

# FILMS OF THE YEAR, 2010

## JAMES NAREMORE MAKES HIS SELECTION OF THE YEAR'S BEST U.S. RELEASES

### 1. *UNCLE BOONMEE WHO CAN RECALL HIS PAST LIVES*

Thai filmmaker Apichatpong Weerasethakul was educated at the School of the Art Institute in Chicago, where a collection of “Exquisite Corpse” drawings by the French surrealists gave him the idea for one of his early films, *Mysterious Objects at Noon* (2000). His subsequent work, consisting of museum installations as well as films, has many things in common with surrealism, including a desublimation of ordinary experience, a disregard for the coherence of realist narrative, a love of the fantastic, and an oscillation of tone between the poetic and the playful. All this is evident in *Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives*, which tells the story of a Thai farmer dying of kidney failure (Apichatpong’s father, a medical doctor, died of the same condition) and his mysterious encounter with past and future lives.

But *Uncle Boonmee* can’t be explained simply as a form of surrealism or, despite Apichatpong’s admiration for Gabriel García Márquez, as “magic realism.” The film was inspired by a book by Phra Sripariyattiweti, a Tibetan Buddhist monk, and the finished product, though secular, retains an aura of Buddhist spirituality. *Uncle Boonmee* is also related to *The Primitive* (2009), Apichatpong’s museum installation about the violent history of the Renu Nakhon district of northeast Thailand, where he was born and where the film is set. This region was occupied by the Thai army during the Vietnam War and many of its inhabitants, who were accused of being communists, were raped, tortured, and murdered. (According to Human Rights Watch, the Thai military continues a policy of political repression and “disappearances” throughout the country.) *Uncle Boonmee* therefore offers indirect political commentary alongside its haunting meditation on death, transmigration of souls, and cinema.

In stylistic terms, *Uncle Boonmee* is “slow cinema,” sparing of close-ups and reverse-field editing, respectful of stillness, acted in an almost deadpan manner. Not much

happens: nearing death, Boonmee (Thanapat Saisaymar) is visited by his sister-in-law Jen (Jenjira Pongpas) and her son Tong (Sakda Kaewbuadee), who live in the city. Tong nurses Boonmee, helping to drain his ailing kidney, and Boonmee shows Jen around his farm, where he raises tamarind, maize, and bees. Jen is suspicious of the illegal Chinese immigrants and “smelly” Laotians who work the farm, but as she limps around the sunny fields (her right leg is shorter than her left), she becomes friendly with one of them. At one point Boonmee tells her that his illness might be the result of bad karma: “I killed too many communists,” he explains. “I killed bugs, too.”

At night the world is different, populated by spirits with stories of their own. The opening of the film prepares us for these nocturnal presences. First we see an epigraph: “Facing the jungle, the hills and vales, my past lives as an animal and other beings rise up before me.” Next, the silhouetted, moonlit image of a huge water buffalo, who looks toward the jungle and seems to hear something in the susurrus of insects and animals; uttering a short, painful cry, the beast breaks free of its tether and runs off through rice fields into the dense foliage. Later, when night falls over Boonmee’s house, stranger things occur. During an evening meal, Boonmee’s long-dead wife Huay appears at one end of the dinner table. The living characters are momentarily disconcerted, but they settle into matter-of-fact conversation with the ghostly figure, who gradually takes solid form. In the midst of their conversation, the night air is filled with a minatory, pulsing noise (the film’s sound design is as impressive as its imagery), and a dark figure who looks like a B-movie actor in an ape suit, eyes glowing like E.T.’s fingertips, enters from downstairs, sits at the table, and identifies himself as Boonmee’s lost, presumed-dead son. “Why did you let your hair grow so long?” Auntie Jen asks in comic amazement. “There are many beings outside,” the son says to his father, “spirits and hungry animals like me. They sense your illness.” He explains that as a young man he experimented with the art of photography and became fascinated by the ape-like creatures his developed pictures revealed in the trees beyond the farm. He wandered away to a forgotten

“old world” and mated with one of the “monkey ghosts” who roam in the night.

Perhaps it should be noted that ghosts in Buddhism are different from the ones we know in the West: they can be dead spirits who visit the living, or “hungry ghosts” who occupy a liminal state between life and death. The monkey ghosts in *Uncle Boonmee* seem to belong more to the latter category, and it may be significant that both of the spirit characters appear during a meal. In any case, the family’s gentle acceptance of the ghostly visitors makes them seem less uncanny than marvelous. Still later that evening, with hardly any motivation, we cut away from the farm to witness a self-contained episode from the folkloric past, perhaps from one of Boonmee’s previous lives, which provides another illustration of the intercourse between spirits, animals, and humans. A Thai princess, her beautiful eyes visible above a veil, travels through the nighttime jungle in a regal litter born by her male servants. She reaches out and caresses the hair and arm of one of the handsome bearers, who looks up and secretly touches her hand. Soon she arrives at a moonlit pool beside a waterfall (the scene is shot day-for-night, its eeriness enhanced by a blue-green filter), where she removes her veil, revealing a homely, scarred face. The reflection she sees in the pool, however, is that of a lovely woman. The handsome young servant approaches and tries to make love to her, but she sends him away because she doubts his sincerity and doesn’t trust the reflection. Alone, she kneels and weeps. A large catfish raises his head above the water and speaks: “Princess, don’t waste your tears,” he says, and begins describing her beauty in seductive tones. When he swims away, she wades into the pool, removing her jeweled necklaces, offering them as a gift for his return. Swooning, she extends her body and floats on her back, her legs spread. Suddenly she experiences a series of orgasmic jolts and spasms. The fish’s giant tail flaps and splashes between her legs. Down below, under the murky water, a necklace drifts away in a cloud of bubbles and a pair of catfish swim around, their long tendrils swaying in the current.

This is one of the most arresting cinematic moments I’ve witnessed in years, a surreal blend of the marvelous and the erotic, merging animal with human and carnal with sublime. The remainder of the film is less vividly supernatural but no less strange. As Boonmee’s death approaches, his dead wife leads his family group through the forest and into a hillside cave, where they glimpse phosphorescent rocks, pools of albino fish, and cave drawings. “This cave,” Boonmee says, “it’s like a womb, isn’t it? I was born here, I don’t know if as a woman or man.” Then the film briefly becomes a sort of *photo-roman* accompanied by Boonmee’s narration: “Last

## NAREMORE’S FILMS OF 2010

1. *Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives* (Apichatpong Weerasethakul)
2. *Mysteries of Lisbon* (Raoul Ruiz)
3. *Carlos* (Olivier Assayas)
4. *The Strange Case of Angelica* (Manoel de Oliveira)
5. *Everyone Else* (Maren Ade)
6. *Vincere* (Marco Bellocchio)
7. *Winter’s Bone* (Debra Granik)
8. *I Am Love* (Luca Guadagnino)
9. *Sweetgrass* (Lucien Castaing-Taylor and Ilisa Barbash)
10. *Inside Job* (Charles Ferguson)

Honorable mention (alphabetical by director): *The Art of the Steal* (Don Argott), *Black Swan* (Darren Aronofsky), *Alice in Wonderland* (Tim Burton), *Poetry* (Lee Chang-dong), *The Kids Are All Right* (Lisa Cholodenko), *White Material* (Claire Denis), *The Square* (Nash Edgerton), *The Social Network* (David Fincher), *Let it Rain* (Agnès Jaoui), *Certified Copy* (Abbas Kiarostami), *Fair Game* (Doug Liman), *The Ghost Writer* (Roman Polanski), *If I Want to Whistle, I Whistle* (Florin Serban), *Hitler in Hollywood* (Frédéric Sojcher), *Toy Story 3* (Lee Unkrich), *La Danse: The Paris Opera Ballet* (Frederick Wiseman).

night I dreamed of the future, ruled by an authority able to make people disappear . . . I was afraid because I had friends in this future.” We see still photos of teenage soldiers in camouflage, capturing ape-men and posing for the camera—images derived from *The Primitive*, which is more extensive in its account of Thai military repression and the disappeared or forgotten history of political violence. Back in the cave, Boonmee’s wife opens the tube leading into his kidney and lets it drain onto the ground.

Boonmee’s funeral is held in the city, where Jen counts up gifts of money from mourners. Tong, we discover, is a Buddhist monk, but after the funeral he wants to change out of his robes and visit a 7-Eleven convenience store or a café. (Apichatpong has previously been censored by Thai authorities for portraying monks in this lightly satirical fashion.) As he and Jen prepare to leave, one of the film’s rare instances of shot/reverse-shot editing gives them pause: they look off screen and see themselves watching TV in the same spot they occupied a few moments before. The film ends in a karaoke café where they sit in silence, perhaps thinking of the temporal displacement they’ve experienced and remembering the old world they left behind.



Strange visions

*Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives.* © 2010 Kick the Machine Films, Illuminations Films Past Lives, Anna Sanders Films, The Match Factory, Eddie Saeta S.A.  
DVD: New Wave Films (U.K.).

Some of Apichatpong's aims in the film can be inferred from his evocative essay, "Ghosts in the Darkness" (translated in the 2009 *Apichatpong Weerasethakul* collection edited by James Quandt and published in the Austrian Film Museum's Synema series), which is both a theory of cinema and a commentary on his key images and themes. "If you notice the people around you while watching a film," Apichatpong writes, "you will see that their behavior is like that of ghosts, lifting up their heads to see the moving images . . . The moving images on the screen are camera records of events that have already taken place; they are remains of the past, strung together and called a film. In this hall of darkness, ghosts are watching ghosts." But the situation isn't as morbid as it may sound. "Just as we like to look at ghosts," Apichatpong explains, "we seem instinctively to want to enter dark halls . . . like returning to our mother's womb, fleeing there for safety, like the time during the war in Laos, when people living on the Ho Chi Minh Trail . . . were attacked by phosphorous bombs during an air raid and took refuge in a cave . . . The cave is probably still full of bones, ranging from small children to adults. If you went to see it now you might see real ghosts there—you wouldn't need a film." A more striking example from the same period, he observes, was the Quan Y cave on Cat Ba Island in Vietnam, which served not only as a hidden hospital but also as a recreation area and a cinema. "[Y]ou come to the conclusion that we watch films instinctively, as therapy for mental and emotional pain. Tens of thousands of years ago, when our ancestors were living in caves, they often drew on the walls of the cave, showing us how they lived their lives . . . Looking at it like this, you could say that cinemas, whether inside or outside department stores, are our modern day caves."

In an influential essay of 1975, "The Apparatus: Metapsychological Approaches to the Impression of Reality in Cinema," French theorist Jean-Louis Baudry compared cinema to the lights flickering on the back wall of Plato's cave—an illusory shadow show from which we need to liberate ourselves. Apichatpong thinks exactly otherwise. His cinema cave is dedicated to recovering a repressed history, healing pain, and connecting our spirits with others.

## 2. MYSTERIES OF LISBON

I've never read the prolific Portuguese author Camilo Castelo Branco (1825–90), but two of his novels have been adapted by major directors—Manoel de Oliveira's *Doomed Love* (1978) and Raoul Ruiz's *Mysteries of Lisbon* (2010)—and based on this evidence it seems clear what sort of writer he was, at least in some of his work. The novels in question, dated respectively 1862 and 1854, were influenced by the

romantic tradition of Chateaubriand and Hugo; they give us passionate individuals in conflict with oppressive aristocrats, clashes of tragic and grotesque emotion, swirling melodramatic action, and sympathetic portrayals of characters who are orphaned, illegitimate, or victims of the ruling patriarchy (in real life, Castelo Branco was all three). They were probably composed at great speed, because Castelo Branco was the first Portuguese writer to live entirely by his pen. He became a master of the *feuilleton* and the multi-volume novel—a talented practitioner of the nineteenth-century version of pulp fiction or soap opera.

The Oliveira and Ruiz films make an interesting comparison. Each is approximately four and a half hours long, intended to be shown as a TV miniseries. Working from a short novel, Oliveira is radically literal; instead of condensing his source by converting novelistic description into spectacle, as films normally do, he preserves virtually all of Castelo Branco's language, emphasizing telling rather than showing. The paradoxical result, as Randal Johnson has pointed out in *Manoel de Oliveira* (University of Illinois Press, 2007), is the transformation of a theatrical, emotional, melodramatic text into an austere experiment in cinematic modernism. Ruiz's approach is just the opposite, though in some ways no less modernist. His screenwriter, Carlos Saboga, has condensed a triple-decker novel into four and a half hours, somehow retaining its plot and leaving enough room for Ruiz to add embellishments of his own; HD photographer André Szankowski and art director Isabel Branco create a gorgeous, period-film spectacle filled with scenic locations; and Ruiz, who began his career in Chile making soap operas, keeps the large cast and the convoluted strands of the narrative moving at a swift pace.

In an interview publicizing the film, Ruiz has said that *Mysteries of Lisbon* has a "gliding" and "labyrinthine" form. In keeping with the first of these qualities—and with what many describe as the baroque theatricality of the novel—he employs long takes, sinuous camera movements, 360-degree pans, lateral tracking shots that slide past the walls of rooms, and complex, graceful blocking. He often frames scenes through doorways, windows, or parted curtains, sometimes using the technique to show us contrasting levels of action. (One of the most amusing sequence shots has two frames within the frame: a priest disembarks from a closed carriage, looks down the street at a violent quarrel, and gets back in the carriage; through the vehicle's near window we see him reading from a Bible as the action on the street boils past the window beyond him.) Occasionally he places a servant on one side of a doorway or behind a wall, overhearing a private conversation in



#### Intrigue and theatricality

*Mysteries of Lisbon*. Photos: misteriosdelisboa.com.

the distance. Several of his compositions are reminiscent of Welles and Toland in *Citizen Kane* (1941): wide-angle, floor-level views and deep-focus arrangements in which a giant head—at one point the head of a parrot—occupies the extreme foreground while action occurs in the far background. Now and then he experiments with antique behavior and old-fashioned theatricality: characters who faint upon hearing shocking news are framed in wide shot, flopping to the floor like rag dolls.

The labyrinthine plot defies description and contains many surprises. In somewhat Dickensian fashion, it begins when the orphan Pedro da Silva (played as a child by João Luís Arrais and as an adult by José Afonso Pimentel), with the help of a kindly priest (Adriano Luz), discovers that he's the love child of a Portuguese countess who was forced to abandon him. Soon, however, everything veers off into stories within the story, told in flashback by multiple narrators. I kept losing track of where it all started, but I was never disappointed. Pedro intermittently returns and several episodes are introduced by inserts of a small, beautifully decorated cardboard theater given to him by his mother. At the end we discover that he's been narrating everything from his death bed

in Brazil. By the time we reach this point, we've also learned that nearly all the important characters have hidden identities and secrets that undermine the assumptions we initially made about them.

The major theme of the film could be described as the instability of human identity, which is always constructed out of individual memories, internalized narratives, and social performances, and which, under certain conditions, is subject to fluctuation and change. The characters in *Mysteries of Lisbon* inhabit a world of immutable aristocracy and Catholic hierarchy, governed by unalterably established institutions. But that world is decadent, beginning to resemble a Gothic novel in which things aren't necessarily as they appear. (Significantly, one of the characters has been reading Ann Radcliffe, who was among the inventors of Gothic fiction.) It's a world in which outlaws become priests, mothers become nuns, and hired killers become aristocrats. The shape-shifting characters, together with the classically realist plot that goes in so many directions it seems to have no goal, make the film and the old novel on which it's based seem not only romantically fun and fascinatingly mysterious, but also very modern indeed.

### 3. CARLOS

Olivier Assayas's riveting *Carlos* was also designed as a TV miniseries, in this case photographed in 35mm widescreen and lasting five and a half hours. Although it achieved limited U.S. theatrical showings in both a long and a condensed version (perhaps because it plays into post-9/11 anxieties about terrorism), it's an unusually intelligent film about Cold War history that should be seen at full length; its natural home is cable TV, DVD, and digital streaming.

*Carlos* tells the story of the real-life Venezuelan terrorist-for-hire Ilich Ramírez Sánchez, aka "Carlos the Jackal," who claimed to be a soldier of international revolution and probably believed the ideas he espoused, but who was essentially an instrument of totalitarian agendas he barely understood. Carlos worked at various times for the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP), the East German Stasi, the Romanian Securitate, and perhaps the KGB. At one point he tried to found a group called the Organization of Armed Struggle. He was responsible for the failed assassination in London of a Zionist businessman, a failed bombing in London of a bank, two failed rocket-propelled grenade attacks on El Al airplanes at Orly in Paris, and a bungled kidnapping of OPEC leaders in Vienna. He made attacks on French newspapers, the office of Radio Free Europe in Munich, and the Maison de France in West Berlin; he tossed a grenade into a Paris restaurant, killed two French special

agents who tried to capture him at a party, and detonated bombs in two passenger trains. Since 1997, he has been serving a life sentence in France. His prison writings, containing praise for Osama bin Laden and Saddam Hussein, were published under the title *Revolutionary Islam*.

In the eyes of his handlers Carlos was a loose cannon who enjoyed women and booze and was much too happy to appear on wanted posters. The PFLP fired him, the Stasi spied on him, Cuba and several Arab states refused him a home, the Syrians expelled him, and the French easily captured him in Khartoum when he lost all usefulness in the Arab region. Even so, right-wing journalists portrayed him as an evil genius and he became something of a pop-culture legend, a name that appears in formulaic stories about International Masters of Terror hunted by Intrepid Government Agents. He's a character in novels by Robert Ludlum and Tom Clancy and in over a dozen movies and TV shows. A pop-art version of his face appears on an album cover for a British rock group, Black Grape, making him resemble a second-rate Che Guevara.

Assayas's well-researched film, admittedly compounded of historical fact and imaginative speculation, grows in part out of his interest in globalization, which he treated previously in *Irma Vep* (1996), *Boarding Gate* (2007), and *Summer Hours* (2009), and in part out of his politics, which are influenced by Guy Debord's critique of the "society of the spec



Loose cannon

*Carlos*. © Film en Stock/Egoli/Tossell Film Carlos GmbH. DVD: Optimum Home Entertainment (U.K.).

tacle” and George Orwell’s left libertarianism. (He articulately discusses these matters in an interview with Rob White, [www.filmquarterly.org/2010/12/encounter-interview-with-olivier-assayas](http://www.filmquarterly.org/2010/12/encounter-interview-with-olivier-assayas).) He nevertheless approaches the social-political themes indirectly, avoiding excessive editorializing or deep analysis of Carlos. Instead he concentrates on the character’s peripatetic bombings and killings, which are depicted factually but in high-adrenaline style—jump-cutting, restlessly reframing, sampling anachronistic post-punk music, leaping to multiple locations across Europe and the Middle East as Carlos rises to rock-star fame and simultaneously becomes a problem for his employers.

The staging of Carlos’s exploits, particularly the raid on OPEC, is swift, spectacular, and frightening, but it also has moments of black comedy, as when Carlos’s henchmen fire rockets at an airliner on a runway directly in front of them and hit planes at the far end of the airport, or when Gabriele Kröchner-Tiedemann, scarily played by Julia Hummer, throws a tantrum because she can’t kill hostages. For all his daring and revolutionary zeal, Carlos himself is portrayed as an alcoholic abuser of women and a lover of fine clothes and bourgeois amenities. He’s also a narcissist who craves celebrity and is turned on by violence. After his first try at bomb-throwing, we see him emerging from a bubble bath, admiring his body in a mirror, and beginning to masturbate as he stands in a window. Later, he boasts that “weapons are an extension of my body” and seduces a woman by having her suck on the pin of a hand grenade.

What keeps the character from seeming little more than a shallow, self-regarding killer is the charisma of Venezuelan actor Édgar Ramírez, who is far more handsome than the real Carlos and brings movie-star glamour to the role, at the same time transforming himself, De Niro-style, from a muscular young proponent of revolution to a bloated drunk with a testicular ailment. The film has many striking performers (especially Nora von Waldstätten as Magdalena Kopp, Carlos’s German wife), but it wouldn’t work without Ramírez. He speaks several of the eleven languages we hear, repeatedly changes his appearance in keeping with Carlos’s love of disguise and costume, and throughout projects a combination of machismo and Brando-like sexual aura. He’s so effective that some reviewers have criticized Assayas for glamorizing terrorism. Actually, the film’s values are made explicit by the minor characters of the left that disassociate themselves from Carlos. The eponymous “hero” is a creature of the media who has no moral qualms about killing and a dim awareness of history. He does know, however, that he has strong nerves and fighting instincts, and that he looks good in sunglasses and a beret.

#### 4. THE STRANGE CASE OF ANGELICA

The 101-year old Manoel de Oliveira’s first film, “Labor on the Douro” (1931) is a twenty-one-minute documentary about working life on and around Portugal’s Douro River as it flows from wine-making country to the ports of Lisbon. A fusion of Expressionism, Impressionism, and city-symphony montage, it opens with images of traditional agricultural labor and shifts to mechanical labor as we enter the metropolis, where accelerated cutting suggests the bustling pace of modernity. Oliveira’s latest film, *The Strange Case of Angelica*, is the antithesis or bookend of the first. Feature-length fiction, it starts in roughly the same place but lingers in a town beside the river where work in the fields is being replaced by machines. It rejects speed in favor of an exceedingly slow and contemplative pace, keyed to the music of laboring songs and the delicate yearning of a Chopin piano solo.

*The Strange Case of Angelica* is imbued with a love of Portuguese literary culture and a melancholy spirit of romantic transcendence, which it occasionally treats with a wry humor. Its epigraph, from the late nineteenth-century Portuguese poet Antero de Quental, describes the death of a funeral flower, the “lily of celestial valleys,” whose end will create a love “never to perish.” The story opens on a rainy night, when Isaac, a young Jewish photographer (played by Oliveira’s grandson, Ricardo Trêpa), is urgently called upon to take funerary pictures of the daughter of an important local family. Just before the call arrives, we find him alone in his boarding-house room, chain-smoking and working on a photographic negative at a desk piled with books. Among the volumes is a 1934 fictionalized biography of Saint Paul by Teixeira de Pascoaes, the poet most associated with the deeply Portuguese concept of “*saudade*,” which Pascoaes defined as “the action of desire on remembrance and of remembrance on desire.” Another is *The Crossroads of God* (1936) by poet José Régio, from which Isaac reads aloud: “Time, stand still, / and you former beings / who roam fantastical, celestial ways, / Angels, open the gates of heaven, / for in my night is day / and in me is God.”

As a Jew, Isaac is a stranger to the community, but he’s fascinated by Portugal’s religion, dying agricultural traditions, and quasi-mystical, late-romantic literature. (*The Strange Case of Angelica* grew out of a film Oliveira wanted to make in the 1950s, dealing with Jews who migrated to Portugal after World War II.) Summoned to take pictures of the dead young woman, he seems in awe of the family’s dark mansion, the mourners sitting like statuary around the walls, and the deceased’s sister, a nun, who looks at him suspiciously. The sight of Angelica, the dead woman (Pilar López de Ayala), strikes him dumb. A beautiful blonde with long hair, full lips, and



### Desire and remembrance

*The Strange Case of Angelica*. Courtesy of The Cinema Guild.

a peacefully smiling expression, she wears a white wedding dress (she was newly married and pregnant) and reclines on a blue “fainting couch” as if she were merely sleeping. When Isaac looks through the camera lens to photograph her, she opens her eyes and smiles at him. Back in his room, when he looks at the developed photos of her he has hung out to dry, she opens her eyes and smiles again.

Isaac becomes obsessed with the angelic dead woman, and also with the old-style laboring men he photographs in a vineyard on the banks of the Douro—a location he can see from the window of his room. He attends Angelica’s funeral and lingers in agony outside the cemetery where she’s buried. One evening he awakes from sleep to find her ghost standing on his balcony. They embrace and she takes him on an ecstatic, moonlit flight above the Douro, during which he finds a white lily floating in the water. (The flying sequence—chaste and idealized but resembling a newly married couple in their nuptial bed—is accomplished with digital technology but has the magical, quaintly amusing power of early cinema and puts Hollywood CGI to shame.) When he falls back to earth, he wonders aloud if the flight was a dream, ponders the momentary celestial love that relieved him of “anguish,” and becomes desperate to find Angelica again. On the next morning at breakfast, his landlady and three other boarders gossip about his strange behavior in recent days. (One of the group, a woman engineer from Brazil, is played by Ana Maria Magalhães, who was a beautiful and quite naked Tupinambá in Nelson Pereira dos Santos’s *How Tasty was my Little Frenchman*, 1972.) A vase at the middle of the breakfast table holds a white lily exactly like the one Isaac found in the Douro. When he enters the room, the group around the table changes the topic of conversation to current events, including Portugal’s economic crisis and the effects of global warming. Isaac can only stand

in stupefied preoccupation, drinking coffee and staring out the window at the river.

Oliveira has described himself as a “cerebral” filmmaker, in part because of his interest in literature and ideas, and in part because of his slow, emotionally detached style: he typically stages scenes in long takes with little or no camera movement, and his actors are posed as if in a proscenium theater, displaying none of the psychological “realism” we’ve come to expect of movies. *The Strange Case of Angelica* has these traits, but is nevertheless a whimsical, lovely, and emotionally touching film, beautifully photographed by Sabine Lancelin and graced by charming, mysterious details at the edges of the screen—a goldfish swimming in a bowl in an empty room, or a kitten, fascinated by a caged bird, who becomes distracted by the sound of a dog barking outside a window. For anyone familiar with Oliveira’s work, it’s difficult not to see the film as a personal and deeply felt project. Isaac functions to some degree as a surrogate for the film’s author. He’s a man with a camera who preserves memories and captures images that hark back to the spiritualism of early photography. He feels *saudade*, soulful attachment to the Portuguese vineyards, and mystical longing for an eternal *élan vital*. At the end of the film he dies, but in doing so he resembles Pascoaes, one of the poets in his library, who once wrote, “I was born to live beyond life.”

### 5. EVERYONE ELSE

Gitti (Birgit Minichmayr) and Chris (Lars Eidinger) are attractive, sexy young lovers from Germany enjoying a holiday alone in Sardinia at a summer house owned by Chris’s parents. They wander half-dressed in the golden sun, briefly babysit two children belonging to Chris’s sister, and play childlike sexual games: Chris makes a toy animal out of a piece of ginger and pulls it out of his fly like a penis; Gitti





On vacation

*Everyone Else*. © 2009 Komplizen Film Produktion/SWR/WDR/ARTE. DVD: Cinema Guild.

paints Chris's face with lipstick and eyeliner, and when he worries if he's masculine enough she tells him, "Do something masculine and I'll see if I recognize it."

This is the Edenic opening of Maren Ade's *Everyone Else*, a sensitive, complex film about social and psychological threats to a loving sexual relationship. The tomboyish Gitti is spirited, earthy, and generous, but a bit too intense. Near the beginning of the film, trying to deal with Chris's recalcitrant little niece, she acts as if she's been shot and falls "dead" into the family swimming pool, where she floats face down for a disturbing length of time. The rather pretty Chris is gentle but *triste* and overly self-conscious about his mother's upstairs room in the summer house, which contains a glass menagerie and an old collection of sentimental pop music. It soon emerges that he's an architect who fears he might not succeed. Gitti gives him emotional support, but when he loses an important competition he sulks and points out that when she watches Italian TV she doesn't understand the language.

Later the couple accidentally encounters one of Chris's architect friends, Hans (Hans-Jochen Wagner) and his pregnant wife Sana (Nicole Marischka), who invite them to dinner. During the evening Gitti becomes hostile, accusing Hans of treating Chris condescendingly. The next day Chris becomes cold and cruel. His mood changes when he

gets a commission to rebuild a house, but things fall apart again when he and Gitti invite Hans and Sana to dinner and try to make up for the first meeting. Hans makes a pass at Gitti, who privately threatens Sana with a kitchen knife, ordering her to take her husband and leave. After the party, Chris broods in an outdoor garden and Gitti suddenly flings herself from the window of his mother's second-story room, barely missing sharp rocks on the ground and lying face down for a long while, as she did earlier in the pool. She sits up just before Chris discovers her, and the emotionally exhausted couple has sex there on the grass. On the following morning, however, Gitti contemptuously announces to Chris that she no longer loves him. As she prepares to return to Germany, he breaks into tears. At first she ignores his pain, but then she falls to the floor and plays dead for the third time. Chris sits in torment beside her for what seem like hours, until he finally "revives" her with a sad, childish joke and the film ends.

A few reasons why Chris and Gitti's relationship is troubled are apparent in this summary, but *Everyone Else* is so subtly written and directed by Ade and acted by Minichmayr and Eidinger (both of whom are respected theater actors in Berlin) that many reviewers seem not to have grasped one of the unstated problems between the lovers: they belong to different social classes. Chris comes from a wealthy family and

aspires to become a famous architect, whereas Gitti works as a publicist for a record label, looking after a band called The Shames, which Chris finds amusing. When they make love, he tenderly recalls that she was the sexiest girl in the disco where they first met, but when they encounter people of his own class, he's a little ashamed of her. At one point she buys a dress to please him, but it isn't pretty and makes her feel "bourgeois." (Sana is a famous dress designer whose clothes Gitti can't afford.) When she goes alone into town and allows a department-store saleswoman to apply makeup to her face, she's seized with anger and inadequacy and stands in the street wiping it off. Notice also that the affluent architect Hans and his wife aren't the only representatives of "everyone else." Midway through the film, Gitti tells Chris that another German couple, the Petersens (Mira Partecke and Atef Vogel), have invited them on a motor-boat trip. His only response is to ask, "What do they do," and mock what he calls "authentic" people. When he and Gitti accidentally encounter the Petersens in town, we discover that Gitti's acquaintances are a warmly friendly, working-class couple. They don't mind that Gitti and Chris never showed up for the boat ride, and they extend the invitation again. Chris says he can't accept—his time in Sardinia is short, he explains, and he's busy with a job. The next night he and Gitti have their second dinner with Hans and Sana.

Described in this fashion, Chris sounds like a swine. I can only say that the film is never overstated and gives us a fairly equitable treatment of the central characters. Gitti's "play dead" scenes, for example, can be read as acts of revenge, cries for help, and dangerous symptoms. She and Chris are sweetly passionate but destructively codependent; alone together, regressing to a kind of childhood, they're equally happy, and when the world at large impinges they're equally exasperating. They softly kiss at the end of the film, but their future is by no means clear.

## 6. *VINCERE*

Marco Bellocchio's *Vincere*, which derives its title from an anthem of the Italian Fascist party, is at once an extravagant melodrama about Benito Mussolini's suppressed marriage to Ida Dalser and a powerful visualization of the links between Fascism and Italian modernity. Mussolini is seen largely through Dalser's eyes, first as a young socialist who defies God and threatens to strangle Victor Emmanuel III with the guts from the Pope's belly, then as a bigamist and Fascist who, in order not to offend Catholics, conceals his marriage to Dalser and sends her and his son to insane asylums. When she first meets him, Dalser is thrilled by Mussolini's revolutionary ardor and set aflame by his phallic intensity.

Even after he splits from the Socialist Party and confesses his Nietzschean ambitions, she kneels to tie his shoes and sells her stylish beauty parlor and dress shop in Milan in order to finance his Fascist newspaper, *Il Popolo d'Italia*. When he takes up with another woman and abandons her, she's furious; but she's also enamored of his image in newsreels, where he seems to have become a "giant."

The film captures the eerie fascination of Fascism both as sadomasochism and in relation to Futurist or modern art, and it does so by strategically abandoning the realist style of most movies about history. Mussolini is played by Filippo Timi, who looks nothing like Il Duce but represents Dalser's vision of the man. Tall, dark, and muscular, his basic presentation of self is to scowl and gaze ahead like a bull or a conqueror; he smiles only in the dark of a movie theater, where he and his uniformed bullies try to stir up patriotic frenzy for Italy's entry into World War I. When he lies naked atop Dalser, played by Giovanna Mezzogiorno, he rolls his eyeballs weirdly back into his head until only the whites are visible, thrusting into her as if she were the feminine body of the masses. As the sexual plot develops, *Vincere* takes on wider implications through the use of archival film footage, animation, intertitles, and antique special effects that link Mussolini with the advent of twentieth-century modernity. His sword duel with a political rival is staged against an expressionist background of billowing factory smokestacks, and the numerous film clips emphasize industry and mechanical speed. After Mussolini establishes his Fascist party, we see him at an exhibit of Marinetti's school of futurist painters, who were responsible for a cult of modernity and war.

Bellocchio appropriates material not only from newsreels, but also from Futurist cinema and a variety of silent features (including an Italian re-edit of Eisenstein's 1928 *October*), using it for exposition but also showing the characters watching movies. When Mussolini lies wounded in a World War I hospital where he's paid a ceremonial visit by a midget Victor Emmanuel, he views a silent film adaptation of a Passion play projected on the ceiling, and identifies with Christ; when Dalser and her son are abandoned and alone, she tearfully watches Chaplin's *The Kid* (1921). Eventually, Mussolini *becomes* cinema—a leader of the masses who projects his power through a mass medium. Once he achieves dictatorship, we see him only in newsreel footage, as a bald, iron-jawed figure aping the Roman emperors. The most astonishing moment comes when Bellocchio shows a clip from a sound newsreel of a triumphant Il Duce orating from a balcony—a chubby bantam cock, absurdly decorated with feathers and medals, gesticulating wildly and predicting a



Mussolini spectacle

Vincere. © Rai Cinema/Offside/Celluloid Dreams. DVD: Artificial Eye (U.K.).

new Roman empire. Afterwards, his abandoned son, Benito Albino (now grown but still played by Timi), who, like his mother, has been driven insane, loudly repeats the filmed oration word for word. It's a disturbing symptom of the son's furious resentment and desire to claim his patrimony. He's a madman imitating a madman.

## 7. WINTER'S BONE

In an interview appended to the 2010 movie tie-in edition of *Winter's Bone*, novelist Daniel Woodrell describes himself as a "regionalist" who is indebted to Southern literary traditions. His best work is set in an area of the Ozarks on the borderland between Missouri and Arkansas, where his family has lived for many generations; and as an artist he has a certain things in common with William Faulkner—a pitch-perfect ear for regional vernacular, a love of Biblical language, and a taste for the American gothic. He says that his favorite writers are Flannery O'Connor and James Agee, and his favorite filmmakers Robert Bresson and the Dardenne brothers. Not surprisingly, he has an interest in the grotesque and a respectful, almost reverent sympathy for the marginalized and dispossessed. But Woodrell is also a crime novelist whose books are short and well plotted. One of them, the darkly comic *Give Us a Kiss*, is subtitled *A Country Noir*, a term Woodrell

invented but now repudiates on the grounds that noir has become an empty signifier. Even so, *Winter's Bone* has structural connections to classic private-eye fiction.

Debra Granik's film adaptation does an admirable job of giving us the plot and feel of the novel, minus some of its distinctive language and frozen winter chill. Shot in the picturesque but hardscrabble area where the novel takes place, the film avoids studio sets and uses a good many local actors and musicians. Its heroine, the seventeen-year-old Ree Dolly, very convincingly played by Jennifer Lawrence, is the sole caretaker of a family whose father has skipped bail and disappeared on a charge of cooking and selling methamphetamine. Ree prepares the family's paltry meals, washes her catatonic mother's hair, and teaches her two young siblings how to read and how to shoot and skin squirrels. She also becomes a kind of detective, trying to locate her father before the police can seize the family home. In this latter role she travels through territory more menacing than Chandler's mean streets, where she encounters an array of characters scarier than the usual pulp-fiction thugs and suffers as tough a beating as ever happened to Philip Marlowe.

Like all the best hard-boiled stories, the investigative plot results in a kind of map or anatomy of a society. Many of the people in Ree's world live beyond the law, in backwoods



Trouble in the Ozarks

*Winter's Bone*. © 2010 Winter's Bone Productions LLC. DVD: Artificial Eye (U.K.).

clans. The men are wife-beaters and addicts, and the women marry too young and shoulder too much responsibility. And yet there's a nearby school, nicely documented by the film, and we glimpse a sociable folk gathering. For all its outlaw quality, the culture is capable of forging strong family bonds and creating a young woman like Ree, who is proud, courageous, and intelligent. In a larger view, however, Ree resembles a figure in ancient tragedy, living in a primal world where family is destiny. One of the most affecting scenes in the film comes when, desperately trying to find money, she naively goes to an Army recruiting office. Even if she were old enough and really wanted to join up and travel, she couldn't. Her loyalty, strength, and resourcefulness keep her tied to her home, but they also trap her there.

### 8. I AM LOVE

If you haven't seen this film, it may sound familiar. It's the one about a rich man's wife who is sexually awakened by a worker on her estate, and another in the endless parade of movies about sex and food. Nevertheless, Tilda Swinton and director Luca Guadagnino, who are also among the film's producers, have made something special of it. Swinton plays Emma Recchi, a Russian trophy wife who marries into a high-bourgeois family of textile-factory owners in Milan and

bears three children. Completely assimilated, she's a loving mother, a sophisticated manager of an enormous household staff, and a beautifully dressed ornament to her husband; but she has an air of shy submissiveness and seems fully at ease only with her grown children and personal housemaid. Her son's friendship with an aspiring young chef liberates a repressed memory of her youth in Russia, and she embarks on an affair with the chef. The film climaxes with a *coup de théâtre* and a breathtaking escape from the Recchi family. Its story has begun in a mansion, and, a bit like *Uncle Boonmee*, it ends in a cave.

I was captivated by the graphic design of the credits, the opening shots of snow covering Milan, and the extraordinarily beautiful modernist architecture of the Recchi home. (In reality, this building now serves as a museum.) Guadagnino and his production designers make the warm, tastefully decorated spaces inside the mansion seem extremely desirable, but a dinner party for the family patriarch feels almost like an aristocratic *Godfather*, in the style of Luchino Visconti. One of the most exciting moments is Emma's visit to San Remo, which deliberately evokes *Vertigo*, but with the roles reversed so that a woman stalks a man. John Adams's music in the sequence is reminiscent of Bernard Herrmann, Swinton's hair has the same French twist as Kim Novak's, and the



Alluding to *Vertigo*

*I Am Love*. © 2009 First Sun/Mikado Film. DVD: Metrodome (U.K.).

winding movement through town is very skillfully shot and edited, generating suspense and ending with a surprise. Of the many times *Vertigo* has been alluded to in movies, this for me is among the most novel and emotionally effective. It alone would make *I Am Love* worth seeing, though the film as a whole offers many cinematic pleasures.

### 9. SWEETGRASS

Lucien Castaing-Taylor's and Ilisa Barbash's nonfiction film about a family-owned sheep ranch in Big Timber, Sweet Grass County, Montana, is a triumph of the "direct," "observational," or "anthropological" form associated with the Maysles brothers, Fredrick Wiseman, and Jean Rouch. This kind of cinema was heavily criticized by 1970s theorists (who also attacked Hollywood's "classic realism") and has been shouldered aside in the age of Michael Moore and TV "reality" shows. *Sweetgrass* helps to remind us what we've been missing. It records the harsh process of sheep-shearing and the painful work of lambing on the Allestad ranch, and then follows a huge drive of sheep into mountainous grazing territory on leased public land. In wide shots, the packed, moving herd resembles a snowy ocean, but in closer views we see individual sheep as they struggle through forests and ford a stream reminiscent of the cattle drive in *Red River* (1948). Once we arrive at the border of public land, the entire job of managing the two thousand sheep is left in the hands of two men—John Ahern, a weathered shep-

herder who smokes hand-rolled cigarettes and talks more to animals than to humans, and Ahern's cousin, Pat Connolly, a cook and guardian of the camping tent, who vents his growing frustration and fatigue with a stream of obscenities. These two not only drive the sheep up and down mountains but also protect them at night against predatory bears. They get little sleep and are on the move for a period of several months.

The film is without narration or music (except when Ahern, like an old-time cowboy, sings to the sheep), and is composed mostly in long takes, showing a skilled, back-breaking work that hasn't changed much since the early cowboy days of the nineteenth century. The camera keeps a discreet distance as Connolly washes utensils after a meal, Ahern saddles his horse, and both men sit quietly in the tent during a moment of peace. Everywhere the scenery is majestic—it's difficult to point a widescreen color camera in this part of Montana without seeing something beautiful—but the film generally avoids the picturesque and views landscape in relation to labor and the production of a commodity. In one of the most memorable scenes, a 360-degree pan circles the mountain range while Connolly talks on a cell phone to his mother, bitterly complaining that he, his horse, and his sheepdog are at the point of collapse. "It's going to hurt if I keep this shit up," he says. "I'd rather enjoy these mountains rather than hate them and it's getting to that point. I'm just hatin' it."



End of an era

*Sweetgrass*. Ilisa Barbash and Lucien Castaing-Taylor. DVD: Cinema Guild.

*Sweetgrass* also has an elegiac effect. Part of the drive back down the mountains is photographed late in the day with the sun casting light through trees, and when the river of sheep reaches a railroad crossing at the edge of town, the sense of relief is tempered by regret that something is over. The owner of the farm drives Ahern home and asks him what he plans for the future, because the ranch will be closing. Ahern gazes ahead for a long while and says he just wants to rest and then maybe raise a few sheep. The screen goes dark and a title card informs us that “In 2003, over three months and 150 miles, the last band of sheep moved through Montana’s Absaroka-Beartooth mountains.” A very old tradition of work with animals in this area has come to an end.

## 10. *INSIDE JOB*

My list ends with a more conventional kind of documentary. Charles Ferguson’s *Inside Job*, a talking-heads investigation into the Wall Street players responsible for the twenty-first century’s worldwide economic collapse, is a calm and informative look into a government-enabled disaster. The causes of the economic meltdown can be traced back to Reagan-era deregulation and greed but, as Ferguson shows, there’s plenty of blame to go around. No administration after Reagan has done anything to stem the tide of sociopathic behavior in the higher reaches of the banking and financial system—even Obama, who had the best opportunity to restore New Deal protections



Heist movie

*Inside Job*. Photos: Representational Pictures. Courtesy of Sony Pictures Classics.

and oust the chief miscreants, has put some of the foxes back in charge of the henhouse and achieved only modest regulatory improvements. If the forces of reaction now gathering have their way, the disaster will repeat itself and the gulf between the rich and everyone else will just keep getting bigger.

Ferguson uses well-edited archival material and explanatory graphics to help viewers understand economic complexities, but the major strength of his film lies in his interviews with lawyers, economists, and members of the financial services industry. He’s often better informed than they are, and his offscreen questioning catches the worst of them in lies and evasions. He also interviews a psychologist who tries to explain the machismo and bottomless greed of a certain class of big shots, and a “Wall Street madam” who provided them with call girls. I’m not sure the psychological speculation is necessary, and I suspect it would be far more difficult to bring such characters to justice than Ferguson imagines. Nevertheless the film makes a persuasive argument that a number of very powerful individuals in the U.S. should be prosecuted and probably imprisoned alongside Enron’s Kenneth Lay and Jeffrey Skilling.

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ABSTRACT This article presents reviews of the author’s selection of the best films released in the U.S. in 2010: *Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives*; *Mysteries of Lisbon*; *Carlos*; *The Strange Case of Angelica*; *Everyone Else*; *Vincere*; *Winter’s Bone*; *I Am Love*; *Sweetgrass*; *Inside Job*.

KEYWORDS Apichatpong Weerasethakul, Raoul Ruiz, Olivier Assayas, Manoel de Oliveira, Maren Ade