



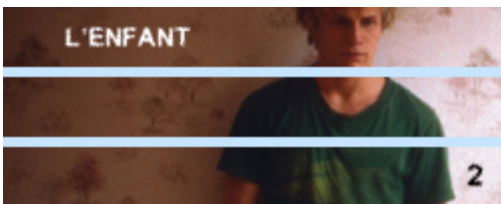
# THE BEST OF 2006

ED GONZALEZ

NICK SCHAGER



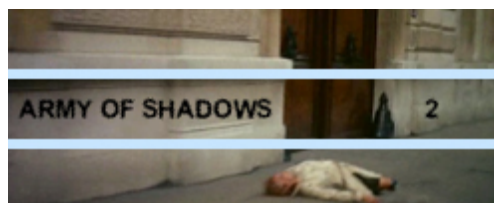
*Inland Empire* is now out of its cage and critics are beginning to struggle with it. Or not. Avant-garde chickenshits have already tossed up their weapons, leaving Lynch's meta-monster and its fucking-brutal clicking parts to please no one except for fans of the director's previous freak-outs. Their 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 transcendental, 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.

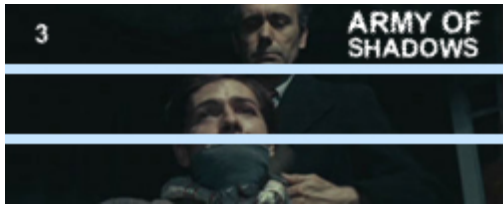


Despite its verisimilitude, Jean-Pierre Melville's classic 1969 WWII tale of the French Resistance—never before released in the U.S.—ultimately exists in the underworld of his American crime pics, a dark, hidden realm of furtive meetings and dangerous diplomacy. An unsentimental vision of war as an arena 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,

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warriors.



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.



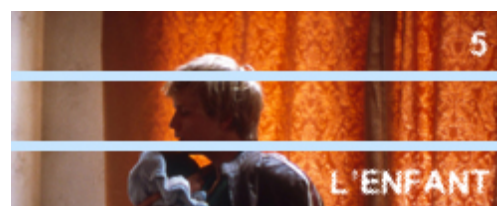
The difference between *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* and *The Science of Sleep* is the difference between a good pop song and a great punk record, a fluid Escher-like mindbender and a kaleidoscopic Jackson Pollock drip. This is the first Gondry film



Surrealistic to its core, David Lynch's epic dreamscape is a bizarre masterpiece that, with every shift in chronology and continuity, confounds rational interpretation, its winding route of asides, associations, and random sights and sounds not so much lucidly understood as simply experienced. Shot on gorgeously composed grainy DV that corresponds with the action's skuzzy, hazy nature, the film is a work of dark enchantment, Lynch craftily combining and reconfiguring aesthetic and narrative components until what remains—aside from Laura Dern's brilliant, wide-ranging lead performance—is a through-the-rabbit-hole mystery saturated with endless interpretive possibilities.



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.



Jean-Pierre and Luc Dardenne's latest is overpowering in its intense humanism, the brothers' documentary-influenced style

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.

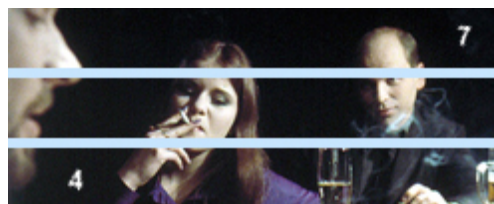


Sofia Coppola is obsessed with Marie Antoinette's pleasure, holding out her hand and contriving for her a series of mini revolutions (she claps, to everyone's shock, after a court performance and, later, carries on an affair with a gorgeous and virile soldier) in order to hint at the girl's desire to 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.

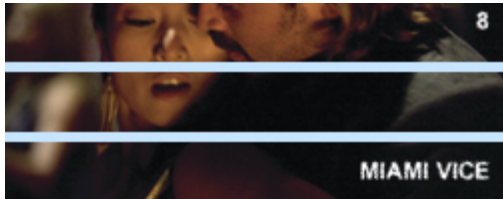
(handheld camerawork positioned behind characters' heads, no musical punctuation) once again deftly employed in service of a tale of painful salvation. In turn cheerless, heartrending, and uplifting, the film is perfectly calibrated for emotional devastation, buoyed by stunning lead performances and a narrative whose superficial simplicity belies an intricate, underlying intertwining of guilt, shame, desperation, accountability, and maturation. Its final, tearful embrace—arguably the most moving cinematic moment this year—achieves a state of sublime, transcendent catharsis.



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.

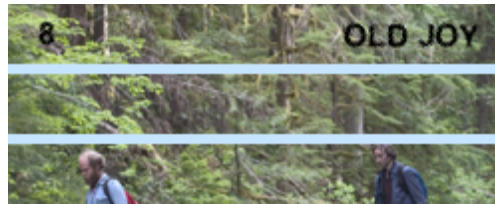


Director Mark Becker's subtle visual touches are always stressing his subject's departed status, and implicit in Carmelo Muñoz Sánchez's struggles—like selling *nieves*, a local ice cream, back home in Mexico (in part to raise enough money for his older daughter's quinceañera)—is a critique of the powers 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.

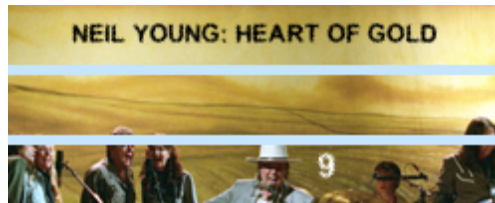


As loyal as Patrice Chéreau's film is to Joseph Conrad's *The Return*, the director expands the story's point of view by giving more authority to the female experience. This is no slight against Conrad's story, which derives its urgency from its uniquely artistic structure: a third-person narrative

...keeping them the astonishing picture of a 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:



*Mongolian Ping Pong, Kekexili: Mountain Patrol, Three Times, Two Drifters, Inside Man, Fratricide, Happy Feet, Monster House, Yaji and Kita: The Midnight Pilgrims, and Don't Come Knocking.*

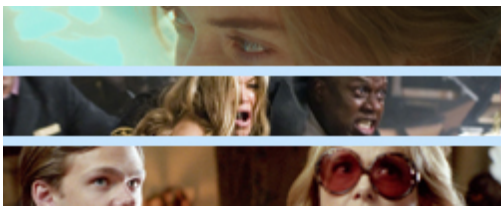
polarizing sci-fi saga is the kind of earnestly romantic-philosophical endeavor that dares to be ridiculous in the greater service of emotional truth. In its own sappy way as daring and extreme as the director's *Requiem for a Dream*, this trippy, era-spanning melodrama is, at its core, an intensely grandiose and sincere rumination on the nature of love as the universe's only eternal element, as well as a bittersweet depiction of the inherent cyclicity of existence. Does its poignancy ultimately outweigh its silliness? To these eyes, it does so strikingly, and definitively.

### HONORABLE MENTION:



*Borat, The Death of Mr. Lazarescu, Mongolian Ping Pong, Battle in Heaven, Volver, A Prairie Home Companion, The Science of Sleep, Letters from Iwo Jima, Marie Antoinette, and District B13.*

## THE WORST OF 2006



*Poseidon, Final Destination 3, The Architect, Failure to Launch, Little Children, Dirty, Peaceful Warrior, Running With Scissors, The Last King of Scotland, and Blood Diamond.*



*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.*