

FILMS OF THE YEAR, 2007

JAMES NAREMORE MAKES HIS SELECTION OF THE YEAR'S BEST U.S. RELEASES (INCLUDING ONE TV SHOW)

In its winter 1961–62 issue, *Film Quarterly* invited five eminent figures—Pauline Kael, Stanley Kauffmann, Gavin Lambert, Dwight Macdonald, and Jonas Mekas—to comment on “Films of the Year,” and in the next several issues the same group provided a feature entitled “Films of the Quarter.” The five were writing at a significant moment. The New Wave had recently hit the shores of San Francisco and a seismic shift was rumbling beneath U.S. culture in general. Hollywood was losing some of its popularity, not only among sophisticated urban audiences, who were infatuated with European art cinema, but also among ostensibly ordinary viewers in small towns, who had turned en masse toward what Federal Communications Commission Chairman Newton Minow, in a much-publicized speech of 1961, called the “vast wasteland” of network television. Of all the films shown in the U.S. during that year, the ones that received the most praise from *Film Quarterly*'s quintet of judges were foreign productions. By far the favorite was Michelangelo Antonioni's *L'Avventura*, with Federico Fellini's *La Dolce Vita* and Jean-Luc Godard's *Breathless* tied for a distant second. Among the pictures receiving at least one vote were Luis Buñuel's *The Young One* and *Viridiana*, John Cassavetes' *Shadows*, Shirley Clarke's *The Connection*, John Huston's *The Misfits*, Nicholas Ray's *King of Kings*, Karel Reisz's *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning*, Robert Rossen's *The Hustler*, François Truffaut's *Shoot the Piano Player*, and Robert Wise's *West Side Story*. There was no mention of three of my own favorites—Samuel Fuller's *Underworld, U.S.A.*, Marlon Brando's *One-Eyed Jacks*, and Jerry Lewis's *The Ladies Man*—but you can't have everything. In my own view, discussion of the best films of the year was a good idea in 1961 and is still a good idea today.

Obviously we live in different circumstances: a horizontally and vertically integrated U.S. entertainment industry has found new ways of marketing films and controlling distri-

bution; digital technologies have altered the look and even the physical basis of cinema; most people watch movies at home; and the Internet may soon supplant all delivery systems for words, sounds, and images. For many years the study of film has proliferated in the academy, but media departments have increasingly replaced aesthetics with sociology. The deaths of Antonioni and Ingmar Bergman in 2007

NAREMORE'S FILMS OF 2007

1. *Colossal Youth* (*Juventude em Marcha*, Pedro Costa, 2006)
2. *Cuadecuc-Vampir* (Pere Portabella, 1970)
3. *Bamako* (Abderrahmane Sissako, 2006)
4. *Ratatouille* (Brad Bird and Jan Pinkava)
5. *Once* (John Carney, 2006)
6. *No End in Sight* (Charles Ferguson)
7. *Away from Her* (Sarah Polley, 2006)
8. *Black Book* (*Zwartboek*, Paul Verhoeven, 2006)
9. *The Assassination of Jesse James by the Coward Robert Ford* (Andrew Dominik)
10. *Mad Men* (Matthew Weiner / American Movie Classics, TV, 2007–)

Honorable mention (alphabetically by title): *Before the Devil Knows You're Dead* (Sidney Lumet), *Brand upon the Brain!* (Guy Maddin, 2006), *A Casa de Alice* (Alice's House, Chico Teixeira), *The Darjeeling Limited* (Wes Anderson), *Eastern Promises* (David Cronenberg), *Gone Baby Gone* (Ben Affleck), *Helvetica* (Gary Hustwit), *The Host* (Bong Joon-Ho), *I'm Not There* (Todd Haynes), *Inland Empire* (David Lynch), *In the Valley of Elah* (Paul Haggis), *Lions for Lambs* (Robert Redford), *Michael Clayton* (Tony Gilroy), *No Country for Old Men* (Ethan Coen and Joel Coen), *Redacted* (Brian DePalma), *There Will Be Blood* (Paul Thomas Anderson), *The Wind That Shakes the Barley* (Ken Loach, 2006), *Zodiac* (David Fincher).

seemed to put a full stop to a remote era of theatrical exhibition and intense cinephilia. In this environment it may seem quaint for an academic like myself to insist that films are artistically vital and to offer a list of the year's best; one risks being called a dinosaur, a cultural gatekeeper, or worse. I should perhaps acknowledge that my judgments are always provisional and subjective, often undergoing modifications or radical changes as time goes by. I also belong to a particular demographic or "user group," and it's a safe bet that my list of favorite films won't be the same as yours. But the best criticism is usually written in the spirit of what Rob White has called "advocacy," and to rid discourse of evaluation is also to rid it of politics.

Unfortunately, anyone who proposes a list of best pictures is confronted with two practical problems, the first of which is that no critic, not even one who makes a living by reviewing for the daily press, can possibly see all the films released in a given year. In my case the problem is exacerbated because I live most of the time in a college town where every theater is owned by a single corporation and only the most heavily marketed products of the mainstream industry are sure to be exhibited. I also live part of the time in Chicago, but I've had no access to "screener" DVDs and was unable to see a few films of 2007 that received positive reviews. (One example is Vincent Paronnaud and Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis*, which didn't receive a wide U.S. release until 2008.) The second problem has to do with the dating of films. Old productions are found and made available on DVD, new films are given different release dates in different countries, some films go direct to video stores while others open in select U.S. cities at the end of December or the beginning of January. Charles Burnett's *Killer of Sheep* and Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck's *The Lives of Others* appeared on several ten-best films of 2007, but by my reckoning the first of these was originally exhibited in the 1970s and the second had a U.S. screening in 2006; by the same token, Cristian Mungiu's *4 Months, 3 Weeks and 2 Days*, which also appears on some 2007 lists, didn't open officially in the US until 2008. To put reasonable limits on my choices, I've restricted myself to feature-length films of any date that, as far as I can determine, had their first U.S. big-screen showing, not counting film festivals, in 2007, plus television films or series that were first broadcast in the past year. My decisions about what should count as a 2007 film are nevertheless, of necessity, somewhat arbitrary. After writing this essay, I discovered that the second film on my list was exhibited briefly in New York in the 1970s, and received a review in the *New York Times*. I've nevertheless decided to keep it on the list because it's very rarely seen and can be justified as a qualified exception



Directors Sarah Polley (top left), Paul Verhoeven (bottom right).

Top: *Away from Her*. Courtesy Metrodome. Bottom: *Black Book*. Photo: Jaap Vrengoer.
© 2006 Content Film. Courtesy Sony Pictures Classics.

to my rules. Here are my selections, a few of which will require more description than others because they had limited distribution.

1. COLOSSAL YOUTH

The most impressive film I saw in 2007 was the 2006 Portuguese/French/Swiss production of Pedro Costa's *Colossal Youth* (*Juventude em Marcha*, properly translated "Youth on the March"), which played at a dozen or so museum or art-cinema venues across the U.S. This is the third in a trilogy of films Costa has made among the poorest slum dwellers of the Fontainhas area in Lisbon, most of whom are immigrants from the rocky, volcanic Cape Verde Islands, a former Portuguese colony established to serve the African



Painterly stillness

Colossal Youth. Courtesy Pedro Costa



slave trade. In 1994, Costa traveled to Cape Verde to make an excellent widescreen fiction film, *Down to Earth* (*Casa de Lava*, or “House of Lava”), and upon returning he brought gifts to people in Fontainhas from their relatives who had worked in the film. Soon he began shooting in the Lisbon favelas, using the residents as actors in a series of improvised “stories” derived from their own experience. His first effort, *Bones* (*Ossos*, 1997), concerns a desperately poor teenage couple and their baby; the second, *In Vanda’s Room* (*No Quarto da Vanda*, 2000), takes place almost entirely within a tiny room where Vanda Duarte, a drug addict who appeared in *Bones*, snorts crack cocaine, shoots heroin, and talks with friends. *Colossal Youth* also features Vanda, now clean and taking state-supplied methadone, but the focus has shifted to a black man named Ventura, who also appeared briefly in *Bones*.

At the point when the film begins, Fontainhas has been virtually demolished by city planners and its inhabitants are being moved to a public housing project in Amador on the outskirts of the city. Ventura’s wife, fed up with the life he has given her, brandishes a knife and throws him out of their slum dwelling. The seventy-five-year-old Ventura, a tall, slender, haunted figure in a dark suit and a white shirt, wanders about like a lost soul, dreading the clean, well-lighted, but empty rooms the city has assigned him, passing the time by visiting friends and various “children.” (He has a damaged memory and so many possible offspring from his history of falling drunkenly into strange beds that neither he nor we can be sure if any of the people he visits are actually his relations; in the strict sense he seems never to have been a legal or emotional father, although his “children” accept him as one of their own.) During his wanderings, we occasionally

flash back to the period of the 1974 Portuguese revolution, when he and his friend Lento were guest workers assigned to building projects in Lisbon. Baffled and terrified by the social upheaval around them, they huddle together in a tiny shack, where Ventura composes and ceaselessly repeats a love poem, urging Lento to memorize it for his wife in Cape Verde. The poem is made up partly from lines appropriated from French surrealist Robert Desnos, and partly from lines composed by Ventura himself. Unfortunately, Lento dies in an accident outside the shack and never learns the poem.

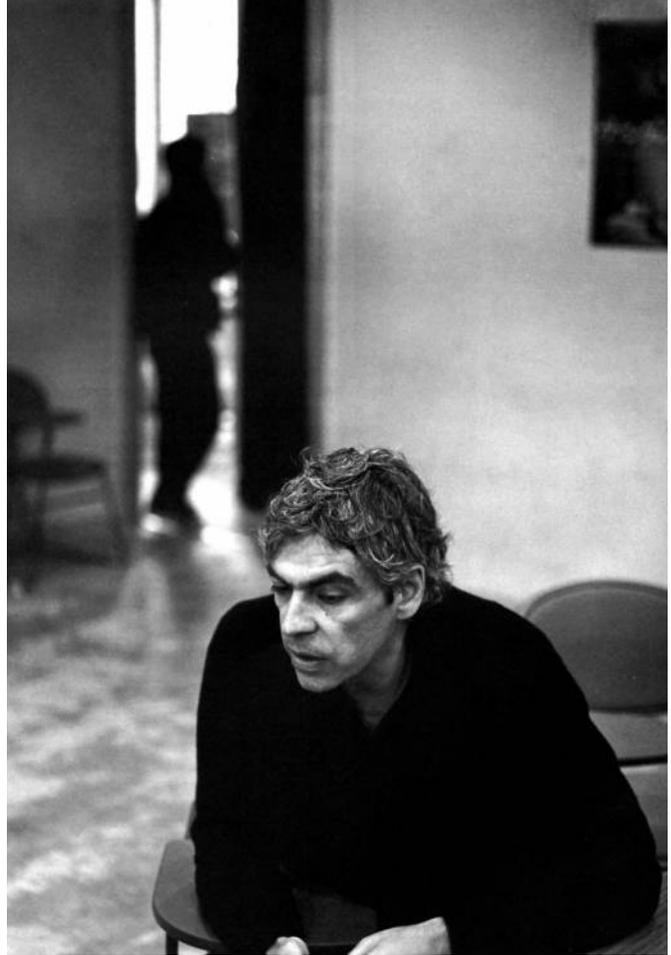
A good deal of the contextual information I’ve just supplied, such as the source of the poem, derives from program notes for *Colossal Youth* or from published interviews with Costa. The film itself is mysterious, beautiful, and elliptical, so intimately related to its characters that it refuses exposition and leaves us to find our bearings as best we can. Costa’s politics will probably not be fully evident to most U.S. viewers; it helps to know that in his youth he enthusiastically celebrated the fall of the fascist dictatorship in Portugal, but later discovered that black workers like Ventura, who had labored to construct Lisbon’s museums, schools, and middle-class residences, were completely abandoned by the “democratic” revolution and even persecuted by the Portuguese military. (Useful background on the politics of the film can be found on the web, at chainedtothecinematheque.blogspot.com.)

Like many important films and an equal number of bad or unethical ones, *Colossal Youth* troubles the distinction between documentary and fiction; its most distinctive attribute, however, is that in stylistic terms it works completely against the grain of neo-realism, giving us no sense of grainy, jerky “immediacy.” Costa shot the picture without a crew, using only a lightweight digital camera, DAT for sound, and a

couple of microphones and tripods; there was no lighting equipment other than mirrors and Styrofoam reflectors, and in some locations there was no electricity. Nevertheless, *Colossal Youth* has a superbly disciplined feeling for composition and color. The images, which have been compared to Vermeer, seem to rise out of a dialectical conflict between painterly stillness, appropriate to a world where the characters live outside capitalist time, and motion pictures, appropriate to the modernity that surrounds and determines the characters. No wonder the brilliant art photographer Jeff Wall, who is equally sensitive to color, texture, and staged “documentary,” is among Costa’s admirers.

In a lecture for a group of young filmmakers in Tokyo, published in the online journal *Rouge*, Costa speaks of the way he “resists” the comfortable versatility of the digital camera, refusing to do what “the managers of Panasonic in the skyscrapers of Tokyo” want him to do. “They want me to move it around a lot, and I don’t want to move it.” His camera usually stands at a respectful distance from the actors, who are treated with discretion, dignity, and patient attention. Each actor in *Colossal Youth* contributed her or his own story, which was modified during rehearsal, and the production took fifteen months of all-day shooting for six days a week, with up to twenty or thirty takes per shot. The finished product consists mainly of lengthy sequence shots exquisitely framed by an unmoving camera, with relatively little figure movement within the frame. (The notes I took at my only viewing indicate a single camera movement—a leisurely 180-degree pan along a pastoral stream outside Lisbon’s Gulbenkian museum, looking toward street traffic in the distance.) The atmosphere is hushed, formal, with characters walking in or out of frame in stately, almost ghostly fashion.

Many viewers will become impatient because nothing dramatic happens; in one sequence we listen to an entire record that Ventura plays for Lento (“Labanda Breço,” a song in praise of Amílcar Cabral, the leader of the Cape Verdian independence movement), and in another we watch three characters silently eating a meal. But each direct cut to the opening of a new sequence is visually stunning. The most startling is when Costa suddenly cuts to the interior of the Gulbenkian museum, an edifice that Ventura helped to build when he was a construction worker, and where he goes to visit one of his “sons,” a museum caretaker. The sequence begins with a distant shot of a small painting by Rubens, almost aglow in a shadowy corner (Costa repeatedly uses a single touch of color to transform monochrome environments); then we cut to a large painting by Van Dyck; and then to Ventura, innocently sitting on one of the art objects, a seventeenth-century French settee upholstered by Gobelins,



Director Pedro Costa

Courtesy Pedro Costa

posed with all the lanky grace of the young Henry Fonda in *My Darling Clementine* (1946).

Other sequences have moments of extraordinary intimacy, although the film is never sensational. Ventura’s several visits with Vanda, who lives in one of the new high-rise buildings and works as a maid, are especially memorable. A motormouth and a fascinatingly natural performer, Vanda sits on her bed and spins out long, druggy-sounding monologues. She suffers from a head cold and occasionally leans over to spit in a wastebasket. Now and then she pauses to glance at her television set, which is always on, or she looks down at a beautiful, dark-eyed baby girl playing on the floor, and encourages the girl to dance to the television music (“*Dança, bebe, dança!*”). An equally striking scene occurs toward the end of the film, when Ventura visits one of his “daughters” in a battered hovel in Fontainhas; the two have a quiet, dreamy conversation and begin playing a game of finding shapes of people or objects in the ragged scars on the wall, much as one would find shapes in the clouds. The young woman observes that the housing project where they will soon be moved is covered with white paint; in the new environment, their very imaginations will be impoverished.

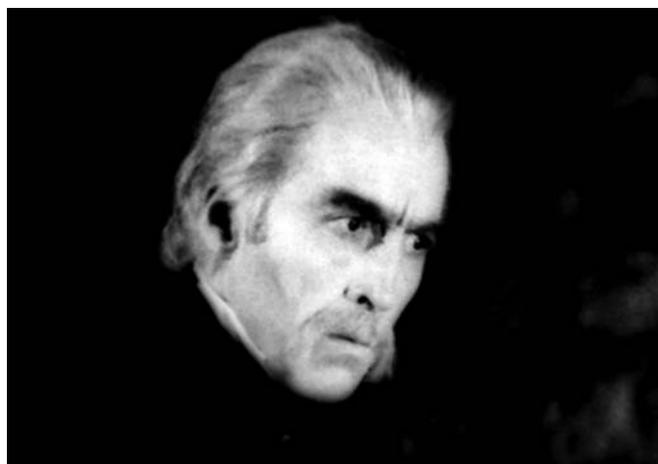
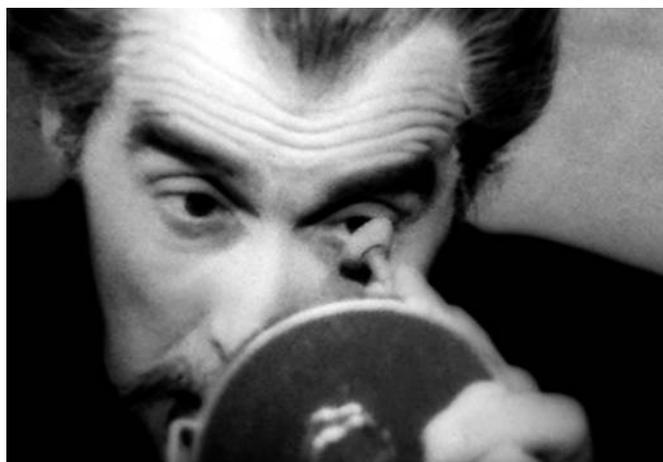
Costa is often compared with Bresson, partly because of the unemotional quality of his actors and partly because

of his “empty” shots, in which we see a room or a wall after a character has left the frame. He tends to compare himself with Hollywood directors: with Chaplin, who made street films about the immigrant ghetto; with Ford, who had a “stock company” and a favorite location; and above all with Jacques Tourneur, who was a poetic realist working at the lower levels of the industry. (He also admires Danièle Huillet and Jean-Marie Straub, about whom he has made an extraordinary documentary, *Where Lies Your Hidden Smile?* [*Où Git Votre Sourire Enfoui?*, 2001].) Ultimately, however, he is unique. He risks being charged with aestheticizing poverty, but I agree when he says, borrowing a phrase from Brecht, that he wants only to make “jewels for the poor.”

2. CAUDECUC-VAMPIR

A seventy-five-minute, quasi-narrative film by Catalan director Pere Portabella, *Caudecuc-Vampir* (1970), was also shown last year in a few U.S. cities, again in the context of a retrospective. Portabella was unknown to me until quite recently, and I’m grateful to Jonathan Rosenbaum, his champion in

this country, for calling his work to my attention. Portabella was one of the Spanish producers of Buñuel’s *Viridiana*, and because of his anti-Franco politics, the experimental films he began making in the 1970s could be shown in Spain only clandestinely. (His most recent film, *The Silence before Bach* [2007], is among the best of his career.) *Caudecuc-Vampir*, the first word of which is a pun referring to the tail end of a worm and to the unexposed material at the end of a film reel, doesn’t seem especially subversive, although it belongs to a well-known avant-garde genre of appropriation in which a new film is made up of material “stolen” from other films. The most influential example of such thievery is Joseph Cornell’s *Rose Hobart* (1936), which takes footage from an enjoyably kitschy South Sea Islands picture called *East of Borneo* (1931) and turns it into a collage of fetishized dream imagery devoted to the film’s female star. *Caudecuc-Vampir* is somewhat different in that little if any of its footage comes directly from the film it appropriates. Instead, Portabella creates what might be described as an avant-garde “making of” documentary, composed of silent, widescreen, black-and-



Eerie self-reference

Caudecuc-Vampir. Courtesy pereportabella.com.

white footage that he shot on the Spanish locations of Jess Franco's Techniscope and Eastmancolor *Count Dracula* (1970), an Italian/Spanish/German co-production starring Christopher Lee and Herbert Lom. Portabella "flashed" his footage during the developing process, giving it a blurred, high-contrast look; as a result, everything in Franco's Euro-trashy B-picture—the over-lighted sets, the voluptuous starlets with big hair and heavy mascara, the hammy character actors—is saturated with the surreal, antiquated gloom that haunts such vampire films as Murnau's *Nosferatu* (1922), Dreyer's *Vampyr* (1932), and Maddin's *Dracula: Pages from a Virgin's Diary* (2002).

One of the ironies of this situation is that the original film was directed by a man named Franco. *Count Dracula* isn't a bad film (it contains one of Christopher Lee's better performances), and Portabella never condescends to it. Instead he transmogrifies a conventional horror movie into an uncanny experience and a subtle allegory of a blood-sucking Spanish dictatorship. One could also say that *Cuadecuc-Vampir* has a vampire-like relation to the original; it seizes upon the host film with erotic intensity and turns it into a seductive but cadaverous production. Much of what we see was shot directly alongside the original, but from strange, off-center angles, sometimes with a handheld camera. When the actors speak their lines, we hear only the sound design of composer Carles Santos: muffled bumping and knocking, metallic gusts of wind, jet engines, jack-hammers, and "light" jazz or elevator music. Now and then we glimpse Franco's cameramen at work or we become aware of the artificiality of the proceedings—the spirit gum holding wigs in place, the wires that enable fake bats to fly, the actors stepping out of their roles. And yet, because of the eerie, lyrical atmosphere of Portabella's photography and editing, the backstage action looks as spooky as anything in the film's diegesis. At one point Lee, in full make-up as Dracula, prepares to lie down in a coffin and reaches out to swipe jokingly at Portabella's camera; we hear a screech on the soundtrack, Lee smiles, and the film seems to shudder with terror. When Franco's crew sprays artificial fog through a forest or spins "cobwebs" over Dracula's coffin, their work seems as weird as anything in Bram Stoker; and when the actors drive an obviously fake stake through a beautiful woman's heart while the crew stands around watching, the effect is unsettling.

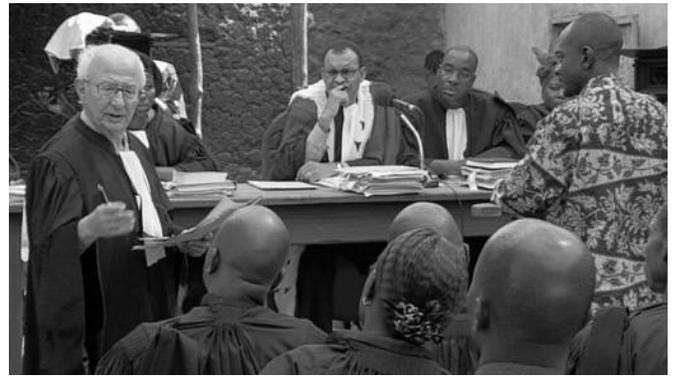
The sense of an all-pervading horror extends even to a coda at the end, when for the first time we hear recorded speech and see ordinary black-and-white photography. A documentary camera (Franco's or Portabella's?) films Christopher Lee in his dressing room, partly in costume, giving an Orson Welles-like disquisition on Stoker's novel. He forgets the

name of one of the characters and has to start over. The second take goes smoothly, concluding with a reading of Count Dracula's death scene from the closing pages of the novel. Lee emphasizes the "look of peace" in the dying vampire's eyes. Then he glances up and stares dramatically at us. The camera zooms into his eyes. An awkward, lengthy silence ensues before the director shouts "cut," and for a few moments Lee seems more troubling than in the Franco movie—a handsome personification of the living dead.

3. BAMAKO

Abderrahmane Sissako's *Bamako* (France/Mali, 2006) takes place in a small square in Bamako, the capital of Mali, where the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank are put on trial. Defense lawyers from Europe and prosecution lawyers from Africa present their cases to an African court. A broad array of witnesses is called, and a small audience watches the proceedings. During breaks in the trial, a French lawyer tries to call his clients on his cell phone and is almost butted by a goat. Elsewhere in the square, women are hard at work, hand-dyeing cloth for gorgeously colored textiles. A few individuals in rooms around the square go on with their lives, among them a beautiful young woman (Assa Maga) who attracts the gazes of men when she strolls past on her way to her job. A wife and mother, she sings in a bar, where we see her suffering the embrace of an ugly male bureaucrat. Her husband, like most of the young men in the community, is unemployed and humiliated. Eventually, he commits suicide.

The foregoing should make clear that *Bamako* isn't a purely realistic film; indeed its most realistic elements, such as the story of the café singer and her husband, are relatively unengaging. As a director, Sissako resembles a more politically lucid and gently humorous Godard, and his best moments are didactic. The fanciful, visually impressive trial scenes, in which Africans speak out against their economic oppression, serve to raise important questions and teach hard truths. The tiny square becomes a microcosm of the nation, and the nation a symbol of sub-Saharan Africa, most of which has had little ability to represent itself in the modern media. At the trial, the intelligent and often witty testimony exposes the workings of the IMF and World Bank, twin organizations charged with regulating the international monetary system and lending money to developing nations. Since the 1980s, the neo-liberal leaders of these organizations have imposed "structural adjustments" on the debts of poor countries in order to force them to balance their budgets. Radical "reforms" benefiting the rich have been widely imposed, none of which would be tolerated in wealthier nations to the north (although the Republican governments in the U.S. since



African indictment

Bamako. © 2007 Archipel 33, Chiguitty Films, ARTE France, Mali Images. DVD: Artificial Eye (U.K.).

Ronald Reagan have managed to institute a few of them). These include the end of state subsidies for agriculture, the dismantling of public services, and the severe reduction of public-sector jobs for teachers, doctors, and social workers. The debtor nations have also been forced to “privatize” their natural resources, which, with the aid of corrupt officials, have been signed over to multinational corporations. As a result, the poorest countries are poorer than they were twenty years ago; their child mortality has risen, their literacy and life expectancy have fallen, and they are dependant on foreign imports of goods they could produce. Meanwhile, as one of the witnesses observes, the west has become preoccupied with terrorism and immigration, both of which are directly related to western economic policy.

Occasionally we cut away from the trial to see bits of evidence. Columns of black men struggle across the desert, dying from their attempt to escape the continent and find work in Europe. African children gather around a battered TV set and watch an American Western—a parody starring Danny Glover (one of the producers of *Bamako*), in which bad men ride into an African town and shoot down the local teachers. Much of this might sound depressing, but in fact *Bamako* is an exhilarating, brightly colored film that lets us

see the beauty and great potential of Africa. The Europeans at the trial don’t seem like stage villains, and several points of view are expressed. Ironically, one of the most eloquent witnesses is an old farmer who “sings” a powerful *cri de coeur* in a language nobody understands. Like everyone else in this invigorating, unusual picture, he stimulates learning and calls attention to something important and seldom seen.

4. RATATOUILLE

G. W. F. Hegel once wrote that because cooking is intended for consumption rather than contemplation, it can never become an art. If only he could have visited Gusteau’s, a once-great Paris restaurant that looks like the Tour d’Argent. Rats have infested the kitchen, but not to worry—among them is a rodent named Renny (voiced by Patton Oswalt), a genius of gastronomy who whips up inspired dishes and enables Linguini (Lou Romano), the untalented, sweet-tempered heir of deceased chef Gusteau, to rise to success and find love with a female cook named Colette (Janeane Garofalo). In the process, Renny foils the plans of the current boss and true pest, Skinner (Ian Holm), who wants to turn Gusteau’s into a fast-food brand; and he melts the heart of influential food critic Anton Ego (Peter O’Toole), “the Grim Eater.”

Brad Bird and Jan Pinkava's *Ratatouille* (2007), the animated feature from Pixar that tells this story, is a gently satiric, sometimes quite funny valentine to Paris and a lovely fable about the social and spiritual wonder of art. Chef Gusteau, whom Anton Ego sneeringly compares to "Monsieur Boyardee," has authored a cookbook entitled *Anyone Can Cook*; the book inspires Renny, but not anyone can cook like him. The point of the film is simply that great talent can come from anywhere; to find an opportunity for expression and to transform an audience, however, the artistic impulse often needs to overcome poverty, prejudice, and conventional thinking, even in the artist's own family.

It would be easy to dismiss this "lesson" as middlebrow romanticism, equivalent to the picture-postcard views of Paris that *Ratatouille* so charmingly evokes. But as the ultra-sophisticated French theorist Pierre Bordieu has argued, middlebrow art is often a site of class struggle, enabling those on the lower rungs of society to gain knowledge and help to shape cultural values. *Ratatouille* exemplifies that tendency and has a democratic, comically utopian quality. It takes place in the hierarchical, traditional, nearly all-male world of haute cuisine, but one of its funniest moments comes when the motherless Renny prepares a dish of ratatouille ("sounds like ratpatootie," Linguine says) that gives Anton Ego a Proustian experience and takes him back to the maternal hearth. In the end, when the public learns that a rat has been cooking at Gousteau's, the place is nailed up by health authorities; this problem is solved, however, when Renny, Linguini, Colette, and nearly everyone else moves to a simpler bistro where Renny's rat pack is given a home, where Ego has joyful meals ("Astonish me!"), and where a community of ordinary customers spills out into the street.

Where computer animation is concerned, the film results in something close to a new art form with its own phenomenology. At one level it imitates realistic, studio-era motion pictures: its "sets" are amazingly detailed; its views of Paris in what appears to be the 1950s or 60s seem to capture every rooftop and cobblestone; its characters have rounded, three-dimensional shapes; its "camera" glides around rooms; and some of its shots are designed to look like photographic images in which the foreground and deep background are slightly out of focus. Certain objects—a glass of red wine, for instance—are indistinguishable from a photograph. At the same time, however, the characters look like cartoon figures, moving with the magically swift, comically exaggerated quality of classic animation. The push-pull between hyperrealism and visible, computerized artifice is developed into a playful, highly self-conscious technique, which sometimes becomes a



Passion in the kitchen

Ratatouille. © Walt Disney Pictures, Pixar Animation Studios

source of jokes (a black-and-white TV in Linguini's tiny apartment shows *Brief Encounter*, but in animated form). Digital technology makes the technique possible, but, as with Renny's cooking, not everyone can manipulate it with such talent and panache.

5. ONCE

Ratatouille might have been even better if it had songs, like so many 2007 films, including *Across the Universe*, *Hairspray*, *Sweeney Todd*, *Control*, *I'm Not There*, *Love and Cigarettes*, and *Walk Tall*. Of this group, Todd Haynes's *I'm Not There* deserves special mention for its deconstruction of the biopic and its kaleidoscopic view of Bob Dylan's very American, self-fashioned series of star images. Few Hollywood films, not even Quentin Tarantino's, have been so dense with esoteric allusions, in this case both to Dylan and to the movies. Haynes wittily employs five different actors to play Dylan's "selves," and, like the two Andersons (Wes and Paul Thomas), makes excellent use of widescreen. Even so, *I'm Not There* seems more interested in myths than music; it gives too little sense of why Dylan is a compelling composer-performer, and in some ways made me prefer old-fashioned pictures like *The Jolson Story* (1948).

I was more taken with John Carney's *Once* (2006), an extremely low-budget production from Ireland, which is full of sweet surprises and songs performed by real musicians. It's the only movie I've seen about post-Tin Pan Alley music that isn't about drugs, booze, sex, and the corrosive effects of fame,



A gentle Tin Pan Alley

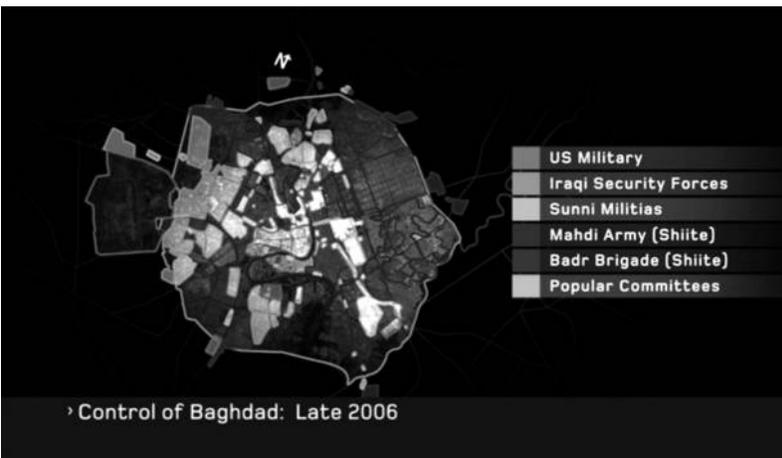
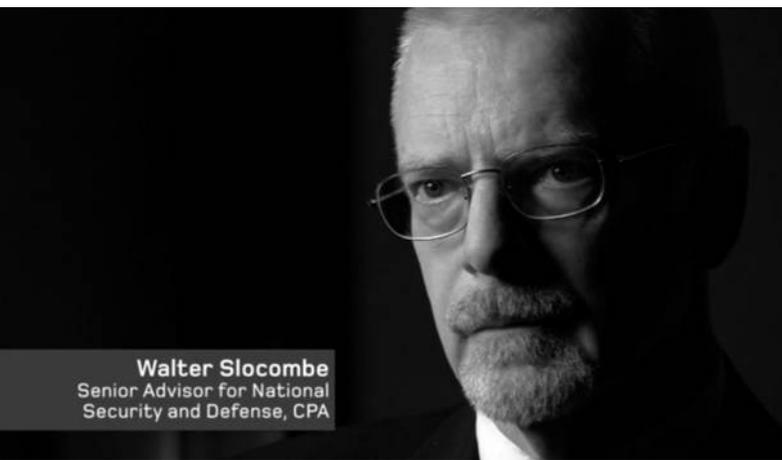
Once. © 2007 Summit Entertainment LP, Samson Film Limited

and in small ways it overturns other clichés. A street singer (Glen Hansard) chases down a teenage drug addict who has robbed him, but after wrestling the culprit to the ground the singer gives him a hug, a lecture, and a few coins. Later, an ethereally pretty Czech flower girl (Marketa Irglova) befriends the singer and takes him to her apartment house; hanging around the front stoop are a group of men, including a black fellow wearing a hood and smoking a cigarette, who I feared might be toughs but who greet the young woman as friends and fellow workers. The singer has a job helping his father in a vacuum-cleaner shop; I expected conflict between father and son (à la *Ratatouille*), but the father turns out to be a nice guy. The singer and the flower girl develop a romantic relationship, but they never even kiss; he's still mooning about his former lover, and she has a baby daughter in Dublin and a husband back in Europe. They form a band together and have a successful recording session, but at the end he goes off to London and she stays in Dublin.

Despite these offbeat touches, *Once* has a good deal in common with classic Hollywood musicals. It tells a boy-meets-girl story about two people from different worlds who decide to put on a show, and it ingeniously uses songs to advance the story. (Consider "Broken Hearted Hoover Fixer Sucker Guy," an improvised tune played in the back of a bus, which provides exposition and tells us something about the singer's reluctance to talk about his past.) A few of the numbers are as good in their own modest way as anything from the heyday of MGM. At one point the girl goes out at night in a robe and slippers to buy a battery for a portable CD player, and as she walks home listening to music and composing lyrics, the camera executes a beautiful tracking shot that feels like a neo-realist version of Vincente Minnelli. The initial love duet for the boy and girl is played in the back of a music store on an old guitar and a grand piano, and was performed live rather than in playback. If you aren't charmed and touched by it, you and I will probably never be intimate friends.

6. NO END IN SIGHT

In 2007, Hollywood liberals produced three worthwhile fiction films about the U.S. invasion and occupation of Iraq. The most dramatically effective is Paul Haggis's *In the Valley of Elah*, anchored by Tommy Lee Jones's restrained performance as the grieving father of a dead soldier; the most cinematically inventive is Brian De Palma's *Redacted*, a low-budget, in-your-face indictment of censored U.S. violence against the Iraqis; and the most critically underrated is Robert Redford's *Lions for Lambs*, a near Brechtian dramatization of conversations between a teacher and a student, a journalist and a politician, and a couple volunteer soldiers. Unfortunately,



U.S. policy under investigation

No End in Sight. © 2007 Representational Pictures LLC. DVD: Magnolia Home Entertainment.

none of these films did well at the box office. Conservative columnists and bloggers were gleeful when *Redacted* lasted only a few days on some screens, and concluded that people don't like to be preached to. Meanwhile, multiplexes around the country were opening their shows with another kind of persuasion: "Citizen/Soldier," a lengthy ad for the U.S. Army

National Guard, consisting of a montage of glossy, computer-enhanced images of young people in military gear, moving to the beat of an excruciatingly bad, all-white rock band called 3 Doors Down.

I sometimes wish the hucksters and politicians responsible for selling the invasion of Iraq and the thirty percent of Americans who still support Bush could be strapped down to theater seats like Alex in *A Clockwork Orange* (1971) and forced to watch over and over again what is easily the best of the Iraq films from 2007: Charles Ferguson's *No End in Sight*, a straightforward, talking-heads documentary that provides jaw-dropping evidence of the U.S. administration's arrogance, mendacity, and incompetence. After using the "war on terror" as a pretext for invading the only Mideast nation that was a barrier to Islamic fundamentalism, the Bush gang ignored the advice of the military and didn't put enough troops on the ground to secure order; then they disbanded the Iraqi military and forced most of the country's civil servants and teachers into unemployment; then they left the nation's historical treasures and caches of weapons and explosives exposed to looters and insurgents. To top it off, having made little or no plans for post-war occupation, they dismissed most U.S. Foreign Service personnel with Mideast experience and replaced them with young Republican apparatchiks, including a recent college graduate who was given the job of drawing up a traffic plan for Baghdad. Too bad Ferguson's chronicle of these criminal errors had to be shown in theaters rather than on non-cable, network television; but, as Redford's *Lions for Lambs* indicates, after a quarter century of mostly right-wing government in the U.S., the news networks have completely lost their souls.

7. AWAY FROM HER

Iraq also makes its way unexpectedly into Sarah Polley's Canadian production of *Away from Her* (2006), in which a woman, Fiona (Julie Christie), with an advanced case of Alzheimer's disease watches a news report of the U.S. invasion on a TV set in a nursing home. The woman's memory is so impaired that she seems not to recognize her husband of forty-four years, Grant (Gordon Pinsent); but when she sees images of U.S. soldiers in combat, she asks herself, "How could they forget Vietnam?"

Polley's adaptation of Alice Munro's "The Bear Came over the Mountain" is the best of several films in 2007 about illness or aging—among them the comic *The Savages*, the spectacular *The Diving Bell and the Butterfly*, the saccharine *Evening*, and the awful *The Bucket List*. Its greatest virtue lies in Polley's careful avoidance of sentimentality, showy cinematic style, feel-good jokes, or sublime images of nature—all



The cold of winter

Away from Her. © 2006 The Film Farm, Foundry Films, Pulling Focus Pictures Inc. DVD: Metrodome (U.K.).

common strategies in films of this type. She also refuses to use too many flashbacks that show the married couple in their youth. The film's few touches of humor have an undertone of sadness, and the quietly subdued imagery of snow and cross-country skiing is nicely used to suggest key themes—marriage, separation, aging, the end of a relationship, and the loss of memory. The almost luxurious nursing home where much of the action takes place is bland and suburban, but never sinister; it's probably the best one could expect, although strain is evident on the smiling face of the lady in charge (Wendy Crewson), and the patients on the second floor, whose disease has "progressed," look like zombies.

Throughout, Christie's line readings are superb, letting us see intelligent awareness alongside bewilderment and anxiety. On the day when she's taken to the home, she asks her college-professor husband where she's headed; then she smiles a little flirtatiously and says, "Just kidding." En route, she tells him there are things in their past she'd like to forget, especially his infidelities with students. Her strength, resolve, and lack of self-pity are palpable, and her last hour in bed with her husband is lovely and poignant. We can never be sure if she no longer recognizes him after she takes up with a mute, wheelchair-bound resident of the home (Michael Murphy). "You certainly are persistent," she says in a polite but slightly annoyed way when the husband keeps showing

up like a suitor with flowers. She's as beautiful and seemingly alive to her surroundings as ever, but a different person. 2007 wasn't a great year for women's roles in the movies, especially for older women, but this film shows what we've been missing. *Away from Her* is a crowning moment in Christie's memorable career.

8. BLACK BOOK

"What's my role in this boy's club?" asks Carise van Hauten in Paul Verhoeven's Dutch/German/British production of *Black Book* (*Zwartboek*, 2006). Actually, a good one, and she makes the most of it. As Rachel Stein/Ellis de Vries, a spirited young Jewish cabaret singer concealing her identity from Nazis in The Hague at the close of World War II, van Hauten becomes a combination of Mata Hari, Marlene Dietrich, and Pearl White. The momentum of her adventures keeps accelerating and her hair-breadth escapes pile up almost to the point of absurdity. Verhoeven handles the action in a style reminiscent of old-school Hollywood, and his mingling of eroticism and suspense, enhanced by Anne Dudley's rather Bernard Herrmann-like score, is so entertaining that some viewers might not notice the film's underlying seriousness.

The story is based loosely on a melange of actual characters and events, some of which echo in the present. The



Troubled by torture

Top three: *Black Book*. © 2006 Film & Entertainment VIP Medienfonds 4 GmbH & Co. KG.

DVD: High Fliers/Tartan Films (U.K.). Bottom two: *The Bourne Ultimatum*. © 2007

Universal Studios, Motion Picture BETA Produktionsgesellschaft mbH & Co. KG. DVD:

Universal Studios (U.K.).

occupying Nazis, for example, describe the captured members of the Dutch resistance as “terrorists” and subject them to a kind of water-boarding. (In his voiceover commentary for the DVD edition of *Black Book*, Verhoeven makes

pointed remarks about the state-terrorist occupation and water torture performed by the U.S. during the Iraq War. Waterboarding was also on the minds of Hollywood filmmakers in 2007. In *The Bourne Ultimatum*, one of the year’s biggest and, despite the awards it received, worst-edited blockbusters, we discover that Jason Bourne [Matt Damon] lost his memory because he was tortured by a Dick Cheney type [Albert Finney] at the CIA, who put an Abu Ghraib-style bag over Bourne’s head and subjected him to simulated drowning.) In several respects Verhoeven keeps the viewer off balance, emphasizing historical ironies and blurring the boundaries between the Germans and the Dutch. The Dutch Calvinists who shelter the Jewish heroine at the beginning of the film force her to recite New Testament verses before she can eat; a Christian fundamentalist in the resistance turns out to be violently unstable; and the head of the Gestapo (Sebastian Koch) is an unexpectedly nice fellow with whom the heroine falls in love. (“Are these a Jew’s breasts?” she asks him, alluding to *The Merchant of Venice*.) As the story develops, it becomes increasingly difficult to distinguish between resistance fighters and collaborators. The only constant is violence, which continues after the war, when Rachel settles with her husband and children in an Israeli kibbutz on the eve of the Suez Crisis.

9. THE ASSASSINATION OF JESSE JAMES BY THE COWARD ROBERT FORD

2007 witnessed an unusual number of Westerns (or pictures with Western settings) and noir-like crime films. In the latter group are several excellent pictures, including, in order of my own preference, *Gone Baby Gone*, *Before the Devil Knows You’re Dead*, *Eastern Promises*, *Michael Clayton*, and *Zodiac*. The Coen brothers’ Academy-Award-winning Western noir, *No Country for Old Men*, has white-knuckle suspense, a scary/funny performance by Javier Bardem as Anton Chigurh (pronounced “sugar”), and the best pit-bull-chasing-a-man scene anyone is ever going to achieve; but the moral-philosophical narration by an aging Texas lawman (Tommy Lee Jones) strikes me as unearned and a bit hypocritical, especially given the Coens’ apparent relish for sadism, and the treatment of the border between the U.S. and Mexico is full of crime-movie stereotypes. I’m equally divided about Paul Thomas Anderson’s much-praised *There Will Be Blood*, which has an intense performance by Daniel Day-Lewis and a nicely worked out mirror-image relationship between an oil tycoon and an evangelist (Paul Dano), who are depicted as a pair of gimlet-eyed con men in deadly struggle with one another. Several critics have described the film as “epic,” but my idea of an epic about oil in the southwest is *Giant* (1956), which



Showbiz executioner

The Assassination of Jesse James by the Coward Robert Ford. © 2007 Warner Bros. Entertainment Inc., Virtual Studios LLC. DVD: Warner Home Video.

was shot in the same Texas location as the Anderson picture, but which involves a much larger group of interesting characters and shows a greater concern with class conflict and national history. *There Will Be Blood* creates an illusion of historical sweep (it begins in 1898 and ends in 1924) but is actually a rather narrow psychological drama concerning Anderson's favorite theme: love/hate between fathers and sons.

To these films I prefer Andrew Dominik's *The Assassination of Jesse James by the Coward Robert Ford* (2007), a lavishly produced adaptation of Ron Hansen's dense nonfiction novel, which was originally over three hours long and has been cut to a leisurely, atmospheric 160 minutes. In the process of condensation, Dominik may have jettisoned historical information. He gives us too little sense of Jesse's racism and murderous ruthlessness, and of his ability to manipulate his public image so that loyalists of the old Confederacy thought of him as a courtly outlaw or Robin Hood. He also limits what we know about Jesse's domestic life and seems to have left a good deal of the talented Mary-Louise Parker's role as Zee James on the cutting-room floor. But much remains to admire. The landscape photography (by Roger Deakins, who also photographed *In the Valley of Elah* and *No Country for Old Men*) and the near-poetic off-screen narration are worthy of Terrence Malick at his best, and the screenplay hews closely to the intriguing narrative spine of the novel, which is not only a study of the mass psychology of

hero worship but also, more interestingly, an ironic retelling of the story of Jesus and Judas. The Jesse we meet in the film, nicely played by Brad Pitt, is nearing the end of his criminal career; a blend of bourgeois paterfamilias and crazy, somewhat dandified killer, he is vain about his reputation and seems to have a melancholy awareness that death is approaching—indeed he participates in his demise and in the heightening of his legend by keeping a potential betrayer, one of his most smarmy disciples, close at hand. (When the killer shoots him in the back, Jesse can see the gun reflected in the glass frame of a picture he is dusting.) Bob Ford (Casey Affleck, in a career-making performance) is at first a callow, ingratiating acolyte who wants, as Lacan would say, to become the phallus. Instead, partly to achieve fame and partly to protect himself from Jesse, he becomes an assassin, and for the remainder of his life is imprisoned by the James myth. Jesse's embalmed body is put on display as entertainment for the curious and worshipful; and Bob, who matures into a brooding, troubled figure, has a brief career on stage, acting himself in the James story. At the end, he too is melancholy, and is shot down from behind by one of Jesse's yahoo-like fans. All this is depicted in nearly tactile images of late nineteenth-century Americana, and in narration, dialogue, and performances that convey the beauty and grotesquerie of a strange, provincial culture—a culture redolent of the Bible and Shakespeare, but inclining toward pulp fiction and show business.

10. MAD MEN

My last choice returns us to 1960–61, when *Film Quarterly* published its initial “Films of the Year.” Jack Kennedy is running for President against Dick Nixon, and the men at the Sterling-Cooper Advertising Agency on Madison Avenue have been assigned the Nixon account. A cocky crew of racist, sexist white males (plus one closeted homosexual), the “Mad men,” as they call themselves, spend much of their time making passes at the office secretaries and competing for the approval of Don Draper (Jon Hamm), a tall, dark, and handsome executive who lives in an affluent suburb with a beautiful blond wife (January Jones) and a couple of kids. Draper is so talented he can successfully market Lucky Strikes even though *Reader’s Digest* has recently published a report on cancer and cigarettes. On the surface, he and his wife make an ideal couple, a bit like Rock Hudson and Doris Day in *Lover Come Back* (1961), except in that film Rock and Doris *both* worked on Madison Avenue. In reality, Draper is as much a self-invented American type as Bob Dylan; he has a hidden past and new name, and he’s a secret adulterer, preferring sex with a Greenwich Village artist and a Jewish heiress instead of his WASP wife. The wife, meanwhile, is seriously depressed. Draper sends her to a psychiatrist, who telephones Draper with detailed accounts of her sessions.

This is the opening setup in *Mad Men* (2007–), a seductively entertaining new series developed for the American Movie Classics channel by Matthew Weiner, who also worked on *The Sopranos*. As with most serial dramas, the show has a “paradigmatic” structure that moves us between different story lines; the secretaries at Sterling-Cooper, for example, include a va-va-voom redhead named Joan (Christiana Hendricks) and a relatively plain but talented new brunette named Peggy (Elisabeth Moss), both of whom have troubling affairs with the advertising men. As we shift back and forth between office politics and domestic life, we become increasingly aware of the cultural anthropology of the period. The show’s historical details are accurate and amusing (Draper invents the name “carousel” for a new 35mm slide projector; and when Joan shows Betty a new IBM Selectric typewriter, she remarks, “The men who designed it made it simple enough for women to use”), and the production design creates a certain nostalgia for a world in which men chain-smoke, wear Brooks Brothers suits, and have three-martini lunches. Some of the episodes resemble Todd Haynes’s *Far From Heaven* (2002) and therefore have the effect of Douglas Sirk with the gloves off; on the whole, however, the tone is darkly satiric and intelligently aware that the period itself was both envious and critical of Madison Avenue. (One of the witty touches is that the eccentric head of Sterling-Cooper is



Office politics and married life

Mad Men. © Doug Hyun / AMC.

played by Robert Morse, who in 1961 was the star of a Broadway satire of advertising, *How to Succeed in Business without Really Trying*.) For all its historical fetishism, *Mad Men* foregrounds its links with our own time. It brings ongoing American social tensions explicitly to the surface and expresses strong ambivalence about the past. It knows that in 1961 the nation was beginning to change in progressive ways; but it also knows that we continue to live in a world of lies, hype, and corporate maneuvering, which have assumed more spectacular, all-pervasive forms than Don Draper could imagine. I look forward to the future episodes.

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ABSTRACT Prefaced by remarks about methodology, this article presents a survey of films (and one television show) released in the U.S. in 2007 which James Naremore evaluates to be the best of the year. The top three are: Pedro Costa’s *Colossal Youth*, Pere Portabella’s *Cuadecuc-Vampir*, and Abderrahmane Sissako’s *Bamako*.

KEYWORDS Pedro Costa, Pere Portabella, Abderrahmane Sissako, evaluation, *Mad Men*.