film isn't better than *Scarface*, but its style is like a vice, almost sinfully deep.

Director Mark Becker's subtle visual touches are always stressing his subject's departed status, and implicit in Carmelo Muñiz Sánchez's struggles—like selling *nieves*, a local ice cream, back home in Mexico (in part to raise enough money for his older daughter's quinceañera)—is a critique of the powers that burden all immigrants. But *Romántico* is, above all, a portrait of an artist as an old man—a good man who reveals, through tears that run along the deep lines in his face, how he gives free *nieves* to poor children who remind him of himself as a child. Would that capitalism were as kind and forgiving.

As loyal as Patrice Chéreau's film is to Joseph Conrad's *The Return*, the director expands the story's point of view by giving more authority to the female experience. This is no slight against Conrad's story, which derives its urgency from its uniquely artistic structure: a third-person narrative homeland divided between a messy, mystical (rural) past and crumbling, industrial (urban) future.

Carefully accumulating and juxtaposing details to form an interconnected web of loneliness, regret and longing for happier times gone by, Kelly Reichardt's small-scale gem would warrant being called a mash-up of *Sideways* and *Brokeback Mountain* if it weren't so superior to those heralded "indie" predecessors in both form and content. With the leisurely rhythm of a Sunday afternoon drive, Reichardt laces her story about childhood friends reuniting for a camping trip with anguished emotion, the sound of Air America radio laments regarding the state of the union gracefully in sync with her characters' dissatisfaction and sadness.

Old and new, dark and light, sorrow and joy—all are united in Jonathan's Demme's wonderful document of Young's August 2005 Nashville concert, which vividly captures the singer-songwriter's greatness by simply letting him do his thing. Refusing to slice-and-dice its various musical numbers, the film features a preponderance of songs that deal with mortality, a theme that resonates forcefully thanks to Demme's magnificent combination of tight close-ups (conveying weighty isolation) and panoramic wide shots of the crowded stage (expressing a counterbalancing optimism and sense of community). It may be the finest concert film I've ever seen.

A search for genuine sentiment in out-there operatic fantasy, Darren Aronofsky's
told as if it were in the first. By staying inside Alvan Hervey's head, Conrad is able to rigidly convey the man's belief that the world revolves around his ideals. But Alvan's trophy wife seems to exist only in the periphery of the man's mind and the corners of Conrad's story, something a generous Chéreau corrects. The change in titles speaks wonders about the director's chivalry: The Return focuses on the act the woman commits while Gabrielle simply focuses on the woman.

HONORABLE MENTION:


THE WORST OF 2006


They're Just My Friends, RevoLOUtion, Iowa, BloodRayne, Sorry, Haters, You, Me and Dupree, Deck the Halls, V for Vendetta, Keeping Mum, and Running Scared.