

The year's ten best films and other shenanigans

by Roger Ebert

It was a time of wonders, an autumn of miracles, one of the best years in recent movie history. One great film after another opened, and movie lovers found there were two or three, sometimes more, must-see films opening on a weekend. I gave up rationing my four-star ratings and went with the flow.

The best films of 2007:

1. "Juno" : How can I choose this warm-hearted comedy about a pregnant teenager, when the year was rich with serious drama? First, because of all the year's films I responded to it most strongly. I tried out other titles in the No. 1 position, but my heart told me I had to be honest: This was my true love, and I could not be unfaithful. It is so hard to make a great comedy at all, and harder still to make one that is intelligent, quick, charming, moving and yes, very, very funny. Seeing "Juno" with an audience was to be reminded of unforgettable communal moviegoing experiences, when strangers are united in delight. It was light on its feet, involving the audience in love and care for its characters. The first-time screenplay by Diablo Cody is Oscar-worthy. So is Ellen Page's performance in the title role, which is like tightrope-walking: There were so many ways for her to go wrong, and she never did.
2. "No Country for Old Men" : A perfect movie, I wrote after the premiere at Toronto. And so it is. The Coen brothers supply not a wrong scene or even a wrong moment. A story bleak and merciless, played out by characters who are capable of almost anything except withstanding the relentless evil of its serial killer. Based on the Cormac McCarthy novel, it builds on his eye and ear to create a world in which ordinary assumptions go astray, and logic is useless. With spare, wounded performances by Josh Brolin, Tommy Lee Jones, Woody Harrelson and many others, and Javier Bardem as not a man so much as a force of destruction.
3. "Before the Devil Knows You're Dead": It was a year for the great character actor Philip Seymour Hoffman, so different and so good in this film, "The Savages" and "Charlie Wilson's War." In "Devil," he and Ethan Hawke play brothers, unlike except in their urgent need for cash, who plan a "victimless" hold-up of their family's jewelry store. Everything goes wrong, they feel anguish and panic in the pits of their stomachs, and in the eyes of their father (Albert Finney), the hurt is almost unbearable. They lie and deceive first others and then themselves, and it all turns to ashes. Another masterpiece by Sidney Lumet, who is 83 and at the top of his form.
4. "Atonement": The momentary misunderstanding of a child destroys all possibility of happiness in three lives. Saoirse Ronan plays a young adolescent in a wealthy English family, who sees her older sister (Keira Knightley) and the

family groundskeeper (James McAvoy) in a confrontation she misunderstands, which later leads her to telling an unforgivable lie. Against the canvas of World War II, the love of the two older characters is prevented from realizing itself, in a stunning period picture that centers on a tracking shot at Dunkirk that is one of the most elaborate ever staged. Directed by Joe Wright, based on an Ian McEwan novel that saves a final ironic insight until the end.

5. "The Kite Runner": The beloved best-seller by Khaled Hosseini about two boys in peaceful pre-war Kabul, before the Russians, the Taliban, the Americans and the anarchy destroyed Afghanistan. The boys and their parents are seen in tender detail, then revisited years later after devastation has overthrown their lives. Homayoun Ershadi, who plays the father, has such expressive eyes he makes many of the film's points without speaking. Director Marc Forster, filming in local languages in Afghanistan and the United States, interlaces the fabric of these lives with a heartbreaking story that leads to a powerfully uplifting ending.

6. "Away From Her": The Canadian actress Sarah Polley makes her directing debut with a heartbreaking story of the destruction of Alzheimer's. Julie Christie, in one of the year's best performances, plays a woman whose memories are inexorably slipping away. Gordon Pinsent plays her loving husband, who cannot comprehend how he could so quickly come to mean so little to her. Based on a story by Alice Munro, the film sees through his eyes the disappearance of love, history, life itself, as he lives on in loneliness.

7. "Across the Universe": Possibly the year's most divisive film; you loved it or hated it. Julie Taymor brings all of her gifts of visual invention to a story centering on a group of friends living in Greenwich Village and expressing their lives through the Beatles songbook. They encounter people not unlike those in famous Beatles songs or albums, and the music sheds light on their experiences — sometimes unexpectedly, as when "I Want to Hold Your Hand" tenderly expresses the deepest feelings of a lovelorn lesbian cheerleader. The movie captures the best of what the Beatles represented. I want to see it two or three more times, experiencing it like a favorite CD.

8. "La Vie en Rose": A virtuoso performance by Marion Cotillard as the beloved "Little Sparrow," the legendary singer closest to the hearts of the French. Raised in a brothel and then the "property" of a gangster, she was only 4'8" tall, but had a voice that filled the city. Cotillard portrays her rising from the gutters to international stardom, and then dying of an overdose at 47. The title refers to her most famous song, about life through rose-colored glasses. The film ends with "Non, je ne regrette rien" ("No, I regret nothing"). The period is vividly re-created by director Olivier Dahan. One of the greatest of musical biopics.

9. "The Great Debaters": Denzel Washington's spellbinding film based on the true story set in 1935 about a debate team from Wiley College, an obscure black institution in Texas that defeated Harvard for the national championship. Washington plays their coach, who demands the highest standards, but the film is not another story about an underdog championship, but a searing reminder of

the racist society the team lived in. On a night journey, Washington and his students happen upon a lynching; the horror and danger are overwhelming. With Nate Parker touching as the team researcher who becomes a last-minute substitute, Denzel Whitaker as debater and future CORE founder James Farmer Jr., Jurnee Smollett as a debater who calls on her deepest feelings, and Forest Whitaker as a local preacher who becomes galvanized. It's a deep emotional experience.

10. "Into the Wild": Sean Penn's bleak but sympathetic drama is based on the real story of Christopher McCandless, an idealistic loner who trekked into the Alaskan wilderness and died there. The movie shows him meeting mentors along the way, who are concerned about him, especially a rugged individualist (Hal Holbrook) and a spirited hippie (Catherine Keener). Emile Hirsch plays the role to within an inch of his life, somehow expressing without seeming to try how his tunnel vision leads him through his dreams to his disaster. Could have been dreary, but Penn's screenplay and direction are compelling.

Special Jury Prize

John Carney's "Once": At film festivals, the jury sometimes singles out a film for special qualities that especially impressed them. As a jury of one, my award this year goes to the charming, low-key, quietly appealing "Once," starring Glen Hansard as a Dublin street musician and Markéta Irglová as a Czech immigrant who meet and slowly grow closer while, yes, making beautiful music together. Very little dialogue, but the music and their eyes and silences say it all, in a bittersweet and aching love story.

The Tie for 11th Place

In a way, it's silly to rank films in numerical order. I do a Top 10 because tradition requires it. But here are 10 more films for which I have equal affection. Alphabetically: David Cronenberg's "Eastern Promises," with Naomi Watts, who becomes the protector of an orphaned child, and Viggo Mortensen as a driver for the Russian mafia in London, whose values are challenged by his assignment; Todd Haynes' "I'm Not There," using six actors to represent aspects of the elusive Bob Dylan (Cate Blanchett is the best); Paul Haggis' "In the Valley of Elah," with another powerful performance by Tommy Lee Jones, as a father not satisfied with the official explanation of his son's death in Iraq; Tony Gilroy's "Michael Clayton," with George Clooney as a fixer for a law firm who gets mired in the messiness of truth and conscience; Gavin Hood's "Rendition," starring Reese Witherspoon as a wife whose Egyptian-American husband "disappears" on a flight from Cape Town, and Jake Gyllenhaall as the CIA temporary station chief who is shocked by discoveries he makes about the outsourcing of torture.

Also, John Turturro's bold, unconventional musical "Romance & Cigarettes," starring James Gandolfini and Susan Sarandon as a couple at war in Queens, and Kate Winslet as his fiery mistress. The characters sing along with their favorite songs, in a story that starts out rambunctious and grows serious; Andrew

Wagner's "Starting Out in the Evening," with Frank Langella as a 70-year-old great novelist, and Lauren Ambrose as the young student who wants to know why he hasn't published a novel long in progress; Tim Burton's "Sweeney Todd: The Demon Barber of Fleet Street," a blood-soaked musical starring Johnny Depp as a cutthroat barber and Helena Bonham Carter as the meat-pie baker who recycles his clients; Kasi Lemmons' "Talk to Me," with its virtuoso performance by Don Cheadle as Petey Greene, who brought an authentic voice to radio in Washington, D.C., at a crucial time, and Paul Thomas Anderson's "There Will Be Blood," with Daniel Day-Lewis as a single-minded oil well wildcatter who runs roughshod over everyone in his way.

The Best Foreign Films

Julian Schnabel's "The Diving Bell and the Butterfly," inspired by the extraordinary achievement of French editor Jean-Dominique Bauby (Mathieu Amalric), paralyzed except for his left eye, which he used to blink out a memoir; Cristian Mungiu's "4 Months, 3 Weeks and 2 Days," about a Romanian girl's attempts to help her friend find an illegal abortion; Ang Lee's "Lust, Caution," about a passionate sex affair between a spy and her quarry during the Second World War; Juan Antonio Bayona's "The Orphanage," about a woman who returns to the orphanage where she was raised, and finds it haunted, and Rajesh Domalpalli's "Vanaja," about a lower-caste Indian girl who is befriended by a rich woman and learns to be a gifted dancer, only to find caste barriers in the way of her heart.

The Best Animated Films

Robert Zemeckis' "Beowulf," using motion-capture animation to create a vast scale warrior-and-monsters epic from the dark ages, with a rich subtext of humor; Vincent Paronnaud and Marjane Satrapi's "Persepolis," about an Iranian girl who rebels against the rise of the mullahs, and Brad Bird's high-spirited, riotous "Ratatouille," about rats taking over a kitchen with excellent results!).

The Best Documentaries

David Sington's "In the Shadow of the Moon," revisiting many of the surviving astronauts to talk about their great Apollo adventures and re-create their triumphs; Seth Gordon's "The King of Kong: A Fistful of Quarters," about an epic struggle between two competitors for the title of champion of an almost-forgotten arcade game; Tony Kaye's "Lake of Fire," filmed over a period of 17 years, about the battle over abortion in America; Charles Ferguson's "No End in Sight," using first-person testimony from government and military eyewitnesses to document the mismanagement of the Iraq invasion; Jim Brown's "Pete Seeger: The Power of Song," about the long and productive life of America's folk troubadour, and Michael Moore's "Sicko," contrasting America's health-care system with the way it's done elsewhere.