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# The Best Film of the Past Two Years

## And 24 more picks from what the industry thought us yokels could handle in 2005

By Jonathan Rosenbaum

To choose the best movies of 2005 is to compromise. I limit my list of candidates to films that have screened in Chicago, but I could easily fill it with movies that haven't screened in the U.S. at all, and God knows what I've missed altogether. I'm at the mercy of studio heads, distributors, and publicists, whose decisions about what to release and when defy comprehension.

I saw Woody Allen's *Match Point* in Madrid in mid-November, believing the distributor's announcement that it would open in Chicago in December. Surprised at how much I liked it, I decided it probably belonged on my list, but then some industry executives decided that only the people in New York and Los Angeles should get to see it this year (in time for Oscar nominations), not the less discriminating moviegoers in the Chicago boon-docks. I also couldn't consider other films that won't open here until 2006, such as Tommy Lee Jones's *The Three Burials of Melquiades Estrada*.

The people who run Disney spent a fortune sending critics and Academy members security-encoded DVDs with special "high end" players to view them on. Once we register the players we can watch the five films we've received so far as often as we like, though each time we do, according to the instructions, "the SV300 inserts a powerful, completely invisible watermark. It stamps the content with your player's ID number, and the time and date of the recording. If the playback is copied illegally to videotape, recordable DVD, or



*The World*

onto the Internet, Cineca will be able to analyze the copy and identify the player, the time, and the date on which the copy was made." Unfortunately, these players aren't high-end enough to be region free, and the version of *Howl's Moving Castle* they sent me is the same old dubbed one I'd already reviewed. The Japanese original with English subtitles won't be out commercially on DVD until March. I can't consider that version here because I haven't seen it, so I've grudgingly put the dubbed version on my list.

These complaints aside, 2005 was a good enough year

that my top ten list expanded to 15 including ties.

1. **The World.** Not just the best film of 2005, Jia Zhang-ke's feature was better, or at least more important, than my first choices for 2004 (*The Big Red One*) and 2003 (*25th Hour* and *Crimson Gold*). Those earlier masterpieces lack its vital and complex vision of what the whole planet is like at the moment.

Jia's greatest film, *Platform* (2002), is about the Cultural Revolution; *The World* is a superb companion piece about China's recent capitalist revolu-

tion, set in a theme park outside Beijing with scaled-down models of the world's most famous tourist attractions and populated by visitors and workers. It's a kitsch monstrosity that Jia makes endlessly fascinating and suggestive—in contrast to the cramped and unattractive "backstage" living spaces where the main characters spend most of their time when they're not working. The animated fantasies sparked by characters' text messages are often even more spacious and ethereal than the shots of the theme park. The play

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# Rosenbaum

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among all these spaces marks Jia as the most talented Asian director currently at work—with the possible exception of Hou Hsiao-hsien, whose hauntingly minimalist *Cafe Lumiere* will be playing at the Music Box in January.

**2. Not on the Lips.** At 35, Jia may be the youngest supreme film master working today. At 83, Alain Resnais is the second oldest working regularly, after 97-year-old Manoel de Oliveira, who visited Chicago for the first time during this year's film fest. This exquisite film version of a 1925 operetta is Resnais' fifth cinematic effort to convey his love of musicals, and in some ways it's his most successful. A weird, ghostly farce about loneliness and emotional fragility, it's also an anachronistic history lesson, with its 1920s manners, 1950s MGM colors and lighting, and early-21st-century French racism and anti-Americanism. It also displays much of the formal mastery of previous Resnais masterworks, including *Last Year at Marienbad* (1961), *Providence* (1977), and *Melo* (1986). Fox Lorber never bothered to advertise this film, but it's been available on DVD since March, when it also screened at the Gene Siskel Film Center.

**3. A History of Violence.** I've yet to encounter a single attack on David Cronenberg's multilayered yet fluid meditation on violence in George Bush's America—filmed entirely in Canada. The writer-director clearly knows what he's doing—note the brilliantly worked-out sex scenes—and though the film peaks well before its end, making the climax almost an afterthought, it's less a serious flaw than an indication of how lean and mean the earlier segments are.

**4. Ten Skies.** Here's an experimental film seen by many fewer people than the titles above, having screened only once at Chicago Filmmakers. This masterpiece by James Benning is an elaborately constructed montage of ten ten-minute takes, a mesmerizing study of time, light, movement, and moisture that traces the shifting relations between clouds and earth, nature and people. It had much more to say to me than most narrative films, though the subtly shifting patterns and textures of each shot provide plenty of narrative as they tell the story of our own perceptions.

**5. Tropical Malady.** All three features to date by Thai writer-director (and School of the Art Institute of Chicago graduate) Apichatpong Weerasethakul confirm that he's one of the most creative and unpredictable film artists now working anywhere. Each time out he becomes more ambitious, though *Mysterious Object at Noon* and *Blissfully Yours* were hardly modest efforts.



Clockwise from top left: *A History of Violence*, *Not on the Lips*, *Howl's Moving Castle*, *Me and You and Everyone We Know*, *Capote*

Part one of *Tropical Malady* shows the budding romance between a soldier on leave and a shy country boy with a mixture of irony and tenderness. Part two turns folkloric and allegorical as the soldier travels through a dark forest, alternately stalking and being stalked by his lover in the form of a tiger spirit, with a talking baboon offering sage advice.

6. A tie between two kids' movies, **Howl's Moving Castle** and **Charlie and the Chocolate Factory**, both based on well-known English novels. I especially value the first, Hayao Miyazaki's animated feature—based on Diana Wynne Jones's book and the most commercially successful domestic release in the history of Japanese cinema—for the radical fluidity with which people and objects undergo constant transformation and for the implied philosophical position: that wisdom doesn't so much succeed callowness as peacefully coexist with it. The same can be said for dreams and waking reality. The triumph of Tim Burton's delirious riff on Roald Dahl's *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* is more in the surrealist design and nightmarish dislocation than in some metaphysics. The off-putting aggressive mannerisms of

Johnny Depp as chocolate tycoon Willy Wonka are a reminder that Burton has better instincts for the visual than for human behavior.

7. A tie between two literary movies, **Yes** and **Capote**, both highly unexpected successes. *Yes*, a post-9/11 love story about an Irish-American scientist (Joan Allen) and a Lebanese surgeon working as a cook (Simon Abkarian), proved that contemporary world politics could be gracefully confronted in iambic pentameter. It's the best film Sally Potter's made since *The Gold Diggers* (1983), in part because she found something affirmative to say. *Capote* showed that Truman Capote's downfall could be partly explained by the ethical and emotional conflicts he went through while writing *In Cold Blood*. It had the advantages of a first-rate actor (Philip Seymour Hoffman), a highly focused script by Dan Futterman, and the economical direction of Bennett Miller.

8. A tie between two up-to-date works about art by old masters, Michelangelo Antonioni's 17-minute **Michelangelo Eye to Eye** (2004) and Ingmar Bergman's feature-length **Saraband** (2003). *Michelangelo Eye to Eye*, shown in 35-millimeter as part of the

Onion City Film Festival at Chicago Filmmakers, used digital technology to show Antonioni, now in his 90s and confined to a wheelchair since 1975, walking through Saint Peter's in Rome, looking at and caressing Michelangelo's restored Moses—one restored Michelangelo considering another. *Saraband*, a sequel to Bergman's 1973 *Scenes From a Marriage*, was shot in DV and shown that way at Bergman's insistence during its commercial release. It's a kind of postcinematic effort by Bergman, now in his 80s, made with a new technology after a 60-odd-year career using film. The content is typically self-punishing, but I could only admire his willingness to record such barrenness using a technology that wouldn't grant it even a modicum of glamour.

9. A tie between two plaintive comedies about lonely fuckups, Jim Jarmusch's **Broken Flowers** and Miranda July's **Me and You and Everyone We Know**. I could have made this a three-way tie and included Noah Baumbach's *The Squid and the Whale*, but once the shock of it wore off I didn't find its negativity as clarifying as I would have liked. Jarmusch's feature lacks the formal and moral

complexity of his underrated *Coffee and Cigarettes*, and the fact that he edited it backward is apparent, because it starts out rich and ends up depleted. Bill Murray's narcissism bores me almost as much here as it did in *Lost in Translation*, but the other actors are delightful. July's compulsion to tweak Americans for their puritanism is also somewhat off-putting, but the characters are sweet, her direction deft.

10. A tie between two examples of not-quite science fiction, Hal Hartley's modest **The Girl From Monday** and Wong Kar-wai's almost Wagnerian **2046**. Hartley's hilarious futuristic satire imagines a "dictatorship of the consumer," with citizens wearing bar codes on their wrists and regarded as "investments with growth potential," especially when they have sex. Wong's first film in 'Scope, a labyrinth of longing, begins in the last year of Hong Kong's economic and political independence but is set mainly in the 60s and concerns his parents' generation.

The year's biggest disappointment was a marked decline in the quality and vitality of the documentaries released. In 2004 we were given *Fahrenheit 9/11*,

*The Corporation*, *Los Angeles Plays Itself*, and *Route 181: Fragments of a Journey in Palestine-Israel*. This year we got solid stuff—*Cinevardaphoto* (a Block Films screening), *Go Further*, *Grizzly Man*, *Magnificent Obsession: Frank Lloyd Wright's Buildings and Legacy in Japan*, *The Wild Parrots of Telegraph Hill*, and *William Eggleston in the Real World*—but fewer revelations. Even the most documentarylike items in my top 15, *Ten Skies* and *Michelangelo Eye to Eye*, are subversions of the form, as is Jem Cohen's memorable *Chain*.

Sad to say, none of the documentaries I saw about the war in Iraq seemed adequate to the subject. They all seemed too “embedded,” too timid, too dependent on cross-referencing Hollywood fantasies like *Apocalypse Now*. It's obviously important for *Gunner Palace* to show that some innocent families in Baghdad whose houses were ransacked for weapons got sent to Abu Ghraib even though no weapons were found, but it's offensive to treat such information as incidental and secondary. Ironically, Joe Dante's crude, fictional *Homecoming*—an angry satire about slain soldiers returning from their graves to vote the president out of office, which turned up on Showtime's “Masters of Horror”—came closer to bearing witness to the war's true meaning.

Far too much fuss has been made lately about liberal-minded fiction films that make liberal-minded viewers feel sensitive and virtuous. As a first feature, Paul Haggis's *Crash* certainly has its high points, but fresh insights into the nature and ramifications of racism aren't among them, and the complacent Altman-esque ironies don't help. (Curiously, Jan Hrebejk's uncannily similar and equally accomplished Czech film *Up and Down* was ignored by critics.) I was moved by both *Brokeback Mountain* and *Rent*, but they still seemed overly contained. Steven Spielberg may have learned to think beyond Zionist reflexes, but *Munich*, like *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, is still supposed to make us feel good about the slaughter of Arabs, though we're now also supposed to feel bad about feeling good.

Ten other movies I liked, in alphabetical order: *The Beat That My Heart Skipped*; *The Brothers Grimm*; *Fear and Trembling*; *Goodbye, Dragon Inn*; *Lord of War*; *Notre Musique*; *Or (My Treasure)*; *Play*; *The Producers*; and *Safe Conduct*. My annual F.W. Murnau award, given to the film that did the most to alter my sense of film history, goes to the wonderful, radical 1966 Jacques Rivette documentary *Jean Renoir*, *the Boss: A Portrait of Michel Simon by Jean Renoir*, or *A Portrait of Jean Renoir by Michel Simon*, or *The Direction of Actors: Dialogue*. Unlike most of what I saw in 2005, it was blissfully free of compromise. **Q**

# The Best Ten Movies You Probably Didn't See

## Attendance is down, but quality is up.

By J.R. Jones

**T**he big story in movies last year was plunging attendance: down 6.2 percent from 2005. Everyone had a theory about why, and among the proposed culprits were DVDs, crying children, on-screen advertisements, and patrons yakking on cell phones. My own guess was that people had wised up to all the slick advertising and puffy reviews, had grown tired of organizing their evenings around a two-hour block of corporatized cheese. But according to an online study cited last month in the *New York Times*, the real reason is more prosaic: ticket prices have risen about 5 percent since 2003, and people think they're too expensive. It's a sign of the times—moviegoing, a middle-class entertainment for more than a century, is becoming too expensive for the middle class.

My own experience is warped by the fact that I watch so many movies for free, but I too spent less at theaters in 2005. I have a DVD player and a big TV tube with a stereo speaker on either side, the best approximation of screen projection I've ever had in my home, and a Netflix subscription provides cheap access to just about anything issued domestically on DVD. But I've resolved to spend more time and money this year at my favorite theaters—the Music Box, LaSalle Bank Cinema, Gene Siskel Film Center, Landmark's Century Centre—because without them I wouldn't know about most of the movies below.

Last year's drop in attendance is particularly dispiriting because so many good movies came and went without finding an audience, from big-studio rollouts like *Cinderella Man* to art-house

secrets like *Lila Says*. I had even more trouble than usual whittling my year-end list down to ten movies, as evidenced by my weaselly genre categories at the end. In the 50s, when the nation's theater owners were first feeling the competition of television, they came up with the advertising slogan “Movies are better than ever.” I wouldn't go that far, but in 2005 movies were better than usual. Here are the best:

**1. *Junebug*.** A hilarious and moving snapshot of the red state-blue state divide, Phil Morrison's funky comedy follows a cosmopolitan art dealer (Embeth Davidtz) to North Carolina, where she meets her new husband's seriously dysfunctional family and tries to land a fractious outsider artist for her Chicago gallery. Amy Adams

gives an Oscar-caliber performance as the adoring sister-in-law, and screenwriter Angus MacLachlan deftly shifts our sympathies between the two.

**2. *Gunner Palace*.** Michael Tucker arrived in Baghdad as an embedded reporter in September 2003; his documentary about an artillery division stationed in the bombed-out Al Azimiyah palace not only exposes problems that make the war unwinnable (soldiers' ignorance of the culture, ineffective training of Iraqi civil defense forces, abuse of the civilian population) but allows the young grunts to comment on their experience through rap and music.

**3. *Lila Says*.** Hands down the sexiest movie I saw this year, this French feature by Ziad Doueiri

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Clockwise from top left: *Junebug*, *Palindromes*, *Lila Says*, *My Summer of Love*, *Gunner Palace*, *The Devil's Rejects*

## Jones

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(*West Beirut*) is set in a dilapidated Paris suburb, where a quiet, gifted Moroccan teenager (Mohammed Khouas) is drawn into a secret romance with a white neighbor (Vahina Giocante). Her exquisite beauty and sexual boldness make her a walking powder keg in the poor, largely Arab community, and a conflict involving the hero's leering buddies leads both lovers to the brink of tragedy—and to genuine love.

**4. Grizzly Man.** German master Werner Herzog finds a uniquely American focus for his career-long fascination with man and nature: Timothy Treadwell, a self-invented grizzly-bear expert who became a media personality before a grizzly devoured him in Alaska in 2003. Working with more than 100 hours of video footage Treadwell left behind, Herzog fashions an unnerving portrait of a troubled man whose congress with the grizzlies was both religion and death wish.

**5. Me and You and Everyone We Know.** Miranda July made an auspicious feature debut with this canny combination of reas-

suring formula and startling subject matter. The main story is a sweet screwball romance between a lonely performance artist (July) and a hapless shoe salesman (John Hawkes), but woven into this conventional fare are subplots that boldly explore the narrowing sexual divide between children and adults. July handles this taboo material with a disarming frankness and simplicity, absorbing it into her main concern—the joy of discovery, be it sexual, romantic, or creative.

**6. Palindromes.** Todd Solondz dives headfirst into the abortion controversy with this heartbreaking moral comedy about a young girl who is forced to have an abortion, runs away from home, and falls in with a born-again family of deformed children. Dividing the main character among eight actors, each chosen for her innocence, was commercial suicide, but it was also typical of a filmmaker who acts more from pure feeling than common sense.

**7. My Summer of Love.** A homely orphan in rural West Yorkshire (Nathalie Press) is drawn into a steamy affair with a posh bird

visiting from the city (Emily Blunt), much to the displeasure of the country girl's older brother (Paddy Considine), who's returned from prison a sanctimonious evangelical Christian. This small-scale British drama by Pawel Pawlikowski was promoted for its lesbian romance, but despite all the idyllic afternoons on rolling hills, it's a story of brutality and betrayal.

**8. A History of Violence.** In David Cronenberg's harrowing crime drama, some people are born to kill, others are born to be killed, and at the end a small-town family gathers at the dinner table, united and stained by this awful knowledge. This was adapted from a hard-boiled graphic novel, and Cronenberg, despite his own history of Grand Guignol, honors the form with a remarkably spare narrative.

**9. The Best of Youth.** This six-hour family saga by Marco Tullio Giordana traces a middle-class Italian clan from 1966 through the end of the century, as two brothers are united by their affection for a mentally ill young woman and then divided by poli-

tics. The film is well-paced and has an impressive historical sweep, though Giordana generalizes that broad perspective through intimate observation of the many characters' everyday lives. The film was produced as a TV miniseries but rejected by the Italian state network and ultimately released in theaters, where it screened in two three-hour segments; a DVD release is scheduled for February 7.

**10. The Devil's Rejects.** Who'd have thought that Rob Zombie, the freaky-looking dude who once fronted the metal band White Zombie, would conjure up the most frightening movie since *The Blair Witch Project*? Moving like a bat out of hell, this tale of a murderous family on the run from a vengeful sheriff taps into the same fear of backwoods crazies that's powered the genre since *Two Thousand Maniacs!* and the original *Texas Chainsaw Massacre*.

Best noirs: *The Ice Harvest*, *A Tout de Suite*.

Best comedies: *Wedding Crashers*, *The 40-Year-Old Virgin*, *Sarah Silverman: Jesus Is Magic*.

Best animated: *Howl's Moving Castle*, *Corpse Bride*, *Wallace & Gromit: The Curse of the Were-Rabbit*.

Best general-interest docs: *March of the Penguins*, *Murderball*, *Tell Them Who You Are*, *Up for Grabs*.

Best music docs: *Fallen Angel: Gram Parsons*, *Moog*, *The Nomi Song*, *Rock School*, *We Jam Econo: The Story of the Minutemen*.

Best political docs: *Enron: The Smartest Guys in the Room*, *The Future of Food*, *The Protocols of Zion*, *Wal-Mart: The High Cost of Low Price*.

Best movies I couldn't jam into any of the above categories: *The Ballad of Jack and Rose*, *The Beautiful Country*, *Breakfast on Pluto*, *Brokeback Mountain*, *Capote*, *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, *Crash*, *The Constant Gardener*, *Good Night, and Good Luck*, *Kontroll*, *Lager Cake*, *Millions*, *Munich*, *Nine Lives*, *Purple Butterfly*, *Separate Lies*, *The Squid and the Whale*, *Thumbsucker*, *Tony Takitani*, *Walk the Line*, *Yes*. **A**

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# The Best Music of 2005

Our Section 3 regulars have made their lists. Even though some of them don't believe in lists, man.

## Liz Armstrong

I was positively, wholeheartedly obsessed with everything on this list at some point in the year, either for months or just for a few hours. I've put the entries in alphabetical order, because arranging them according to the amount of time I fixated on them would be silly.

**AIDS WOLF**  
"We Multiply," "Opposing Walls," "Fuck You McLean," "Panty Mind Extended" | MP3s on MySpace

A tangled orgy of wall-to-wall shrieking in a paradise full of dirty naked people.



## COCOROSIE

**Noah's Ark** | Touch and Go  
Stripped bare but still lush, heart-wrenching but kind of creepy—like the songs a Jean Genet novel would sing.

**DELIA GONZALEZ & GAVIN RUSSOM**  
**The Days of Mars** | DFA/Astralwerks

Instrumental electronic art-gallery music that's like the deeply revelatory moment in the denouement of some trippy, gritty, long-lost 70s film set in a wintry New York, stretched out to last a whole hour.

## HARRY MERRY

**Well . . . Here's Another Nice Mess You've Got Me Into!** | Tocado

Keyboard chaos and arrhythmic percussion, simultaneously giddy and desperate—the music a hamster might hear in its head as it tries to navigate the most elaborate Habitrail ever.

## INDIAN JEWELRY

**Invasive Exotics** | Girlgang  
Shamanic badasses wield shadowy guitars and sinister



Clockwise from left: Bettye LaVette, Spoon, Crooked Fingers, M.I.A.

analog synths to summon a vision of crows flying into a dark eternity.

**SAM FLAX KEENER**  
**"Backwards Fire"** | MP3 at mindmilk.com

A transmission from Marc Bolan's ghost channeled by a blond, feather-haired New Age twink.



**M.I.A.**  
**Arular** | XL/Interscope  
Dangerous dance music that's equal parts jump-rope taunt,

hood grit, antifashion fashion, and *National Geographic*.

**NEON BLONDE**  
**Chandeliers in the Savannah** | Dim Mak

Two of the Blood Brothers set jazzy, ass-ripping screeching to rollicking cabaret piano, spiny guitar, and hectic beats.

**OCS**  
**3 & 4: Songs About Death and Dying Vol. 3 and Get Stoved** | Narnack

Like a lazy summer evening on the porch, tipping back warm whiskey with friends while some weird dusty troubadour guy no one really knows sings and plays guitar.

**SSION**  
**"World's Worth"** | Sound Virus  
Sleazy Robitussin party jams fist-fucking outrageous Vivienne Westwood punk.

## Kabir Hamid



**1. EDAN**  
**Beauty and the Beat** | Lewis

Edan spins a dense, claustrophobic matrix of 60s psychedelic rock samples around his deeply weird lyrics, which he delivers in an authoritative, scissor-tongued style. The hip-hop equivalent of a Salvador Dali painting.

**2. THE GAME**  
**The Documentary** | Aftermath  
Single-handedly rehabilitates

west-coast gangsta rap. The Game is so hardcore I bet all the muscles he uses to smile have atrophied right off his face.

**3. BLACKALICIOUS**  
**The Craft** | Anti-  
Not even their best, but still head and shoulders above almost all the other hip-hop this year—Gift of Gab's inexhaustible flow defies belief, and Chief Xcel packs ideas into his tracks like a guy who knows he won't run out.

**4. COMMON**  
**Be** | GOOD/Geffen  
Chicago's native son resurrects himself after the flop that was *Electric Circus*: his love songs to the ladies are great, and his love songs to the street corner are even better.

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