

THE BEST OF

SCREENINGS & MEANINGS

A JOURNEY THROUGH FILM



Appendix

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APPENDIX

TWO DECADES OF BEST MOVIES: 1997-2017

1997

Top picks

Titanic (U.S.): Finally, an epic that actually is one. Kate Winslet and Leonardo DiCaprio are swimming as the doomed romantic leads, and the last hour soars (sinks, actually) to classic stature.

Ulysses' Gaze (Greece/France/Italy/Germany/UK/Yugoslavia/Bosnia and Herzegovina/Albania/Romania, 1995): An extraordinary back-to-the-future Balkan journey into cinema's soul and the cruel ironies of its first century. The Sarajevo scenes are unforgettable.

The Company of Men (U.S.): The ultra-low budget independent film of the year if not the decade. It's savagely observed. The overt misogyny is nothing so simple; rather, a subtext for the real lesson in man-to-man betrayal and corporate intrigue.

Good Will Hunting (U.S.): Based on a buddy script by "Southies" Matt Damon and Ben Affleck (playing their own roles), this unlikely scenario scores with genuinely affecting performances including Minnie Driver as the love interest and Stellan Skarsgard (*Breaking the Waves*) as the professor. Even bankable Robin Williams, inserted as a scarred therapist, connects beyond flip one-liners. But it is Damon who smoulders with marquee star quality.

Kundun (U.S./Monaco): Martin Scorsese provides a stunning lesson in cinematic poetry of Himalayan proportions.

The Boxer (U.S./Ireland): Another acting triumph for Daniel Day-Lewis, this time teamed with Emily Watson following up her breathtaking debut in *Breaking the Waves*. A gritty drama in the class of *Raging Bull*, the best pugilistic picture ever made.

The Ice Storm (U.S.): Taiwanese director Ang Lee moves from English costume drama and sprightly comedy of manners (*Sense and Sensibility*) to decline of American middle-class morality tale in this finely wrought lament for Camelot lost and a generation gapped.

Fairy Tale: A True Story (UK/U.S.): An extraordinary, true story faithfully retold of childlike innocence, adult skepticism and gullibility, faith and healing in a Britain seeking spiritualist solace from the real-life horrors of the first fraudulent "war to end all wars." With Houdini, Sherlock creator Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, and the selling of theosophy in supporting escapist roles, this curious historical hiccup in the unravelling human mystery is wondrously brought to the screen.

The Hanging Garden (Canada): A small near-perfect film debut — best Canadian feature of the year — brings homegrown teen angst and disorientation to a new level.

The Sweet Hereafter (Canada): While strained by director Egoyan's still trademark emotional distances and disturbed subtexts, a rare transcendence is allowed to shine through (especially in Sarah Polley's note-perfect rendering of the survivor role incorporating the Pied Piper myth). Virtuoso craftsmanship at all levels.

Honourable Mentions

L.A. Confidential (U.S.): Much more than a conventional crime drama, this sprawling landscape of murder and mayhem has a hard-boiled film noir feel not seen since the 1973 classic *Chinatown*. Includes a star turn by Kevin Spacey, but it is Aussie Russell Crowe as the tormented “bad cop” who is the real standout.

Jackie Brown (U.S.): Tough as it is for yours truly to admit, Quentin Tarantino delivers his best and most mature feature yet. Not for the sensitive or politically correct. But the countless “n” and “mf” words are the syncopation in a dynamic script that raps with the authentic cadence of the streetwise. This Jackie marches on to the beat of a movin’ ‘n groovin’ ’70s soundtrack.

The Rainmaker (U.S.): Coppola does Grisham. Terrific lawyer and law-school jokes. Matt Damon (a.k.a. Will Hunting) excels as perfect foil to Danny De Vito.

The Full Monty (UK/U.S.): A rambunctious British comedy about the lengths to which unemployed UK midlands miners will go, this popular import has the ingenious edge and attitude so often lacking in limp Hollywood formula fare. As boisterous but more fun than another fine British import trashing Thatcherism, *Brassed Off*.

The House of Yes (U.S.): Parker Posey is simply sensational in the title role. A wickedly perverse comic takeoff on the Jackie O/Kennedy assassination mystique.

As Good as it Gets (U.S.): Fiendish Jack Nicholson competes with a scene-stealing pooch to mug for the camera. Yet somehow it works despite a few draggy bits, thanks to snappy dialogue and a terrific full-range performance by Helen Hunt as the much-more-than-romantic interest.

Love Serenade (Australia 1996): This offbeat Aussie flick pulses with energy and wry small-town observation as sisterly rivalry simmers to a boil over a mysterious jaded newcomer and ex-big-city DJ. A smashingly good soundtrack.

Career Girls (UK/France): This powerful script’s themes of personal trauma and catharsis are equally well conveyed by the superb naturalistic acting.

Wings of the Dove (UK/U.S.): The best of the year’s three Henry James adaptations (the others being *Portrait of a Lady* and *Washington Square*). Helena Bonham Carter and Linus Roache are luminous as the star-crossed lovers.

Shall We Dance? (Japan): This is the beguiling, bittersweet story of a middle-aged Tokyo accountant taking a chance on some new steps.

1998

This year saw some wonderful animated/special effects features — *Antz*, *A Bug’s Life*, and the return of *Babe* the talking pig.

Top picks

The Thin Red Line (U.S.): In adapting James Jones classic novel of the 1942-43 American campaign to wrest control of the island of Guadalcanal from the Japanese, director Terrence Malick makes few concessions to convention in pursuing his vision of war in a South Pacific jungle paradise transformed into inferno of the soul. The story may be vintage Second World War, but retold with a post-Vietnam sensibility.

Saving Private Ryan (U.S.): Steven Spielberg deserves enormous credit for restoring the classic form of the war film as genre. The astonishing soldiers'-eye view opening sequence of the disastrous D-Day landing at Omaha Beach is among the most harrowing in movie history

Dancing at Lughnasa (Ireland/UK/U.S.): Pat O'Connor's sublime adaptation of the Brian Friel play is a small miracle with the ring of true life. The camera lovingly embraces the Donegal landscape and caresses the features of each fully realized character.

Shakespeare in Love (U.S.): A frothy frolic fable of the Bard's inspiration interruptus over the creation of *Romeo and Juliet* and *Twelfth Night*, enhanced by some sly Tom Stoppard script magic.

Happiness (U.S.): Todd Solondz's caustic anti-morality satire of fin-de-millennium urban American soullessness breaks the boundaries of convention and taste. The cinematic equivalent of acid in the face, no doubt some will find it abhorrent; I prefer challenging.

The Truman Show (U.S.): Director Peter Weir coaxes the best performance of Jim Carrey's career in this ingenious futuristic fantasy that takes the notion of "television land" to a whole new level. We get an exhilarating epiphany not a lecture, as our hero discovers self, breaks out of the collective bubble and keeps hope alive.

Pleasantville (U.S.): This is a take on television shows and the thin black-and-white-to-colour line separating fantasy and reality. Instead of fast forward, rewind to the stifling insular conformity of '50s America knows best in this dystopian fable.

Regeneration (UK/Canada): An adaptation of Pat Barker's First World War novel conveys the hellish horror and absurdity of wartime effects back from the front in a way that is almost poetic and introspective, compared to the point-and-shoot direction of American war-is-hell action narrative.

Gods and Monsters (UK/U.S.): A masterfully constructed film by Bill Condon based on the novel *Father of Frankenstein* about the last days of homosexual Hollywood director and ex-pat Brit James Whale. Ian McKellen, Britain's greatest Shakespearian actor, inhabits the tormented character in a transcendent performance. Almost as perfect, in physicality and temperment, is the casting of Brendan Fraser as the hunky young gardener. Lynn Redgrave as Whale's housekeeper completes a very odd and altogether fascinating trio.

The Celebration (Denmark/Sweden): Intrepid director Thomas Vinterberg delivers this cinematic feast with commanding virtuosity.

Honourable Mentions

The Mask of Zorro (U.S./Germany): Pure swashbuckling entertainment. Anthony Hopkins is teamed here with a rapier-sharp Antonio Banderas.

The Last Days of Disco (U.S.): Whit Stillman continues his clever dissections of post-modern urban yuppie with a dynamite soundtrack.

Bulworth (U.S.): The most savage satire of Yankee race and class politics and Hollywood hypocrisy yet made. Perhaps only Warren Beatty, ageing hipster icon, could get away with murder and beat the rap quite like this.

The Inheritors (Austria-Germany): Post-Marxists should applaud this Austrian-German production, which imagines the ill-fated results when a group of peasants suddenly inherit their master's farm in 1920s rural Austria.

A Soldier's Daughter Never Cries (UK/France/U.S.): Merchant and Ivory are top form in this wonderfully wrought adaption of Kaylie Jones' autobiographical novel.

Pecker (U.S.): Maverick U.S. director John Waters most enjoyable film yet — a wry and often wickedly delicious streetwise skewering of low art (Baltimore) and high pretense (New York).

Next Stop Wonderland (U.S.): A small U.S. indie product, this time featuring the streets of Boston and an intimate story of loves lost and soulmates found. There are beautifully modulated performances by Hope Davis and Alan Gelfant in the leading roles.

Men with Guns; Smoke Signals (U.S.): With this drama of uncovered truths and traumatic consequences, set in a composite Central American country with a brutalized rural indigenous population in post-revolutionary transition, John Sayles continues his great record of bringing stories that need to be told to the big screen, with authenticity and integrity.

Simon Birch (U.S.): A loosely based adaptation of John Irving's masterful novel *A Prayer for Owen Meany*, this bittersweet movie features stunning performances in the roles of the pint-sized boy hero and his childhood best friend, plus an uncredited bookends cameo by Jim Carrey.

Celebrity (U.S.): Woody Allen lightens up and lets Kenneth Branagh carry the acting chores — with great panache opposite the waspish Judy Davis — and among the revolving-door celebrity cast, no one does a better send-up of himself than bratpacker extraordinaire Leonardo Di Caprio in a titanic hotel-trashing tantrum. It's great stuff, and all too true.

1999

Top picks

Sunshine (Canada/Germany/Austria/Hungary/France): This Canada-Europe production of a family saga is a true masterwork in every respect and a metaphor for a century of idealistic dreams and totalitarian illusions. The incomparable Ralph Fiennes especially shines playing three generations of sons of the Hungarian Jewish Sonnenscheins descended from patriarch Emmanuel.

The Insider (U.S.): Michael Mann makes a top-notch thriller out of the true story of big tobacco whistle blower Jeffrey Wigand and the troubles that follow when proud American investigative journalism succumbs to corporate power plays.

The Talented Mr. Ripley (U.S.): In this glorious version of the Patricia Highsmith novel about fatal attractions among spoiled American rich kids indulging their fancies in 1950s Italy, director Anthony Minghella brings the same meticulous attention to detail and nuance as he did with *The English Patient*. And Matt Damon gives a remarkably convincing and sympathetic portrayal of the aspiring imposter at the centre of a web of murderous homoerotic intrigue.

Magnolia (U.S.): A huge, sprawling, chaotic mess of a movie with enough audacity and brilliant flashes for 10, this feature dissects and intersects contemporary stories of characters craving connections against a backdrop of a soggy, drugged-out Californian dystopia.

American Beauty (U.S.): First-time director Sam Mendes scores a popular and critical knockout with this scathing and subversive satire of American "family values" masking a vacuous youth-addicted consumerism and overlaid by mercenary, hypocritical business and

civic cultures. Blood-red Beauty roses are the signature of the eye-filling cinematography, but this is a cynical, not rose-coloured lens.

Besieged (Italy/UK): In Rome a lonely English pianist becomes infatuated with his housekeeper, the exiled wife of an African political prisoner, in this spare, heartrending fable by the Italian master Bernardo Bertolucci. It's an intense study of two souls seeking solace in estranged circumstances.

The Straight Story (U.S.): Perhaps growing up with John Deere machinery and having an Iowa-born farmer father has something to do with my soft spot for this ineffably sublime tribute to the late Alvin Straight, who actually drove a lawn tractor and trailer hundreds of miles from Iowa to Wisconsin to patch things up a last time with his stroke-stricken brother Lyle. As the crusty Alvin, Richard Farnsworth makes the role totally his own.

The Buena Vista Social Club (Germany/U.S./UK/France/Cuba): An homage to Cuba's neglected jazz greats, this marvellous collaboration of German director Wim Wenders and American folk musician/composer Ry Cooder and son proves that it is never too late to retrieve the best of a bygone era. The result is a superb documentary record as well as a sensational soundtrack.

The Cider House Rules (U.S.): John Irving recounted his 13-year struggle to bring his novel to the screen in a compelling memoir, *My Movie Business*. Although the "pro-choice" abortion politics subtext may offend some, Swedish director Lasse Hallstrom has fashioned a film of great humanity. Among the fine ensemble cast is Michael Caine and Tobey Maguire.

My Life So Far (UK/U.S.): This eccentric family drama, a real-life story set in the Scottish countryside, is crafted with such enormous charm and stamp of authenticity that it resonates with an irresistible appeal for an audience of all ages.

2000

Top picks

Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon (Taiwan): After mastering diverse Anglo-American genres (*The Ice Storm*, *Sense and Sensibility*, *Ride with the Devil*), director Ang Lee returns to his Asian roots with this thrilling homage to ancient myth, heroic virtue and abiding love. Spectacular sequences, mainly involving a trio of female combatants, use traditional techniques to achieve a magical purity of action surpassing any computer-enhanced formula. While elevating the martial arts to the realm of high art, the story can be enjoyed by all.

Dancer in the Dark (Denmark/Sweden/France): An East European mother goes to America with her young son, who needs an eye operation. Tragedy ensues. The most daring, provocative movie of the year challenges rather than entertains; brilliantly so. Conformists and capital punishment supporters beware! Director Lars von Trier's visionary genius is definitely not for everyone. Bjork's performance as the doomed "dancer" is also remarkable.

Wonderland (UK): Director Michael Winterbottom has taken a day in the lives of three sisters in London and fashioned it into a near masterpiece of cinematic realism. Sharp observation and superb acting combine to grip our attention as intersecting narratives unfold. The childbirth labours of the sister played by Canadian Molly Parker bring it all to an appropriately wondrous epiphany.

Billy Elliot (UK): A small-scale gem that exposes a vein of sly Thatcher-era social critique within its richly comic tale of a miner's son who abandons boxing for ballet. Against a backdrop of male family tensions, stereotypes, strikers and scabs, Jamie Bell and Julie Walters are perfect as the feisty young lad and his formidable teacher. They make us cheer his triumph.

Wonder Boys (U.S.): First-rate dialogue and delivery drive an archly humorous and engaging drama revolving around a college English professor in mid-life crisis, and his unlikely student protégé — the “wonder boys” of the title. Michael Douglas and Tobey Maguire are terrific as the fading literary lion and the next publishing sensation.

Traffic (U.S.): Michael Douglas scores an encore with a second great role as an earnest judge who bites off more than he can chew when he is appointed Uncle Sam's latest “drug czar” and discovers the “war on drugs” to be a family affair. On the Mexican enforcement side, Benicio del Toro is another standout. Adapted from the British series “Traffik” to the turf wars of the Tijuana and Juarez border cartels, director Steven Soderbergh's sure hand gives this sprawling epic a quasi-documentary look and feel.

You Can Count on Me (U.S.): Following the death of their parents in a car crash, a sister and brother struggle to make sense of their lives in this sparkling feature from producer Martin Scorsese and writer/director Kenneth Lonergan. Outstanding throughout are Laura Linney as Sammy, the home-town girl and single parent of eight-year old Rudy, and Mark Ruffalo as the wayward drifter brother, Terry.

State and Main (U.S.): Renowned playwright David Mamet brings a deft, knowing touch to this often hilarious spoof of what happens when a hapless film crew invades the main street of a small town in Vermont. A bevy of major and minor stars, including the always reliable William H. Macy in the snappy director's role, ham it up in a sort of repertory mockumentary of Hollywood hipsters taking on the locals.

Butterfly (*Lengua de las Mariposas*, Spain): Galicia 1936 in the period leading up to the Spanish Civil War is the setting for this story of the relationship between a curious young boy, “Moncho,” and a doting teacher, Don Gregorio, a gentle old anarchist who expounds on butterflies and creative freedom but is brutally betrayed. The insects also point metaphorically to reverse transformations that can turn the beautifully fragile mind of a child into something ugly.

waydowntown (Canada): Anti-establishment director, Gary Burns (*Kitchen Party*, *The Suburbanators*) is third-time lucky with this sardonic, offbeat flick. Through the spacy, ironic musings and meanderings of narrator Tom, we follow a group of office inmates betting who can stay longest confined inside the artificial videotaped maze of Calgary's corporate commercial core connected by glassed-in walkways.

Thirteen Days (U.S.): The political potboiler and insider story of the year. For sheer dramatic potential, it's hard to beat the countdown to the 1962 Cuban missile crisis that brought the world to the brink of nuclear war. Director Roger Donaldson wisely plays it straight ahead. There's a spotlight on Kevin Costner's as presidential right-hand man, but Canadian Bruce Greenwood is the true star.

Proof of Life (U.S.): Situated in the post-Soviet and same-old South American “new world order” brought to you by the arms and dope trade, Taylor Hackford's tale of the globalized commando-for-hire kidnap and ransom rescue business puts the Schwarzenegger, James Bond and Mission Impossible crowd to shame. Meg Ryan and Russell Crowe star.

2001

My list carries several caveats as to omissions. *Shrek* and *Monsters Inc.* deserve applause in the animated category. Worthy independent and foreign offerings include: *Memento*, *Ghost World*, *Gosford Park*, *Greenfingers*, *Iris*, *Enigma*, *The Man Who Wasn't There*, *The Deep End*, *The Others*, *The Business of Strangers*, *Hedwig and the Angry Inch*, *Sexy Beast*, *Amores Perros* (Mexico), *Divided We Fall* (Czech Republic), *No Man's Land* (Bosnia), *Our Lady of the Assassins* (Colombia/France), *Fat Girl* (France), *The Son's Room* (Italy), *The Road Home* (China, Sundance audience award). Mention should also be made of *The Believer*. On the documentary front, honours go to *Startup.com* and *The Endurance: Shackleton's Legendary Antarctic Adventure*. Best Canadian documentary: *God's Explorers*, on the role of the Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate in Canada's North.

Top picks

The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring (New Zealand/U.S.): Director Peter Jackson brings J.R.R. Tolkien to life in this magnificent achievement in all senses; a total entertainment experience.

Apocalypse Now Redux (U.S.): Sure it was filmed a quarter century ago, but some scenes are being seen for the first time in this definitive director's cut of a cinema classic. As a journey into the psychosis of war and evil empires, only *The Thin Red Line* comes close.

Amélie (France): After taking France by storm, this fabulous story of how doing good turns can be its own reward comes along at just the right time to lift sagging spirits.

Moulin Rouge (Australia/U.S.): Its fantastical turn-of-the-century Paris may have been created on a Sydney soundstage, but it has enough energy to have powered the City of Light at the dawn of the motion pictures era. Nicole Kidman and Ewan McGregor sing their hearts out amid the glorious operatic excess of it all.

Innocence (Australia): This "down under" gem from veteran director Paul Cox is a classic meditation on love in the twilight of life. Julia Blake and Charles Tingwell are sublime as the aging lovers granted the grace of a second chance before the final curtain falls.

A Beautiful Mind (U.S.): Although Ron Howard is a somewhat conventional director, he extracts Oscar calibre performances from Russell Crowe and Jennifer Connelly in this story of the paranoid-schizophrenic Princeton mathematician John Nash, whose equilibrium theories eventually earned the 1994 Nobel Prize for economics.

Waking Life (U.S.): Gen X director Richard Linklater uses a revolutionary rotoscoping technique in transforming live action to animation, producing a trance-like effect that draws us into the narrator's exploring and questioning of the meaning of existence. In searching for the "holy moments" of conscious awakening to deeper realities and their cinematic representation, the film is a mind-trip like no other.

Kandahar (Iran/France): Many of the visual images are moving beyond words, as unforgettable as the desperate journey by Ottawa-based journalist Nelofer Pazira, whose burqa-clad presence carries the film, dramatizing the plight of her Afghan sisters suffering decades of war and oppression.

The Royal Tenenbaums (U.S.): Wes Anderson directs 71-year-old actor extraordinaire Gene Hackman in a wickedly wacky comic tour de force. If Douglas Coupland imagines that “all families are psychotic,” this Manhattan version definitely takes the prize. Co-writer Owen Wilson gets to have more fun too, along with brothers Luke and Andrew, in this weirdest family ensemble of all.

The Shipping News (U.S.): Newfoundland stars as its rugged, salty self in this touching adaptation of the Pulitzer Prize-winning novel. Kevin Spacey is effective as the sad-sack central character of Quoyle, with excellent cast support that includes 71-year old Newfie “rowdyman” acting legend Gordon Pinsent. Here the epiphanies are smaller and quieter, but more affecting and closer to the heart.

2002

Far from having to scrounge to make up a genuinely “top 10” list, I found not enough space for some of the movies I enjoyed most: *Spider-Man*, Steven Spielberg’s two fine features — the ominous *Minority Report* and lighter crime caper *Catch Me if You Can*. The movie version of the hit musical *Chicago* sparkled with “all that jazz.” Steven Soderbergh with the ethereal *Solaris*, while its star George Clooney joined the parade of actor-directors with the intriguing *Confessions of a Dangerous Mind*. Superb independent films also challenged social consciences, notably the Australian *Rabbit-Proof Fence* with Aboriginal actors telling a true story of non-white children abducted by a racist bureaucratic-religious establishment blinded by its own sense of superior benevolence.

On the Canadian side of things, by far the best was the commercial release of the Inuit saga *Atanarjuat*. Winnipeg can claim a connection to the crowd-pleasing *My Big Fat Greek Wedding*, the first independent movie to top US\$200 million in business. In Quebec, a nostalgic tearjerker *Séraphin: Un homme et son pêché* (released in the rest of Canada as *Heart of Stone*). On the arty side is Egoyan’s *Ararat*. But I have a warmer feeling for the unpretentious fare of *Bollywood/Hollywood* and *Rare Birds* (for American William Hurt’s performance). In the dark and disturbing department, Cronenberg’s *Spider* deserves recognition.

Top picks

Atanarjuat: The Fast Runner (Canada): The first-ever Inuit language feature claimed the Cannes festival’s best first film prize in the spring of 2001. It’s an astonishing achievement and an epic story. The most original movie experience of the year was also the best.

The Pianist (Poland/France/UK/Germany): Winner of the Cannes festival’s top prize, this is Roman Polanski’s masterpiece and the year’s most moving story. Of recent Holocaust dramas (*The Grey Zone*, *Max*), this will be remembered as one of the greatest ever.

The Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers (New Zealand/U.S.): It won’t be everyone’s choice, is hardly above criticism, and less innocent fun than Harry Potter, but this homage to Tolkien’s cult classic truly is a towering work. Epic filmmaking on the grandest scale seen to date.

Far From Heaven (U.S.): The New York critics’ circle choice for best film, the year’s most perfectly composed feature is a brilliant peeling away of what lay beneath the plush surfaces of respectable middle-class society in 1950s America.

The Hours (UK/U.S.): Stephen Daldry (*Billy Elliot*) directs from a screenplay by David Hare based on Michael Cunningham's Pulitzer-Prize winning novel. This feast of mostly female acting power, enhanced by a Philip Glass score, weaves a sombre spell of literate cultural anxieties from Virginia Woolf's day to our own.

Adaptation (U.S.): Spike Jonze's follow-up to *Being John Malkovich* is even more clever, wildly inventive and eccentric. The perils of real-life screenwriter Charlie Kaufman (*Confessions of a Dangerous Mind*) and his made-up twin brother (both played by Nicolas Cage) in adapting an unfilmable non-fiction book, *The Orchid Thief*, make for an original treatment that is also outrageously entertaining.

About Schmidt (U.S.): There's never been a better, gentler or wiser movie made about the sorrows of middle-aged male retirement and early widowerhood. This Midwestern tale is full of masterful small touches, but mainly it's a tribute to Jack Nicolson's portrayal of Warren Schmidt, whose best friend turns out to be a six-year-old Tanzanian foster child. That epiphany is a joy to behold after all.

Ivans xtc (UK/U.S.): This harrowing insider's trip exposing the Hollywood dream as a nightmare is dominated by a phenomenal feat of acting by Danny Huston. The son of a legendary studio director plays a dissipated agent based on a real-life character who can no longer summon up any picture in which to believe.

Gangs of New York (U.S.): A flawed film long in the making, yet this sprawling epic by the great Martin Scorsese does pay off with some of the toughest, most potent and politically charged images of the year. For a "native" America whose violent temptations and fears were "born in the streets," this recovery of long-buried Manhattan history could be as revealing as the contemporary shock parody of *Bowling for Columbine*.

Bloody Sunday (UK): A superb recreation of the Northern Ireland massacre of three decades ago that destroyed the hopes of the peace movement. Like the best documentary-like dramatizations inspired by real events, it feels immediate and true to life.

In terms of actual documentaries, apart from the sensationalist *Bowling for Colmbine*, the most deserving of honourable mention tended to focus on the entertainment business in some form: movies themselves — *The Kid Stays in the Picture*, *Lost in La Mancha*; music — *Standing in the Shadows of Motown*, *24 Hour Party People*, *I am Trying to Break Your Heart: A Film About Wilco*; and *Comedian*, which follows Jerry Sienfeld's return to trial by standup.

Although *Atanarjuat* is the only non-English-language film on my list, other excellent features would include: *Italian for Beginners* (Denmark), *The Son's Room* (Italy), *Auberge espagnole*, *L'Adversaire*, *Time Out*, *Under the Sand*, *8 Women* (France), *Talk to Her* (Spain), *Tu Mama Tambien* (Mexico), *Son of the Bride*, *Nine Queens* (Argentina), *Behind the Sun*, *City of God* (Brazil).

2003

I've left out some excellent 2002 films, notably: *The Quiet American*, *Spider*, *Russian Ark*, *Whale Rider*, *Nicholas Nickleby*, *The Dancer Upstairs*, *Nowhere in Africa*. Fine films that didn't make my final cut but deserve honourable mention include: the summer blockbuster *Seabiscuit*, *Lost in Translation*, *Capturing the Friedmans* and *The Station Agent*. Other American independents: *Thirteen*, *Raising Victor Vargas*, *Pieces of April* and *Shattered Glass*, Woody

Allen's *Anything Else* and Tim Burton's *Big Fish*, the comedies *School of Rock* and *Love Actually*, the wonderful animated *Finding Nemo*, the Italian *Good Morning, Night* and Iranian *At Five in the Afternoon*, the inspiring *Gospel of John*, the offbeat British *Dirty Pretty Things*, *I Capture the Castle*, *Bend it Like Beckham*, *The Shape of Things*, and *Calendar Girls*, the American tragedy *House of Sand and Fog* by first-time L.A. director (via Russia and Alberta) Vadim Perelman, and the 19th-century war epics *Master and Commander: The Far Side of the World*, and *The Last Samurai*.

On the Canadian side of the ledger, *Owning Mahowny*, and Sarah Polley stood out in *My Life Without Me* and *Luck*; Callum Keith Rennie in *Flower and Garnet* and *Falling Angels*.

Top picks

The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King (New Zealand/U.S.): The final episode of this justly acclaimed trilogy is also the best and elevates it from cult favourite to classic. A rare case of global mega-popularity coinciding with near unanimous critical praise, including even the intellectual independent-minded New York Film Critics' Circle which chose it as best film.

Elephant (U.S.): Controversial winner of the Cannes festival's top prize, this haunting and enigmatic reconstructed post-Columbine story of teenage violence tearing the surface of suburban American "normalcy" stands in a class by itself (and compared to which Michael Moore's *Bowling for Columbine* is crude propaganda). A masterpiece of arresting composition, though disturbingly without answers.

Code 46 (UK): Michael Winterbottom's glimpse into an imagined Orwellian near future of global corporate-social mind control offers a foreboding vision for fear-obsessed times (and fittingly the 100th anniversary of Orwell's birth). Softened by the affecting relationship between the illicit lovers played superbly by Tim Robbins and Samantha Morton.

American Splendor (U.S.): A groundbreaking fusion of animation, dramatization and real life based on the eccentric rise to comic strip anti-hero status of Cleveland clerk Harvey Pekar, played to perfection by Paul Giamatti, as is the protagonist's equally odd companion, Joyce, by Hope Davis.

City of God (Brazil): A stunning and shocking tour de force of life and death on Rio's meanest streets, this has also put a powerful new Brazilian cinema on the international map.

In America (Ireland/UK) and **In This World** (UK): A tie between two extraordinary movies about emigrant dreams for a better life elsewhere. Jim Sheridan's semi-autobiographical *In America* takes a more sentimental tug at the heartstrings with a story closer to home — it opens with a Canada-U.S. border crossing and closes with a moonlit skyscape of New York City.

Winterbottom goes from strength to strength with *In This World*, filmed in a raw and wrenching quasi-documentary style that follows the attempt by two Afghan cousins in Pakistan to slip illegally across a maze of borders to make it to the mecca of London. Only one of them does in this amazing tale so true to our times.

The Fog of War (U.S.): Master documentary filmmaker Errol Morris's series of interviews with a still cagey Robert McNamara, placed in a context spanning seminal moments in the rise of U.S. hegemony both corporate and global, make a fascinating anti-war statement that's more relevant than ever. Can one be a moral man in the service of power when, as Chomsky so intrepidly exposes, our own states often practice evils while proclaiming good intentions?

The Mother (UK): A challenging London drama about a suddenly widowed older woman who refuses to conform to stereotype and fade into the background, as assumed by her self-absorbed grown children. Instead, matters come to a head when she discovers desire and follows it. Brilliantly and bravely acted by Anne Reid and a top supporting cast.

I Love Your Work (U.S.): This independent feature starring Giovanni Ribisi offers a harrowing journey into a self-destructive, psychotic world of pop celebrity. Ribisi gets great support from German actress Franka Potente as the falling idol's wife, and in smaller roles, Canadian Joshua Jackson and Goldberg's girlfriend, Christina Ricci.

Mystic River (U.S.): Based on the Dennis Lehane novel, what might have been just another crime and punishment story is made into something more through a combination of strong acting and Clint Eastwood's impeccable spare, but atmospheric direction. Kevin Bacon, Sean Penn and Tim Robbins are terrific as the childhood friends, especially Robbins as the unlucky victim turned murder suspect.

21 Grams (US): Talented Mexican director Alejandro Iñárritu's first English-language feature is a bleak and obsessive story of bad luck, betrayal and revenge, with powerhouse acting to match by Sean Penn, Benicio Del Toro, and Naomi Watts. This is Penn's strongest role since *Dead Man Walking*, its menace more subtle and controlled than in *Mystic River*. And Watts' portrait of raw grief and rage is stunning; it's off the charts.

The Barbarian Invasions (Canada/France): Reinventing the ensemble cast from *The Decline of the American Empire*, a greyer, sadder Denys Arcand has fashioned a post-"9/11" parable on the borderlands of the new Rome. While sometimes too glib, an in-joke among Montreal's arty bourgeois elite, it also reaches out to touch universal themes with wit and moments of genuine grace and regret.

The Snow Walker (Canada): Another tie — and a close call with Guy Maddin's strange, surreal *The Saddest Music in the World*, set in Depression-era "Winterpeg" — this heroic saga of Arctic survival directed by American Charles Martin Smith captured for me an essence of the *Canadian* story in its element better than any film since *Atanarjuat*. A tubercular Inuit girl saves a brash blond, blue-eyed bush pilot played by Vancouver native Barry Pepper. Based on a Farley Mowat short story, the land itself has a starring role.

2004

Top picks

A Very Long Engagement (*Un Long Dimanche de Fiançailles*, France): From its first scenes of the horrors and insanity of trench warfare to its astonishing resolution, this epic story of young lovers from Brittany, Manech and Mathilde, separated by the First World War, achieves the stature of a classic. Director Jean Pierre Jeunet touches even the worst tragedy with reprieves of whimsy, hope and grace.

The Aviator (U.S.): A thrilling throwback to the era of grand Hollywood studio pictures, this full-tilt recreation of the early decades of Howard Hughes' exploits — in the air and on the screen before his eccentricities and phobias overwhelmed him — has it all (including one of the best crash sequences ever filmed). Leonardo DiCaprio is up to the mad billionaire's larger-than-life bravado, while Cate Blanchett turns in a terrific Kate Hepburn.

Fahrenheit 9/11 (U.S.): Michael Moore's take on what happened in the United States post- 9/11 failed in its avowed intention of preventing a Bush victory at the polls, but wowed the Cannes festival jury enough to be awarded its coveted *Palme D'Or* prize. Then went on to become by far the most watched and commented on documentary in history.

The Motorcycle Diaries (Argentina/Chile/Peru/U.S.): Brazilian director Walter Salles teams up with Mexican heartthrob Gael Garcia Bernal to bring to life a little-known episode in the young Ernesto "Che" Guevara's passage from middle-class medical student to mythic guerrilla icon. We see a very human Che, not a romantic illusion. And a journey, presented with humour, pathos, eros and empathy, through a South American continent that is fertile ground for the revolutionary impulse.

Spider-Man 2 (U.S.): The year's second highest grossing movie (behind *Shrek 2* and just ahead of *The Passion of the Christ*), this sequel was even better than the original and as good an animated feature as has ever been made. Director Sam Raimi provides an engaging storyline to go along with his brilliant revival of a classic comicbook hero. Tobey Maguire as Peter Parker is simply perfect as the shy, self-doubting teenage saviour of a particular fair damsel (played by Kirsten Dunst) and all New Yorkers in distress.

Vera Drake (UK): A darkly compelling period piece by British director Mike Leigh, this drama of a genial middle-aged housewife and mother who "helps" other women in trouble offers a sensitive, contextually complex treatment of the taboo subject of abortion. The movie effectively evokes the dingy atmosphere of postwar working-class London and a justice system that falls unequally on the rich and the rest.

The Sea Inside (Spain): From Spain, director Alejandro Amenabar presents a compelling drama of life and death issues. The subject is euthanasia and, specifically, the real-life story of Ramon Sampedro, left a quadriplegic by a diving accident. He fights relentlessly, despite loving care and attention, for the right to "die with dignity," whatever his older brother, the church, or the state may say. Extraordinary acting all around, especially by Javier Bardem as the bedridden but mentally tenacious Ramon.

Maria Full of Grace (U.S.): A harrowing Spanish-language account of a Colombian woman ensnared into becoming a drug-running "mule" into the U.S. How she returns a survivor of the New York streets truly requires a belief in something like grace. As the Maria of the title, Catalina Sandino Moreno amazes in her first professional acting role.

Mayor of the Sunset Strip (U.S.): An intimate portrait by George Hickenlooper of gnome-like Rodney Bingenheimer, a late-night L.A. disc jockey whose role in the pop music scene of the past few decades has been huge and equally neglected, does not deserve to share the fate of its oddball "mayor." Exploring a family and cultural story that really is stranger than fiction, it's irresistible, affecting, and immensely entertaining.

Kinsey (U.S.): The year's bravest and most personal biopic tackles the still contentious character and legacy of Dr. Alfred Kinsey, a rather square zoologist of wasps whose move to the scientific study of human sexuality stirred up no end of waspish travails, revelations and stinging rebukes. Among a fine ensemble cast, Liam Neeson is superb as Kinsey, as is Laura Linney playing his wife.

Dramatic honourable mentions:

Sideways, Shaun of the Dead, Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind, Before Sunset, Garden State, Osama, Crimson Gold, Monsieur Ibrahim and the Flowers of the Koran, The Return,

Distant, Since Otar Left, The Manchurian Candidate, Silver City, Friday Night Lights, Finding Neverland, Ray, De-Lovely, Collateral, The Clearing, The Woodsman, Mean Creek, Young Adam, Stage Beauty, In Good Company.

Documentary honourable mentions:

Control Room, Word Wars, Touching the Void, The Story of the Weeping Camel, Supersize Me, What the Bleep Do We Know, My Architect, Bukowski: Born Into This, Aileen: Life and Death of a Serial Killer, Metallica: Some Kind of Monster, Bus 174, The Weather Underground, Dig!, Riding Giants, Incident at Loch Ness, Tarnation.

2005

Top picks

Joyeux Noël (France/Germany/UK/Belgium/Romania): Based on the spontaneous frontline truces that broke out during the first 1914 Christmas of the “war to end all wars,” this extraordinary European co-production is certain to become a perennial Christmastime classic, with a message of hope for humanity amid battlefield horrors.

Brokeback Mountain (U.S.): This western love story with a difference is, bar none, the best American movie of 2005. A great story told with awesome sensibility by Taiwanese master director Ang Lee, made heartbreakingly real through the courageous cowboy odd-couple performances of Heath Ledger and Jake Gyllenhaal.

Millions (UK): Among good movies featuring child actors, this gem of Scottish magic realism from director Danny Boyle cannot be beat. A story of loss, love and mortal dangers guaranteed to melt hearts, it also has a moral to test souls and inspire a global ethic of sharing.

The Constant Gardener (UK): A top-drawer political action thriller based on the John Le Carré novel of love and sacrifice in a dangerous time. Intrigue turns deadly as duplicity and cover-up create an amoral alliance of state and corporate elites with Third World thugs. Ralph Fiennes and Rachel Weisz are superb in the roles of the once mild-mannered British diplomat and the intrepid activist who goes with him to Africa.

Caché (*Hidden*, France/Austria/Germany/Italy): A drama that peers into the troubled conscience of contemporary French society, it also contains one of the most startling scenes in the history of cinema, and an ending that demands careful attention to its clues. Daniel Auteuil and Juliette Binoche are brilliant as the parents under surveillance.

Der Untergang (*Downfall*, Germany): In the 60th year since the end of the Holocaust, this chilling drama of Hitler’s bizarre last days and ignominious fall of Berlin packed a punch, powered by Bruno Ganz’s performance as the demented dictator.

Munich (U.S.): Its final shot implicitly linking Israel’s war on Palestinian terrorism to the post-9/11 U.S. “War on Terror,” Steven Spielberg delivers a morally anguished tour de force that follows the secret death squad allegedly set up by Israeli prime minister Golda Meir to hunt down those responsible for the murder of 11 Israeli athletes at the 1972 Munich Olympics. The movie is inspired by Canadian George Jonas’ controversial 1984 book, *Vengeance*.

The Assassination of Richard Nixon (U.S.): A gripping film of true events, about a depressed salesman turned would-be assassin during the era of Vietnam and Watergate. Sean Penn

delivers one of the year's strongest performances as the protagonist driven to desperate measures.

Syriana (U.S.): Along with *Good Night, and Good Luck*, which looked back to the McCarthy era, this was one of two sharply political George Clooney projects. Audiences will be left with plenty to ponder in this complex tale of mayhem and manipulation from the oil-addicted land of the free to the carbon-corrupted Middle East. Joined by an impressive cast, Clooney gives his best performance ever as a CIA assassin with a conscience who goes out with a bang.

La Neuvaine (*The Novena*, Canada/Quebec): An intense, slow-moving drama about the depths of human despair redeemed by the healing touch of religious belief lived in practice as a prayer of daily life. *The Novena* is a movie for any season and anyone in need of a guardian angel.

Honorable Mentions: *Capote, Crash, Yes, Brothers, Junebug, Moolaadé, Casanova, Prime, North Country, Walk the Line, Turtles Can Fly, Paradise Now, Walk on Water, Nobody Knows, Dear Frankie, Charlie and the Chocolate Factory, Oliver Twist, The Beautiful Country, The Girl in the Café, Match Point, Kiss Kiss, Bang Bang, Mysterious Skin, Look at Me, The Beat that My Heart Skipped, Everything is Illuminated, The Squid and the Whale.*

Documentary picks

Shake Hands with the Devil: The Journey of Roméo Dallaire (Canada): In 2004, the 10th anniversary of the Rwandan genocide, director Peter Raymont accompanied General, now Senator, Dallaire on a visit with his wife back to that haunted country. The result was an insightful, moving testimonial, truly a "must see."

Murderball (U.S.): An eye-opening look at wheelchair rugby as aggressively played by teams of young testosterone-pumped paraplegics. The filmmakers wisely delve into individual characters' stories as well as showing the intense rivalry between Team USA and Team Canada Olympians. From the arena to an army hospital for Iraq war amputees, the action says a lot about both overcoming disability and the temper of our times.

Bob Dylan: No Direction Home (U.S.): Martin Scorsese, America's greatest living director, gives us an intimate, complex retrospective of and by Dylan and his contemporaries on those early years. A feast for the eyes and ears, it explores the mind, heart and soul of a big-city "rolling stone" from small-town Minnesota.

March of the Penguins (France): Wildlife filmmaker and biologist Luc Jaquet and his crew spent an arduous 14 months near a French Antarctic research station capturing the many amazing scenes and sounds of an Emperor penguin colony in order to tell a survival story that is truly stranger than fiction. The English-language version released by National Geographic Films was also enhanced by Morgan Freeman's narration.

Grizzly Man (U.S.): German director Werner Herzog brings his impressive talents to bear in this telling of the reckless exploits of Timothy Treadwell, a blonde Californian surfer who took his obsessions into the remote Alaskan wilds with the declared aim of "befriending" and protecting the grizzlies.

Why We Fight (U.S.): Eugene Jarecki's exposé of America's "military-industrial complex" — a psychological one too — should resonate with a lot of concerned citizens, not only in the world's militarily strongest democracy.

Enron: The Smartest Guys in the Room (U.S.): This movie focuses on another darker side of the American dream as revealed when the Texas-based energy giant Enron collapsed like a house of cards in 2001, taking with it the dreams of thousands of employees and small investors.

Black Coffee (Canada): This critical global history of the aromatic bean is both entertaining and educational, offering a superb survey of coffee's habits from Ethiopia to Brazil, from plantation exploitation and cutthroat international commerce, to consumer-conscious fair trade and shade-grown correctness, from the pleasures of café society and the coffeehouse to contemporary Starbucks-style marketing hype, from a too-frequent legacy of repression and destruction to coffee's ritual role in many (notably African, Arab and Ottoman) cultures.

Scared Sacred (Canada): This film is the result of a five-year journey begun in 1999 by a B.C.-born B'hai with the unlikely name of Velcrow Ripper. Describing that pilgrimage as "searching for the sacred in the scared," his mission was to visit what he calls the "ground zeroes" (including post 9/11 New York and the Middle East) of "a planet that might not get the chance to grow up."

Les Voleurs d'enfance (*Thieves of Innocence*, Canada/Quebec): A searing no-holds-barred look at childhood abuse and a failing urban child protection system in Quebec that got millions talking in a year when *Aurore*, a harrowing rural historical drama about the torture and murder of a young girl by her stepmother, also shocked audiences across la belle province. Victims tell their stories to the camera, while comfortable bureaucrats and politicians convict themselves as the ones called to account. It's unsparing, and compelling if not easy viewing.

Honourable mentions (the first four are Canadian): *The Peacekeepers*, *War Hospital*, *Being Caribou*, *Reading Alistair McLeod*, *Born into Brothels*, *The Wild Parrots of Telegraph Hill*, *Mad Hot Ballroom*, *Watermarks*, *Protocols of Zion*, *Darwin's Nightmare*, *Gunner Palace*, *Ballets Russes*, *Touch the Sound*, *Rock School*, *Word Wars*, *Paper Clips*.

2006

Top picks

Babel (U.S./Mexico): Crossing languages and continents, Alejandro Iñárritu has created an extraordinary statement of the perils of miscommunication in our globalized but still very divided world.

V for Vendetta (U.S./UK/Germany): A razor-sharp political satire and thriller written by the Wachowski brothers that literally blows you away at the end.

United 93 (U.S.): Paul Greengrass's intense docudrama of the last hijacked plane that crashed into a Pennsylvania field on September 11, 2001, brings one to the edge of one's seat from beginning to end.

The Road to Guantanamo (UK): Co-directed by Michael Winterbottom, this is a harrowing examination of some other victims of 9/11 — what happens when four English friends of Pakistani descent become terror suspects in Afghanistan, one is lost in wartime confusion and three wind up in the notorious U.S. prison for "enemy combatants" at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba.

L'Enfant (*The Child*, Belgium/France): This is a heart-wrenching tale of a young couple living by their wits and a baby sold and retrieved.

Volver (Spain): This story of women dealing with life's complications and a mother seemingly returned from the dead shows Pedro Almodovar in peak form. Penelope Cruz is smashing in the lead role.

Fateless (Hungary/Germany/UK): From a screenplay by Imre Kertesz, adapted from his own novel, this remarkable film tells the story of a Budapest teenager who gets rounded up with other Jews and sent to several Nazi concentration camps. Somehow he finds the will to survive the hell of the camps then face the alienation of war's aftermath.

Eve and the Firehorse (Canada): A delightful story of two Chinese-Canadian sisters growing up in Vancouver. The precocious nine-year-old Eve and her experimentation in spirituality across religious and cultural boundaries captures our hearts.

The Journals of Knud Rasmussen (Canada): Based on the observations of the great Danish explorer and ethnographer Knud Rasmussen, the film provides a mesmerizing account of the early clash between shamanistic Inuit tradition and the spreading ways of the Christian white man's culture.

Blood Diamond (U.S.): The best of several high-action movies (*Catch a Fire*, *The Last King of Scotland*) set in Africa, the film manages to entertain as well as to inform about the dirty business involved in the trade in conflict diamonds financing ruthless civil wars. Terrific performances from Leonardo Di Caprio, Jennifer Connelly, and Djimon Hounsou.

Documentary picks

An Inconvenient Truth (U.S.): Based largely on crusading lectures on a looming climate change crisis by former U.S. vice-president Al Gore (who lost that memorably disputed 2000 presidential election to George W. Bush), he proves himself not only an accomplished public speaker, but a compelling global advocate on the most vital long-term issue of our times.

Deliver Us from Evil (U.S.): This film from director Amy Berg exposes another inconvenient truth — one that has sometimes been covered up by the American Roman Catholic hierarchy. Berg follows the path of a former parish priest and notorious pedophile from the scene of his crimes in Northern California to his post-prison exile in Ireland, where she interviews him extensively.

Into Great Silence (France/Switzerland/Germany): This award-winning film shows a deeply uplifting, if little seen and heard, side of Catholic Church practice. It follows the austere daily lives of the Carthusian monks of the 17th century Grand Chartreuse monastery nestled near the French Alps. Director Philip Groning waited over 15 years to get access, filming alone with only natural light, observing a strict way of mostly silent prayer and contemplation in the service of God.

Manufactured Landscapes (Canada): This is an eye-opening perspective on the exceptional photography of Edward Burtynsky as he travels the globe looking at what industrialized manufacturing has wrought, especially on an unprecedented scale in contemporary China. Eschewing conventional notions of what is naturally pleasing to the eye, Burtynsky finds a terrible beauty in the most mechanized processes and altered landscapes, even scrapyards. In doing so, he makes us reflect as well on what we are doing to the environment around us.

La Planète Blanche (*The White Planet*, Canada/France): Stunning photography captures indelible images of a fragile Arctic environment in transition. The film provides an exceptional look at the life cycle of polar bears, among other creatures of the circumpolar North.

Wordplay (U.S.): A surprisingly entertaining look at the enthusiasts of *New York Times* crossword puzzles (including former U.S. president Bill Clinton) and at the competitive intensity of national championships among those who can complete the legendary and fiendishly difficult crosswords in a matter of minutes not hours.

The U.S. vs. John Lennon (U.S.): A fascinating look at the evolution of The Beatles lead singer from rock god to anti-Vietnam War activist along with his wife, Yoko Ono. As the Lennons became more outspokenly political, the paranoid Nixon administration tried repeatedly, and ultimately unsuccessfully, to get them deported from the U.S.

Dixie Chicks: Shut Up and Sing (U.S.): This film follows the ugly reaction back home when the lead singer of the chart-topping country rock band The Dixie Chicks made her infamous aside about being ashamed that President Bush was from her home state of Texas during a 2003 concert in England.

Neil Young: Heart of Gold (U.S.): Transplanted Canadian folk-rock icon Neil Young has become an angry elder American, judging by his album “Living with War” with songs like “Let’s Impeach the President.” But nostalgia, not politics, reigns over this film, shot during a two-night performance by Young at Nashville’s Ryman auditorium.

Memory for Max, Claire, Ida and Company (Canada): Documentary filmmaker Alan King brings his candid, compassionate camera right into the fading lives of a group of patients in a palliative care facility in Toronto.

2007

Top picks

Children of Men (UK/U.S. 2006): This screen adaptation of the P.D. James novel has been described as a “nativity story for the ages.” And in the face of planetary perils, should we not all be thinking about the fate of future generations? The first great movie of 2007.

The Kite Runner (U.S.): The endangered Afghan child actors in this moving realization of Afghan expatriate Khaled Hosseini’s 2003 bestseller of the same name also speaks to our own present predicament. The most emotionally engrossing movie of the year — devastating and overwhelming, but not without hope.

There Will be Blood (U.S.): An uncompromising epic character portrait of a sociopathic California oilman (played by Daniel Day-Lewis in a titanic performance) that is loosely based on Upton Sinclair’s 1927 novel *Oil!*.

The Assassination of Jesse James by the Coward Robert Ford (U.S.): Shot in Alberta and Manitoba, this moody exploration of the American James myth is a brilliant masterwork in which there is surprisingly little violence. Certainly it is a western with a difference — more poetry than gunslinging.

Battle for Haditha (UK): The best of the Iraq War movies to date, this first docudrama comes the closest to bringing home the awful truths on all sides. It not only recreates the true events surrounding the massacre of 24 men, women and children by U.S. Marines in November 2005

in the heart of the so-called “Sunni triangle,” it puts you right in the heart-stopping action/reaction moment by moment.

The Lives of Others (*Das Leben der Anderen*, Germany 2006): This look back at the former Communist East Germany focuses on a devoted Stasi (state security police) officer, Gerd Wiesler who, in the course of his surveillance of a famous playwright and his girlfriend, suffers his own crisis of conscience.

4 months, 3 weeks, and 2 days (Romania): This bleak and raw drama of a young woman’s plight in the dark last years of the Ceausescu dictatorship heralds the arrival of director Christian Mungiu as a major talent.

Pan’s Labyrinth (*El Laberinto del Fauno*, Mexico/Spain/U.S. 2006): Director Guillermo del Toro’s extraordinary rendition of an episode from the Spanish Civil War. The central character is a young girl, Ofelia (Ivana Banquero), who moves between a spellbound underworld and the real one of terror, torture, and death. Her spirit emerges from the nightmare, as has that of Spain itself.

A Mighty Heart (UK/U.S.): A recreation of the events surrounding the horrific videotaped murder of Jewish-American journalist Daniel Pearl in Pakistan in early 2002 after being kidnapped by militant Islamists. Angelina Jolie turns in the best performance of her career as Pearl’s pregnant wife.

Atonement (UK/U.S.): Based on Ian McEwan’s great 2001 novel, the movie is dominated by the tangled relationship between a wronged young man, Robbie (James MacAvoy), and a confused adolescent young girl, Briony (Saoirse Ronan). It also includes one of the finest Second World War sequences ever filmed.

Canadian picks

L’Âge des ténèbres (*Days of Darkness*): This is the extraordinary summation to Quebec’s greatest living director’s trilogy on the modern human condition — following *The Decline of the American Empire* (1986) and the Oscar-winning *The Barbarian Invasions* (2003). If the movie is dystopian and full of mordant satire, it is not heartless, and offers a gentle if nostalgic soft landing evocative of a rustic bygone era.

Away From Her (2006): This heart-rending feature based on an Alice Munro story about an elderly couple coping with one partner’s Alzheimer’s showcases the talents of screen legends Julie Christie and Canadian Gordon Pinsent.

Contre Toute Espérance (*Against All Hope*): The second in Quebec director Bernard Émond’s trilogy on faith, hope, and charity, following 2005’s *The Novena*, focuses on a couple who suffer immense trials. It’s uncompromisingly bleak, but in the end calling for God’s grace as the only hope to go on living.

Congorama (2006): Philip Falardeau’s satire of a Belgian amateur inventor seeking his origins in rural Quebec is an absolute delight, with enough twists and turns to leave one slightly dazed, but thoroughly entertained.

Eastern Promises (UK/U.S./Canada): This harrowing tale of the Russian mob scene in London (England) is only Canadian by virtue of being directed by veteran Canadian cult director David Cronenberg. This one grabs you by the throat and never lets go.

Wrath of Gods (2006): This superb documentary on the chaotic making of the 2006 movie *Beowulf & Grendel* stars Sarah Polley. It is stranger than fiction and really shows what it's like behind the camera defying the weather gods on the windblown sets in Iceland.

Radiant City (2006): Calgarian feature filmmaker Gary Burns turns the camera's unblinking eye on his hometown and the seemingly inexorable, spreading soulless and homogenizing suburbanization going on all around him.

Fugitive Pieces (co-production with Greece): A brave adaptation of Anne Michael's much-loved 1996 poetic novel, this emotionally complex story features Stephen Dillane as the adult main character, Jakob, who wrestles with a tragic past.

Shake Hands with the Devil: This close-to-the-bone flashback drama is based on the acclaimed memoir by Lt.-General, now Senator, Roméo Dallaire, which was subtitled *The Failure of Humanity in Rwanda*. Although filmed mostly on location, it's not quite as good as Peter Raymont's great 2004 documentary on the return of Dallaire and his wife to the places of genocide, or the 2006 Quebec feature *A Sunday in Kigali*.

Breakfast with Scot: A hockey yarn with a difference, this sprightly movie follows the ins and outs when a settled, closeted gay male couple unexpectedly have custody thrust upon them of a precocious nine-year-old.

Documentary picks

The five best documentary series of 2007 were all shown only on television, not in theatres. By far the most monumental — indeed I would say the finest in history — was veteran Ken Burns' 900-minute, seven episode remembrance of the Second World War, entitled simply *The War*, six years in the making and including never before seen footage. It aired on PBS stations but is also available as a DVD set along with an excellent 450-page companion book.

The second is Emmy-winning HBO series, *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee*, a historic chronicle based on the book by Dee Brown, explains how Native Americans were displaced as the United States expanded West.

The third was the remarkable *Why Democracy?* project (www.whydemocracy.net) of 10 separate films by 10 directors from 10 countries, including Canada (*Citizen Sam*, about a day in the life of Vancouver's wheelchair-bound mayor).

Commendable mention should also be made of the environmentally conscious BBC series *Planet Earth* helmed by legendary British filmmaker Lord Richard Attenborough, the BMW-sponsored CNN series *Planet in Peril*, hosted by Anderson Cooper, and the IMAX movie *Hurricane on the Bayou*, narrated by Meryl Streep, on the mostly human-made causes and consequences of the Katrina disaster in New Orleans.

No End in Sight (U.S.): This comprehensive look back at the U.S. invasion and occupation of Iraq to calamitous effect is arguably the best documentary yet made on the Iraq War misadventure.

Heavy Metal in Baghdad (U.S./Canada): This follows the real-life troubles of members of the metal band Acrassicauda (Black Scorpion) from their first concerts in their hometown of Baghdad during the last months of Saddam's regime to their eventual miserable circumstances as refugees in Damascus, Syria.

Body of War (U.S.): This moving work follows the return of American Iraq War veteran Tomas Young, paralyzed from a bullet to the spine. As he struggles to cope with his fate, he begins to question the reasons for the war and evolves into a powerful symbol of anti-war resistance.

Captain Mike Across America (U.S.): This is Michael Moore's best and most honest film yet. In the spirit of keeping the flame burning for change, the movie recalls the 45-day "Slacker Uprising" get-out-the-vote travelling roadshow to 60 cities in 20 battleground states during the crucial last months of the 2004 U.S. presidential election campaign.

SICKO (U.S.): A devastating exposé of Americans' woes with the for-profit health insurance industry. Michael Moore successfully appeals to the conscience of a mass public who are literally sick of a system that shamelessly favours the rich while exploiting the working poor and the middle class.

Iraq in Fragments (U.S. 2006): Director James Longley follows the human predicament of people caught up in a situation not of their making, in Baghdad, in the Sunni south (specifically Naseriyah and Najaf), and in the Kurdish north.

Encounters at the End of the World (U.S.): Expatriate German master Werner Herzog turns his camera to the southernmost continent and focuses candidly on the human inhabitants of the U.S. McMurdo research station on the Ross Sea in the storied heart of Antarctica.

The Ground Truth (U.S. 2006): This delves deeply into the psychological states of American Iraq War returnees, ordinary patriotic men and women soldiers who are now trying to face the aftermath and reconstruct their lives.

Sharkwater (Canada 2006): This remarkable look at the dire plight of the 400-million-year-old species of sharks is truly an eye-opener. Maybe viewers will not learn to love sharks the way Stewart does, but they will certainly come away, not only better informed of the threats to the rapidly diminishing shark populations around the world, but also more conscious of the perils of ecosystem destruction that may also endanger our own survival atop the food chain.

In the Shadow of the Moon (U.S./UK): This magnificent look back at the Apollo space missions uses breathtaking photography and interviews with survivors of the six manned American voyages that landed on the moon from 1969 to 1972,

2008

Top picks

Entre les murs (*The Class*, France 2008): Based on a real teacher's experiences in a multiracial Paris neighbourhood, the film uses three cameras and multiple improvised takes of actual students.

Milk (U.S. 2008): The most acclaimed American film of the year in which Sean Penn gives the performance of his career as Harvey Milk, the country's first openly gay elected politician, who was assassinated by a troubled colleague over 30 years ago.

Slumdog Millionaire (UK/U.S. 2008): Danny Boyle's pre-terrorist Mumbai "Millions" uses child non-actors and dazzling technique to explore human issues in the context of India's and globalization's cultural contradictions of capitalism.

The Dark Knight (U.S. 2008): Back to the shadows of Gotham City, this dark Batman episode from director Christopher Nolan features the late Heath Ledger as “The Joker” in a definitive characterization.

WALL-E (U.S. 2008): The best animated feature I have ever seen tackles planetary issues and manages to be entertaining to people of all ages. Close to a miracle and a triumph for Pixar studios.

The Hurt Locker (U.S. 2008): The best and closest to the action Iraq war film yet, in an invasion/occupation whose cost in blood (hundreds of thousands killed) and treasure (US\$ trillions) continues to rise.

Wendy and Lucy (U.S. 2008): A gritty portrait of a vagabond young woman and her dog in the other America is the ultimate in pure, spare, truly independent filmmaking. Michelle Williams’ Lucy is acting on the rawest edge possible.

Frozen River (U.S. 2008): This border-crossing (St. Laurence Mohawk nation territory spanning Quebec and New York state) drama of human trafficking, Aboriginal-white relations, poverty, crime, single motherhood and more features veteran actor Melissa Leo’s indelible performance.

Gran Torino (U.S. 2008): Clint Eastwood is producer, writer-director, and principal actor in this film about a bitter Korean War vet who gets to know his Hmong neighbours. Can he overcome his bigotry and heal his guilt?

Doubt (U.S. 2008): This shattering adaptation by John Patrick Shanley of his own Pulitzer Prize and Tony-award winning play about religious intolerance in a Bronx Catholic school circa 1964 raises still relevant faith questions.

A Woman in Berlin (“Anonyma-Eine Frau in Berlin”, Germany/Poland 2008): Based on the dirty secret of a real survivor of the raping and pillaging during the Soviet Red Army’s 1945 occupation of Berlin, only discovered and released to great controversy a decade later, this personal account of some ordinary Germans’ suffering is essential viewing.

Revolutionary Road (U.S./UK 2008): It’s the summer of 1955. Kate Winslet and Leonardo Di Caprio play a couple who struggle with their relationship while trying to raise their two children.

Documentary picks

Theatre of War (U.S. 2008): An adaptation of Bertolt Brecht’s masterwork “Mother Courage and Her Children: A Chronicle of the Thirty Years’ War.” It makes brilliant use of archival footage and interviews to bring Brecht’s story to life and to offer profound insights into war, morality, and the politics of theatre.

Taxi to the Dark Side (U.S. 2007): On the scandals of Bagram, Abu Ghraib, and Guantanamo, this winner of the Oscar for best documentary remains a stark reminder of what went wrong, in this case leading to the death by torture in December 2001 of a hapless Afghan taxi driver at the hands of U.S. forces.

Of Time and the City (UK 2008): The great filmmaker Terrence Davies was asked to make a feature marking his hometown Liverpool’s turn as European Capital of Culture. It’s an exquisite mix of archival elegy and sombre reflection, a cinematic urban poem like no other.

Alone in Four Walls (“Allein in vier Wänden”, Germany 2007): Writer-director Alexandra Westmeier, a former TV journalist, breaches walls in this astonishing look inside a Russian “reform school” for juvenile delinquents boys.

Frontrunner (U.S. 2008): While interviewing Afghan women activists director Virginia Williams decided to focus on the remarkable story of medical doctor Massouda Jalal, who ran second to Hamid Karzai at the 2002 Emergency Loya Jirga, and, again as the sole female candidate, contested the 2004 presidential elections.

View from the Bridge: Stories from Kosovo (U.S. 2007): In 2005 the intrepid duo of John Ealer and Laura Bialis went north and south of the divided city of Mitrovica on a risky shoot to find out what was really on the minds of residents away from western attention.

Man on Wire (UK 2007): In August 1974, when the north and south towers of New York’s World Trade Centre were still quite new, and standing, French daredevil Philippe Petit walked back and forth on a swaying chord strung between them 1,3250 feet above the ground.

Young @ Heart (UK 2007): This follows the ups and down of a New England seniors’ choir, ages 74 to 92, who still rock on. Their serenading of prison inmates with Bob Dylan’s “Forever Young” following the death of a member would draw tears from a stone.

At the Edge of the World (U.S. 2008): This feature by Dan Stone plays like an eco-political action adventure as Greenpeace and Paul Watson’s always controversial Sea Shepherd Society recklessly chase down Japanese “scientific” whaling vessels in the southern ocean.

Flow: For Love of Water (U.S. 2008): For all the concern about “peak oil”, crashing crude prices, and who knows what’s next, nothing can survive without supplies of clean fresh water. Many activists see it as the “blue gold” spark for the next generation of worldwide conflicts. Writer-director Irina Salinas makes clear where she stands in a tour d’horizon that convicts World Bank water privatization, bottled-water company execs, Coca-colonization polluters, and a cast of capitalist cons in sheep’s clothing.

Canadian picks

Le Dernier Continent (*The Last Continent*, Canada/France 2007): It’s an enduring record of another extraordinary voyage by Jean Lemire (*The White Planet*) and crew, this time overwintering in Antarctica in an expeditionary vessel and capturing some of the most stunning images you will see in a lifetime.

Ce qu’il faut faire pour vivre (*Inuujutiksak, The Necessities of Life*, Quebec 2008): In this remarkable story filmed on location in Iqaluit, an Inuk hunter, Tiivii — played by Natar Ungalaaq, the star of *Atanarjuat: The Fast Runner* — is forced to leave his family behind when a medical check up on a Canadian supply ship discovers he has tuberculosis (the year is 1952). Entrusted to the care of nuns in a Quebec city sanitorium, he cannot understand French and over months loses the will to live until a concerned nurse brings him together with an orphaned boy patient, Kaki.

C’est pas moi je le jure (“It’s not me, I swear!” Quebec 2008): The 1968 family psycho-drama revolves around the outrageous attention-getting antics of 10-year-old Léon (Antoine L’Écuyer) who escapes his horrible parents, befriending a girl named Léa. From black comedy to hilarity to the politics of parental abandonment, this one is swift and sharp.

Fifty Dead Men Walking (Canada/UK 2008): Ottawa-born director/co-writer Kari Skogland's controversial "inspired by" account of informer Martin McGartland's incredible true story — he survived a 1999 assassination attempt of six point-blank bullets in the head and still lives incognito on the run.

Amal (2007): More like the reversal of fortune in *Slumdog Millionaire*, Amal tells the tale of an honest to a fault auto-rickshaw driver whose coincidental connection with an eccentric billionaire tycoon leads to an uplifting triumph after many trials and tribulations.

Continental – Un Film sans Fusil (*Continental, A Film without Guns*, Quebec 2007): Stéphane Lafleur's loosely linked storyline about four people affected by one man's disappearance enchants the viewer with mystery, moodiness, and marvellous acting.

Maman est chez le coiffeur (*Mommy is at the Hairdresser's*, Quebec 2008): Simone (Céline Bonnier), an aspiring journalist, is a '60s-era mother of three children living the dream of the career-woman two-parent family. In reality she can't deal with the demands of her headstrong daughter Élise or the tone deafness of her out-of-touch husband.

La Brunante (*Twilight*, Quebec 2008): Monique Mercure portrays the elderly Madeleine, who decides to keep her Alzheimer's diagnosis from her family and plans her exit in her beloved Gaspé region. Except she needs a driver to get her there, who turns out to be a troubled, hip musician, Zoé.

2009

Top picks

Der Baader Meinhof Komplex (Germany/France/Czech Republic 2008) This German film exposes the self-destructive vengeance that the rebellious children of the Nazi generation — notably the gang of three, Andreas Baader, Gudrun Enslin, and radicalized journalist Ulrike Meinhof, heading the "Red Army Faction" — sought to wreak on their Americanized "establishments." Nothing is spared in this intense recounting of the homegrown secular terrorism and suicidal impulses that challenged state authority in the late 1960s and 70s.

Karamazovi (The Karamazovs, Czech Republic/Poland 2008): Parallel narratives intersect to mesmerizing effect when a Prague theatre group travels to Krakow in Poland to rehearse a production of Dostoevsky's great novel *The Brothers Karamazov* inside the cavernous Stalin and Solidarity-era steel mill of Nowa Huta.

Das weisse Band – Eine deutsche Kindergeschichte (*The White Ribbon*, Austria/Germany/France/Italy 2009) This German "children's tale" told in retrospect by the village teacher is both a mystery and warning sign. Set in pre-war 1913, hidden crimes and abuses lie at the roots of emerging fascist culture.

Bright Star (UK/Australia/France 2009): A simple seamstress is the "bright star" of the last of the English Romantic poets, John Keats, to the dismay of his worldly friend Charles Brown. Although Keats dies of tuberculosis overseas at age 25, his soulful, yearning verses inspired by this chaste doomed love affair endure in an afterlife of the spirit world

Five Minutes of Heaven (UK 2009): A wrenching revenge/reconciliation drama of the aftermath of Northern Ireland's Troubles. Liam Neeson and James Nesbitt star.

Tokyo Sonata (Japan 2008): This is a penetrating psycho-social drama of family disintegration and rebirth when the patriarch loses his corporation job.

Lourdes (Austria/France/Germany 2009): This fraught journey of faith and fakery to one of the world's most famous shrines provides extra layers of paradox exposing a fundamental malaise in so-called "post-Christian" society

Fantastic Mr. Fox (U.S./UK 2009): Among terrific animated features that included *Up* and *Coraline*, Wes Anderson's wondrous quirky twist on traditional stop-motion technique is in a class by itself. Based on the children's book by British World War Two spy Roald Dahl.

The Men Who Stare at Goats (U.S. 2009): George Clooney stars in this ferociously funny satire about actual early Cold War-era U.S. defence fantasies — revived in a 2004 British novel — about a top secret "New Earth Army," with Jedi-like powers surviving into the messy quagmire of the Middle East.

The Imaginarium of Dr. Parnassus (U.S./Canada/France 2009): As the weary travelling circus master with debts to pay to the devil, Christopher Plummer holds together Terry Gilliam's wildly a-kilter salvaging of Heath Ledger's last unfinished role.

Documentary picks

The Yes Men Fix the World (U.S./France 2009) Masters of the global spoof, Mike Bonnano and Andy Bichbaum take on big state-corporate entities that shirk ethical responsibilities and exploit with impunity. Whether it's the victims of the chemical disaster in Bhopal, India, or those left behind by rapacious "development," their stories are heard in provocative ways that poke fun at the follies of the great.

Ahead of Time (U.S. 2009) This is the life story of Dr. Ruth Gruber, one of the most intrepid journalists of the last century. A Holocaust survivor living in Israel, she experienced and reported on many of its most traumatic events first-hand. Born Jewish in Tsarist Russia, she was a relentless overachiever with a passion for the Arctic and a command of world affairs few could match. The film uses both sprightly conversational interviews from 2007 when she was already 96, and an archival treasure trove of stories from a lifetime of personal witness.

Afghan Star (Afghanistan/UK 2009) Rarely do we see aspects of Afghan society and culture that are about their hopes and fears, not ours. This follows the real-life dramas of four contestants in the country's most popular singing contest on the independent Kabul-based Tolo TV channel.

Reporter (U.S. 2009) Another reminder, from HBO Films, of the heroic purpose of journalism dedicated to not allowing us to forget the nameless victims of conflicts raging off the radar in forsaken places. The camera follows renowned New York Times foreign correspondent Nicholas Kristof from the killing fields of Darfur to those of the eastern Congo.

The Cove (U.S. 2009) One of the most abhorrent seagoing practices takes place in the Japanese coastal town of Taijii where every effort is made to conceal the capture of dolphins for marine exhibitions using methods that result in mass slaughter.

Food Inc. (U.S. 2008) Closer to home are the practices of the "industrial food system" that dominates what most North Americans eat. The film is a plea for democratic action to defend citizens' rights and for ethical choices at all stages of production and consumption.

Fierce Light: When Spirit Meets Action (Canada 2008) A compelling global exploration of “soulforce” and “truthforce” in the traditions of non-violent resistance from Gandhi to Martin Luther King. The death of a close friend and “rebel angel” impels him to seek out examples of varied forms of spiritual energy in practice, especially in places scarred by war and injustice.

H2Oil (Canada 2009) Shannon Walsh’s sobering look at our toxic backyard should be required viewing for Canadians. She focuses on the enormous quantities of freshwater required for tarsands extraction and the health effects of environmental contamination on the downstream Aboriginal community of Fort Chipewyan where the local physician stands up to the pressures of official displeasure.

Capitalism: A Love Story (U.S. 2009) Here Michael Moore achieves genuine pathos in telling the stories of those who have been left out of the American dream, or cast aside by a distorted, remorseless economic system that has betrayed its own promises.

Anvil! The True Story of Anvil (U.S. 2008) A candid tragic-comic homage to a Toronto heavy metal band, Anvil, which carries on despite the slings and arrows of outrageous misfortune. While the band’s core of Steve “Lips” Kudlow and Robb Reiner could be seen as hapless 50-something losers, the film’s embrace of their plight puts them in a generous human light as people not giving up on their dream.

Canadian picks

Lost Song (2008) An intimate portrait of a couple with a newborn infant, whose marriage disintegrates during a summer sojourn in the woods beside a lake. She is an opera singer falling into post-partum depression. He commutes from the city, leaving her to the mercies of his interfering mother.

Before Tomorrow (*Le Jour avant le lendemain*, 2008) The story of the struggle for survival of nomadic Inuit in the Canadian Arctic before the arrival of the white man. Co-directors Marie-Hélène Cousineau and Madeline Piujuk Ivalu worked in collaboration with an Inuit women’s collective and community in the Nunavik region of northern Quebec to realize a film of stark beauty that reclaims an ancient people’s history.

Polytechnique (2009) Denis Villeneuve’s masterful black-and-white recreation of the events surrounding the shooting deaths of 14 young female engineering students in Montreal provoked major debate in Quebec months before the 20th anniversary of the massacre.

All Fall Down (2009) This unique, archival collage of words, voices, and images centres on the troubled, shortened life of writer George Lachlan Brown, an unhappy outsider and conspiracy theorist. Combined with elements of historical docudrama, it conveys a sense of the ravages of time across a Canadian landscape that sometimes exists only in memory or the imagination.

The Legacy (La Donation, 2009) Bernard Émond is Quebec’s most humanist spiritual director, influenced by the late Polish master Krzysztof Kieslowski. This last film of a trilogy brings together a dying doctor in an asbestos mining town and a big-city physician seeking respite from emergency ward pressures.

Sticky Fingers (*Les Doigts Croches*, 2009) A co-production with Argentina, partially filmed there, this Ken Scott film stars Quebec leading man Roy Dupuis as leader of a gang of six thieves, five of whom are caught following a \$2 million heist. Whether thieves can mend their ways is the question posed by this sparkling, comedic tour de force.

Dédé à travers les brumes (2009) Sébastien Ricard gives an outstanding performance as André (Dédé) Fortin, lead singer of the Quebec band Les Colocs, including a Saskatchewan Cree Indian among its members, that rose to fame during the 1980s and '90s.

Madwoman of God (*Folle de Dieu*, 2008) The founder of the Ursuline order of sisters in Quebec, Marie de l'Incarnation, played brilliantly by Marie Tifo, is the subject of this exceptional National Film Board documentary by Jean-Daniel Lafond (husband of Governor General Mikail Jean). It's an incredible life story that burns with passion at every turn.

George Ryga's Hungry Hills (2009) Ryga, born Ukrainian and poor in northwest Alberta, is best known for his plays dealing with Aboriginal peoples' issues. This brilliant adaptation of one of his early novellas discovers another side of his restless passion for those on the margins of society.

Fathers and Guns (*De Père en flic*, 2009) "Flic" is French slang for the cops. In this tangled affair, a father and son who can barely tolerate each other are paired as a police undercover team tasked with rescuing a kidnapped fellow officer by busting a biker gang through surveillance of its fatcat lawyer played by the reliably excellent Rémy The film works best as a sharp parody of these dysfunctional relationships.

Honorable mention: *Pour toujours les Canadiens* (*Forever, the Canadiens*), on the 100th anniversary of the foundation of the storied Montreal Canadiens hockey franchise. A rebellious 17-year-old junior hockey player, a distant father working on a documentary of the club's first century, a 10-year-old boy waiting for the pre-Christmas miracle of a kidney transplant, a wise old zamboni driver, hockey legend Jean Beliveau, members of the 2008-2009 team on and off ice — all are woven into a touching narrative that integrates a passionate love of the game into the fabric of contemporary family life and Quebec society.

2010

Top picks

Des Hommes et des Dieux (France) A handful of greying, white male French monks who follow the rule of St. Benedict want only to serve God and their Muslim neighbours in a small Algerian village. A profound meditation on faith and fraternity in the face of a violent Islamist insurgency directed against foreign western culture as well as a corrupt government and its military forces.

Carlos (France/Germany) Director Olivier Assayas's epic multi-country and multilingual chronicle of the career of Venezuelan-born terror mastermind Ilich Ramirez Sanchez, known as Carlos "the Jackal," has the kind of breadth and depth that fully justifies every one of its absorbing 330 minutes.

Hereafter (U.S./UK) Clint Eastwood at 80 alternates between and ultimately brings together three unusual narratives in which the possibilities of near-death or afterlife experiences haunt the main characters. The movie raises questions about the fragility of human relationships, the pathways and boundaries of human life, and the yearning for hopeful connection, without being religious.

The Social Network (U.S.) David Fincher's remarkable account of how an arrogant Harvard student, Mark Zuckerberg, became the world's youngest "accidental billionaire" at age 26 through the appropriation of a co-invention of Facebook.

Incendies (Canada/France) Adapted from a celebrated play by Wajdi Mouawad, the story begins with the last wishes of an Arab woman who came to Canada after escaping tragic circumstances in southern Lebanon. Her son and daughter, twins Simon and Jeanne, are rocked to learn that they have a father and brother living in the Middle East

The King's Speech (UK/Australia) This finely wrought period piece offering historical gravitas, personal overcoming of adversity, and not least humour, is about George VI (Elizabeth II's father), who was afflicted by a speech impediment that was a severe handicap for a wartime king.

Buried (Spain/US/France) A powerful movie ratcheting up the suspense in which all of the action takes place in an underground, coffin-like wooden box illuminated only by a flickering lighter, small flashlight and the glow of a cell phone screen. Star Ryan Reynolds plays a hapless American truck driver kidnapped in Iraq, manhandled, bruised and bloodied, buried in the box in an unknown location and held for ransom by Iraqi insurgents

The Debt (UK) Helen Mirren is a tower of strength in John Madden's *The Debt* as Rachel Singer, one of three Israeli secret agents tasked with hunting down and eliminating an infamous Nazi war criminal.

The Dry Land (US) A powerful story of the legacy of the Iraq War on returning veterans coping with injuries that are physical, psychological and spiritual.

Black Swan (US) Controversial and critically acclaimed, Darren Aronofsky's high-wire melodrama of vicious passions backstage at the ballet is truly something to behold. Natalie Portman's Nina is the new star of the New York stage, chosen to dance the role of Swan Queen in Tchaikovsky's famous 1875 ballet Swan Lake. She is the ideal white swan, but can she "let go" and play the black as well with the temptress allure that a rival Lily (Mila Kunis) possesses in spades?

Documentary picks

Armadillo (Denmark) An astonishing, close-up look at the war in Afghanistan from the perspective of young Danes sent to a remote, forward operating base.

Marwencol (U.S.) In April 2000 Mark Hogancamp, an alcoholic with a transvestite fetish for ladies' shoes, was attacked by five youth outside a bar in Kingston, New York. Severely beaten, he had to relearn how to function. As therapy he began constructing in his backyard a miniature fantasy world of a Belgian Second World War town, Marwencol, out of Barbie dolls, Kens, GI Joes and other figures, done exactly to one-sixth scale, and indentifying himself with the soldier hero. Stranger than fiction, amazing beyond words.

Restrepo (U.S./UK) Combat journalists Sebastian Junger and Tim Hetherington were embedded for 15 months with a platoon of young American soldiers in Afghanistan's rugged Korengal valley, later abandoned after the death of some 50 troops. The movie captures the emotional experience of war at a visceral, gut-level and what it does to these raw recruits caught in an alien environment they have no understanding of except as a shooting range.

The Tillman Story (U.S.) When former pro football star Pat Tillman was fatally shot by his own troops during a firefight in Afghanistan in 2004, it was portrayed by military commanders and the Bush administration as a heroic battlefield sacrifice. Made out to be a poster boy for patriotism, the opposite of what he would have wanted, his strong-willed family has waged a fight for truth against a monumental cover-up and denial of responsibility.

The Pipe (Ireland) This is the extraordinary story of the people of Rosspport's battle against Shell's plans to build a natural gas pipeline from an Irish offshore field through their land.

Teenage Paparazzo (U.S.) Paparazzi are those annoying hordes of pushy prying photographers that hound celebrities and often plague film festivals. Imagine when a fast-talking L.A. kid named Austin Visschedyk decides to be one at the age of 13.

Exit Through the Gift Shop (U.S./UK) Thierry Guetta is a zany, obsessive photographer and amateur filmmaker living in Los Angeles who gets hooked on the countercultural movement of urban "street art" that some may consider furtive graffiti by vandals, but which attracts serious admirers and money.

Waiting for Superman (U.S.) Absorbing investigation of chronic failings in the American public education system and the obstacles to changing the status quo. It follows the struggles of actual families to get their children into good schools with good teachers and what has to happen so that "no child left behind" is not just another empty promise.

Inside Job (U.S.) Narrated by Matt Damon, Charles Ferguson's dissection of the 2008 financial meltdown, its causes, costs and aftermath, indicts a long line of culprits from governments in thrall to deregulation ideology, to the corporate high rollers of casino capitalism, colluding credit rating agencies, lobbyists and "experts" who encouraged the wild speculation that left taxpayers with a staggering hangover of toxic debt.

Cave of Forgotten Dreams (Germany/U.S.) Veteran filmmaker Werner Herzog brings 3D effects to this extraordinary look at the wonder and meanings of fragile prehistoric art discovered inside France's Chauvet caves, which are open only to scientists.

Canadian picks

The Whistleblower (Canada/Germany) About the real-life scandals involving UN peacekeepers and other internationals in sexual misconduct and trafficking of women during the Balkan wars of the 1990s. The heroine is a Nebraska policewoman (brilliantly played by Rachel Weisz) on contract to a security firm, later put in charge of "gender affairs" at the UN mission, who puts herself on the line to expose as well as to serve and protect.

Les amours imaginaires (*Heartbeats*) It's a seductive romp about close friends Francis (played by Dolan) and Marie who compete for the affections of a beautiful young man in the bohemian cultural world of Montreal.

L'enfant prodige (*Child Prodigy*) Most Canadians have probably never heard of Quebec pianist-composer André Mathieu who, as the "Canadian Mozart," took the world by storm as a child in the 1930s but died forgotten at age 39 after years of alcoholism and depression. His genius and tragically short life is masterfully brought to the screen by writer-director Luc Dionne.

Force of Nature: The David Suzuki Movie: Interspersed with well-chosen clips from Suzuki's "legacy lectures" after turning 75 are details of his troubled childhood and often turbulent career. Through understanding the interdependence of the biosphere and the consequences of our

actions, Suzuki emerges as a voice of optimism about human capacities to live in harmony with the natural world.

Rush: Beyond the Lighted Stage: Directors Sam Dunn and Scot McFayden deliver a terrific account of the four-decade longevity of the Toronto rock foursome Rush, whose brand of hard-driving and high-pitched progressive rock has attracted legions of devoted fans.

Last Train Home (Canada/China) First-time Chinese Canadian Lixin Fan's moving portrait of a migrant family's struggles to return home at least once a year for the Chinese New Year turns the spotlight on the plight of the growing millions of such workers who have moved to the cities to earn a living, leaving behind their rural homes and often their children.

Defendor An unusual and affecting movie about an oddball character, Arthur Poppington (played by American star Woody Harrelson), who dresses up as a fantasy superhero in a homemade costume out to battle the evil designs of "Captain Industry." But rather than being an object of pity, Arthur emerges as the gallant protector of a streetwise teenage runaway.

Barney's Version (Canada/Italy) Paul Giamatti gives a terrific performance as the incorrigible television producer and ladies' man Barney Panofsky in Richard Lewis' high-spirited adaptation of Mordecai Richler's celebrated Canadian novel.

A Shine of Rainbows (Canada/Ireland) The story of a beaten-down orphan boy who gets a chance when a kind, caring woman chooses him for possible adoption and brings him home to remote, rugged Corrie Island off the Irish coast.

Score: A Hockey Musical: Writer-director Michel McGowan's irrepressible if hokey ode to our national sport seems more aimed at a hometown audience that probably prefers arenas to theatres. Fortunately, Noah Reid is perfectly cast as the sweet-faced pacifist home-schooled 17-year old hockey phenom Farley Gordon who rises to the pro level, then drops out, and still gets the girl Eve (Allie MacDonald). The story may be a bit silly and contrived but this is a movie that requires no work to be enjoyed.

2011

Top picks

The Tree of Life (U.S.) Although Terrence Malick's epic ode to the universe through the prism of a 1950s Texas Catholic family upbringing mystifies some, it is an immensely rich and profound work of art.

In a Better World (Denmark) The deserving Oscar winner for best foreign-language film, Susanne Bier's remarkable drama revolves around the strained relationship between two fathers and their troubled sons, misfit schoolmates who act out in revenge.

The Kid with a Bike (Belgium) Eleven-year-old Cyril is left in an institution after being abandoned by an uncaring single father to whom he nonetheless desperately tries to return.

Hugo (U.S.) Asa Butterfield plays the orphaned Hugo Cabret, who lives in a 1930s Parisian train station where the gruff, disillusioned old man he encounters turns out to be the pioneering magician-filmmaker George Méliès.

The Artist (France/Belgium) Michel Hazanavicius's audacious gamble in making a silent black-and-white melodrama about the passing of the silent era in Hollywood features Jean Dujardin and Bérénice Bejo, who give splendid performances as the falling and rising stars.

The Descendants (U.S.) When his wife is left in a coma from a boating accident, middle-aged Honolulu real-estate lawyer Matt King (George Clooney) is confronted with multiple family dilemmas, most importantly raising his two daughters.

The Ides of March (U.S.) Clooney again, this time both directing and starring as a high-sounding liberal Democrat governor vying for his party's presidential nomination. Ryan Gosling, Paul Giamatti and Seymour Philip Hoffman are terrific as well.

Kinyarwanda (Rwanda/U.S.) This powerful drama set during the 1994 genocide sees a teenage girl at the centre of interrelated stories in which Muslim leaders offer sanctuary to the hunted of all faiths, including a Catholic priest.

The Devil's Double (Belgium) British actor Dominic Cooper commands the screen in the dual role of the psychotic Uday Hussein, Saddam's putative heir, and his coerced body double, Latif, a veteran of the Iran-Iraq war.

Countdown (South Korea) This dynamite story features two actors in top form as a debt collector who needs an organ transplant from a fugitive con woman.

The Journals of Musan (South Korea) A shy refugee from North Korea struggles in the margins of his adopted capitalist society. He seeks solace in reaching out to a young woman in an evangelical church choir and in the companionship of a small dog he found abandoned.

Honourable mentions: A third superb Korean movie is Chang dong-Lee's *Poetry*, Steven Spielberg's *War Horse*, Woody Allen's wonderful nostalgia trip *Midnight in Paris*, *Margin Call* shines an especially penetrating light on the high-level corruption of a Wall Street firm, Clint Eastwood's *J. Edgar*, and Michael Fassbender's raw performance deserves accolades in the controversial *Shame*. Another acting tour de force is Ralph Fiennes' savage, contemporary adaptation of Shakespeare's *Coriolanus*.

Documentary picks

Into the Abyss, A Tale of Death, A Tale of Life (Germany/Canada) Director Werner Herzog is unequalled in his probing of the human spirit, in this case the dark aftermath of a shocking and senseless triple murder in small-town Texas.

Hell and Back Again (U.S./UK/Afghanistan) Armed with only a Canon camera, Danfung Dennis captures the close-up reality of combat faced by 25-year-old Capt. Nathan Harris in Afghanistan.

Love Hate Love (U.S.) Directors Dana and Don Hardy tell the stories of three families devastated by monstrous acts of terrorism — New York's 9/11, the "7/7" London attacks of 2005, the 2002 Bali bombing — who have chosen to help others in memory of their lost love ones rather than be consumed by bitterness.

Life in a Day (UK/U.S.) On July 24, 2010, people around the world were invited to upload videos taken that day to YouTube. The edited result, fashioned by Kevin Macdonald and his team from over 80,000 submissions from 192 countries, is a groundbreaking achievement that provides an unparalleled composite picture of the global human family at a moment in time.

The Flaw (UK) There have been other accounts of the 2008 financial crisis and its consequences but none more enlightening and entertaining than this incisive examination of the systemic flaws at its root.

Position Among the Stars (The Netherlands) Entirely without narration, this is a remarkably candid and intimate look at three generations of an Indonesian family in migration from the countryside to the slums of Jakarta.

Buck (U.S.) Buckaroo (“Buck”) Brannaman was the inspiration behind *The Horse Whisperer* starring Sundance founder Robert Redford, and worked with him in making that movie. Along with an older brother, he was a child prodigy at rope tricks and in the corral, which masked a violent upbringing by an abusive alcoholic father. In overcoming a lot, Buck has become a gentle soul and family man, a master handler of horses who travels the country giving clinics to owners and riders.

An African Election (U.S./Switzerland) A fascinating and illuminating perspective on the hotly contested 2008 presidential election in Ghana. Going behind the scenes of the campaign and disputed vote, it’s a gripping inside look at the political combatants, the fraught social dynamics, and the institutions of a fragile democracy put to the test.

Love During Wartime (Sweden) Director Gabriella Bier followed the mixed marriage of Jasmin, an Israeli Jew, and Osama (“Assi”), a Palestinian Muslim, through years of legal-bureaucratic obstacles, hardships and threats. Both are artists who persevere with the support of their families but who, unable to live together in their homelands, must struggle to make a new life in Europe.

Project Nim (UK/U.S.) James Marsh tells the bizarre story of “Nim Chimpsky,” a chimpanzee taken from its mother and “adopted” by a human family in a dubious 1970s experiment by a Columbia University psychology professor.

How to Die in Oregon (U.S.) Physician-assisted suicide, euthanasia, or whatever “death with dignity” euphemism “right to die” advocates choose seems destined to be a subject of growing public policy contention as our population ages. This is a sobering examination of the experience in Oregon.

Honourable mentions: *The Green Wave* about the repressed popular resistance to the stolen 2009 Iranian election; *This is Not a Film*, the smuggled clandestinely made home movie of Iranian director Jafa Panahi under house arrest in Tehran; *Tahrir 2011*, about elements of the Egyptian revolution in progress; *How to Start a Revolution*, about the spread of strategies for non-violent democratic struggle against dictatorships as advocated by an unassuming American academic Dr. Gene Sharp; *Paul Goodman Changed My Life*, about one of America’s most controversial, outspoken, radical thinkers from the 1940s till his death in 1972; *The Last Mountain*, about the fight to save a threatened piece of Appalachia from coal mining devastation. Special mention to the monumental 15-hour *The Story of Film: An Odyssey*, directed and narrated by UK scholar Mark Cousins.

2012

Top picks

Lincoln (U.S) Steven Spielberg’s *Lincoln* is a magnificent achievement on all levels, about the American president’s struggles with his decision to emancipate slaves.

Zero Dark Thirty (U.S.) Conceived by Kathryn Bigelow and journalist/screenwriter Mark Boal before the daring assassination of Osama bin Laden took place, it’s a brilliant, riveting account

of the manhunt for the terrorist mastermind. A warning: the early torture scenes are extremely disturbing, though justifiable in context.

A Separation (Iran) This intimate portrait of a Tehran couple's marriage coming apart probes deeply into family relationships strained by the social pressures of gender, class, religious and cultural divides.

Amour (France/Austria/Germany) An elderly, loving couple living quietly in Paris face the extremities of life choices when one suffers the soul-destroying ravages of a stroke and dementia. This movie won't warm your heart, but it will give you pause, and the performances by screen legends Jean-Louis Trintignant and Emmanuelle Riva are superlative.

To the Wonder (U.S.) However flawed, this semi-autobiographical story (Terrence Malick, writer and director) of a man and a woman falling in and out of love, and a priest struggling with faith, unfolds with a poetic cinematographic grace that is in a class of its own.

Argo (U.S.) Ben Affleck proves himself to be an accomplished director in this top-notch dramatization of the CIA scheme to rescue the American diplomats who had escaped being held hostage during the 1979 Iranian revolution — with the crucial covert help of Canada's ambassador Ken Taylor and his staff as well as the connivance of a Hollywood producer.

Everyday (UK) Filmed over an actual period of five years with documentary-like realism, this is a spare, yet deeply affecting portrayal of a family's daily struggle to cope with the incarceration of the husband and father, finding moments of joy and relief amid the pain of separation.

Beasts of the Southern Wild (U.S.) This film conjures up a haunting, post-Katrina mystical universe on the flood-prone shore of the Louisiana bayou that transports one to a place of disaster and dreams, as seen and voiced by a six-year old child.

Death of a Superhero (U.K. 2011) Andy Serkis may be best known as the "Gollum" character in the Ring and Hobbit trilogies, but this is his best role, playing a melancholy psychiatrist who, in getting through to a suicidal, cancer-afflicted teenager, also heals himself.

In the Family (U.S. 2011) Actor-director Patrick Wang's quietly moving story of a small-town Texas family torn apart when one same-sex partner dies. Unassuming, independent films such as this easily get overlooked.

Shadow Dancer (UK/Ireland) No ordinary spy and terrorism thriller, it centres on the relationship between a young mother caught up in IRA family connections, and a sympathetic British intelligence officer. An edge-of-one's seat master class in storytelling and suspense.

Mercy (Norway/Germany) This wrenching drama explores the crisis of a German family working in the North Sea oilpatch of northern Norway when a shocking event during the polar night alters their lives.

Honourable mentions: The James Bond thriller *Skyfall*, Christopher Nolan's *The Dark Knight Rises*, *The Impossible*, the harrowing true story of a family's survival of the devastating Christmas 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami.

Documentary picks

The Act of Killing (Denmark/Norway/UK) Former death-squad killers from the 1965 Indonesian massacre of alleged communists and dissidents freely re-enact for the camera their heinous deeds, in grisly and often bizarre detail.

Death Row (Germany/U.S.) Here Werner Herzog tackles the subject of capital punishment within America's prison-industrial complex through extraordinary intimate conversations with four death-row inmates.

Mea Maxima Culpa: Silence in the House of God (U.S.) Alex Gibney tackles the sexual abuse crisis in the Catholic Church, concentrating on the case of a much-admired priest in the Milwaukee archdiocese who for decades was able to prey on boys at a school for the deaf despite the fact that his crimes were known to members of the hierarchy and, indeed, the Vatican.

The Dust Bowl (U.S.) This four-hour Ken Burns film that aired on PBS puts a human face on the disastrous consequences of drought and poor agricultural practices in the hardest hit areas of the Midwestern plains during the Dirty Thirties.

Chasing Ice (U.S.) James Orlofski's icy travelogue follows intrepid landscape photographer James Balog and his assistants on an arduous multi-year effort to document the startling retreat of glaciers and ice sheets from Alaska and Montana to Greenland and Iceland.

Ai Wei Wei: Never Sorry (U.S.) A fascinating portrait of China's leading artistic dissident and iconoclast. We need to hear more about the courageous individuals who are challenging the orthodoxies of a corrupt dictatorship.

The Kingdom of Mr. Edhi (Belgium/Spain 2011) The world is full of remarkable persons one seldom hears about. Two of these are an aging Pakistani couple, Abdul Sattar Edhi and his wife Bilquis. Eschewing any government or outside support their Edhi foundation provides sanctuary and succor to impoverished women in distress, such as those suffering from abuse or mental illness.

The Queen of Versailles (U.S.) A jaw-dropping story of the ill-timed Florida plans of a super-rich couple, billionaire time-share king David Siegel and his much younger trophy wife Jacqueline, to build the biggest and most opulent dream house in America, until the 2008 crash threw them a curve.

Searching for Sugarman (Sweden/UK) Swedish director Malik Bendjelloul tells the incredible story of 1970s Motown musician Sixto Rodriguez who, after several great but commercially unsuccessful albums, disappeared from view. But when a bootleg copy of his politically charged lyrics made it to South Africa, his mythical, apparently posthumous, figure became bigger than Elvis or the Beatles—an icon to anti-apartheid youth.

Marley (UK/U.S.) When legendary Jamaican musician Bob Marley died at a relatively young age in 1981, he and his band, The Wailers, had already made their unique reggae style into a worldwide phenomenon. Scottish director Kevin Macdonald's definitive screen biography delves into the circumstances and complexities of character that made him into such a phenomenon.

The Ambassador (Denmark 2011) If you think Michael Moore is a nervy provocateur, meet gonzo Danish journalist and filmmaker Mads Brügger. Using his real name to play the part of a mercenary envoy of Liberia to the Central African Republic, he risks life and limb to surreptitiously record the blatant corruption of African elites.

Words of Witness (Egypt/U.S.) The Arab upheavals since 2011 have given rise to a number of eyewitness documentary treatments. Following a remarkable young female journalist, Heba Afify, into the squares and the streets, filmmaker Mai Iskander provides a compelling and visually arresting insight into Egypt's revolution and troubled aftermath.

Honourable mentions: *Samsara, 5 Broken Cameras, The Gatekeepers, How to Survive a Plague, Burn, Detropia, The Imposter, Leviathan, Revolution, The Fruit Hunters, Big Boys Gone Bananas, One Day After Peace, The Invisible War, Bully, The Reluctant Revolutionary, Undeclared, On the Mat, Ping Pong, The House I Live In, You've Been Trumped, Darwin, Love Marilyn, Ethel, Sons of the Clouds, First Position, Town of Runners, Under African Skies, The Flat, The List, Planet of Snail, Side by Side, Surviving Progress.* Also deserving mention are two superb docs on the case of the wrongfully convicted West Memphis three — *Paradise Lost 3: Purgatory* and *West of Memphis*.

Canadian picks

Rebelle (*War Witch*): We know about the horrors of child soldiers and genocidal African conflicts from the news, but writer-director Kim Nguyen's astonishing story of an abducted Congolese convent girl who becomes the charmed sex slave of brutal rebel commanders makes it an intensely visceral experience

The World Before Her: Director Nisha Pahuja offers an eye-opening exploration of the lives of young women in India between past and future, contrasting the high-pressure gloss of a national beauty pageant with the equally unsettling training and indoctrination of girl recruits to an ultra-nationalist Hindu movement that rails against modern western influences.

Stories We Tell Actor-director Sarah Polley finds a gentle, reserved mastery in this intimate telling of her own difficult personal history upon discovering that she had a different biological father than her siblings.

Laurence Anyways (Canada/France) French actor Mevil Poupaud is convincing in the daunting lead role of a thirty-something college teacher with a devoted girlfriend. His coming out as transsexual and transition to being a woman tests the depths of others' acceptance and love.

The End of Time Stephen Hawking's *A Brief History of Time* is more famous than read. I hope that won't be the fate of veteran documentarian Peter Mettler's globe-spanning and truly mind expanding cinematic exploration—one that moves among the myriad ways in which moments of time are experienced and measured; its mysteries probed from the beginnings of consciousness to the limits of modern science.

Tout ce que tu possèdes (*All That You Possess*) A melancholic literature professor Pierre refuses a large inheritance from his wealthy, estranged father and tries to avoid coming to terms with a daughter from an abandoned youthful liaison.

Still A poignant love story about an elderly couple trying to stay in their rural New Brunswick farm home in the face of health challenges and bureaucratic obstacles.

Inch'Allah (Canada/France) Director Anais Barbeau-Lavalette's Middle East drama centres on a young Quebec doctor living in Jerusalem who also volunteers at a Red Crescent clinic in Ramallah in the occupied West Bank, where she becomes close to one of her patients, a young pregnant woman.

Midnight's Children (Canada/UK) Although a rare film review in *The Economist* calls it "a good book that makes a bad film," the writer concedes that "there is much to admire" in the first half of this adaptation of Salman Rushdie's sprawling, epic novel. The core of the overlapping storylines centre on the contrasting destinies of two boys switched after birth at the stroke of India's independence and the creation of Pakistan.

Sisters and Brothers (2011) This caravan of tragi-comic sibling rivalries and fraught relationships had me in stitches. The situations range from boisterous, ribald and profane to empathetic and strangely affecting.

2013

Top picks

Before Midnight (U.S.) In the third of a trilogy following *Before Sunrise* and *Before Sunset*, Julie Delpy and Ethan Hawke as the Franco-American couple Celine and Jesse continue to develop their relationship with an honesty and maturity that makes this one of the great modern screen romances

Blue is the Warmest Colour (*La Vie d'Adèle chapitres 1 et 2*, France/Belgium) Extremely controversial and provocative. At the same time the fearless female performances by Adèle Exarchopoulos and Léa Seydoux as young women in a stormy love relationship are truly astonishing.

12 Years a Slave (U.S./UK) Chiwetel Ejiofor gives a commanding performance as Simon Northup, a black freeman and talented violinist from upstate New York who is kidnapped and sold into slavery on a southern plantation before being rescued and returned to his family.

American Hustle (U.S.) David O. Russell's take on the 1970s "Abscam" caper in which the FBI pressured a couple of con artists to carry out a sting operation entrapping prominent politicians is both sharply observed and hugely entertaining.

Inside Llewyn Davis (U.S./France) The Coen brothers have created some of the most memorable characters to grace the screen and they have done it again with this offbeat drama about a struggling folksinger in the New York scene of the early 1960s that produced the likes of Bob Dylan.

The Hunt (Denmark/Sweden) Directed by Thomas Vinterberg and winner of many awards, you won't see a more searing look at what happens when a teacher is falsely suspected of abusing children under his care.

The Past (*Le Passé*, France/Italy) An utterly absorbing family drama that also explores a troubled marital relationship. What follows is a tangled affair of resentments, secrets and deceptions in which no one is innocent and the past remains hauntingly present.

All is Lost (U.S.) J.C. Candor's tale of tragedy at sea has almost no spoken words and only one role, that of "Our Man" in a battered sailboat adrift in the Indian Ocean. But in the hands of aging film icon Robert Redford that is all it needs.

Nebraska (U.S.) Bruce Dern is crotchety, addled alcoholic Woody Grant, who's determined to cash in on one of those million-dollar direct-mail marketing scams. He drives his sharp-tongued wife and two sons crazy. But when the hapless David (Will Forte) humours the old man by taking him on a roadtrip to see relatives and collect the non-existent prize, the upsets and letdowns are softened in the end by a turn that puts a smile on their faces.

The Rocket (Australia) This features child actor Sittiphon ("Ki") Disamoe, a former Laotian street kid, as Ahlo, a surviving twin who loses his mother, then with his father is forced to move when their valley is flooded by a big hydroelectric project undertaken by the Communist government of Laos and an Australian company.

Honourable mentions: *Fruitvale Station, Philomena, Rush, Mud, Dallas Buyers Club, The Wolf of Wall Street*

Documentary picks

The Kill Team (U.S.) The harrowing details that director and cinematographer Dan Krauss discovers about a group of rogue American soldiers who hunted Afghan civilians deliver a devastating commentary on what can go wrong in war.

Dirty Wars (U.S.) Rick Rowley's scathing inquiry into how counter-terrorism wars are increasingly being waged, notably using high-tech unmanned drones. Using the work of investigative journalist Jeremy Scahill the film focuses in particular on the secretive U.S. Joint Special Operations Command (JSOC) and its "kill lists," which can include U.S. citizens.

The Square (U.S./Egypt) Jehane Noujaim's brilliant account of the revolutionary and post-revolutionary upheavals in Egypt. Her intrepid filmmaking team goes to the streets to put a human face on the protests.

Inequality for All (U.S.) Directed by Jacob Kornbluth, the film follows the dynamic and irrepressible former Clinton cabinet member and Berkley professor Robert Reich as he astutely dissects where the American economy has gone wrong for so many, leading to income inequality levels similar to those that preceded the Great Depression.

Blood Brother (U.S.) Steve Hoover's intimate and intensely personal portrait of what childhood friend Rocky Braat has accomplished in India, working with children affected by HIV/AIDS.

Gasland Part II (U.S.) Josh Fox's first investigation of the U.S. "fracking" boom has led to a rapid increase in controversial shale gas and oil developments. Along with the touted benefits of the new energy economy is a dark side of groundwater contamination affecting people and communities and a sometimes nasty corporate campaign against those daring to go public with their concerns.

Valentine Road (U.S.) This HBO production examines the 2008 classroom shooting death of a teenage gay/transgender teenager, Larry King, by a classmate in Oxnard, California.

How to Make Money Selling Drugs (U.S.) This is a provocative look at the massively profitable drug trade and the multiple failures of the "war on drugs." Particularly bracing are the candid testimonies of former bigtime kingpins who have served their time.

Oxyana (U.S.) A harrowing look at how a drug abuse epidemic has destroyed lives in the West Virginia community of Ocean, battered by a depressed economy since the closure of the region's coal mines. The once vibrant town has been dubbed "Oxyana" for the high levels of dependence and criminality associated with the misuse of the prescription pill Oxycontin.

When I Walk (U.S./Canada) A moving and uniquely intimate look at the disability of multiple sclerosis by a director living with it every day. Jason DaSilva was a talented 25-year-old documentary filmmaker when he was suddenly afflicted by the degenerative disease. Rather than bemoaning his progressive debilitation, he courageously turned the camera on himself, documenting his difficult struggles to cope.

Honourable mentions: *A River Changes Course, God Loves Uganda, West of Memphis, Sound City, 20 Feet from Stardom, In God We Trust, 99% The Occupy Wall St. Collaborative Film, Powerless, Born This Way, Which Way is the Front Line from Here? The Life and Time of Tim Hetherington.*

Canadian picks

Gabrielle: Writer-director Louise Archambault cast Gabrielle Marion-Rivard, who suffers from Williams syndrome, in the title role of an afflicted young woman overcoming the odds to form a loving bond with a group-home choral companion.

Watermark: Mesmerizing imagery is used to explore the essential role of water in human civilization and the human-made threats to the world's water resources.

Our Man in Tehran: Directors Drew Taylor and Larry Weinstein do a first-rate job of revisiting Canada's role in the 1979-80 Iran hostage crisis and telling the real story behind the "Canadian caper." Call it the un-*Argo*.

The End of Time (2012) Examining the nature of time from myriad perspectives, veteran Peter Mettler delivers a haunting meditation on the meaning and mysteries of time from the frontiers of scientific research to traditional cultural understandings to the rhythms of nature and the harmonics of the universe.

My Prairie Home: Chelsea McMullen directs this National Film Board production about transgendered singer-songwriter Rae Spoon who overcame an abusive Alberta childhood to become a unique solo performer and musical traveler from sea to sea.

Vic & Flo Saw a Bear: Two ex-convicts share a backwoods cottage and test their relationship, until a menace from the past intrudes with fateful consequences.

Blackbird (2012) A troubled adolescent in small-town Nova Scotia, living with his hunter-gunowning father, makes an online threat that gets him arrested and ignites a firestorm of suspicion. Bullied at school, then targeted in juvenile detention, Sean has to prove he needs to be understood, not feared.

Empire of Dirt: The story of a Toronto single mom and recovering addict struggling to raise her rebellious teenage daughter. When she decides to return to her First Nations reserve she must face the further challenge of repairing her relationship with her own mother.

L'Affaire Dumont (2012) The disturbing, true story of Michel Dumont, a Montreal-area man and divorced father of two, who was falsely accused and convicted of sexual assault in a sensational botched 1990 trial, enduring three years of abuse as a sex offender in prison. It's a powerful recognition of the human fallout from a miscarriage of justice.

Le Méteore: Writer-director François Delisle employs a striking combination of visual images and voice-over narration to convey the fragile relationships between the incarcerated Pierre (François Papineau), serving a lengthy sentence for a hit-and-run fatal accident, his elderly mother who visits him weekly, and the woman with whom he dreams of being reunited.

When Jews were Funny: Alan Zweig's survey of American Jewish humour then and now contends, through interviews and archival footage, that a passing generation of great comics — most Yiddish-speaking immigrants from Europe who had known oppression — has given way to a more complacent culture.

Fight Like Children, Die Like Soldiers (2012) Director Patrick Reed, a director and producer on the 2004 documentary *Shake Hands with the Devil*, which accompanied senator and former General Romeo Dallaire back to those killing grounds, follows Dallaire as he visits affected conflict zones, tangles with the labyrinth bureaucracy of the UN, and pushes tirelessly for political action.

2014

Top picks

A Second Chance (Denmark) A searing story of two very different families — one law-biding and middle class; the other crime and drug-ridden — and their infant sons. A redeeming humanity is the “second chance” that follows devastating tragedy and loss.

Blue Ruin (U.S./France 2013) Director Jeremy Saulnier’s ultra-low budget revenge-murder drama is co-written with best friend Macon Blair. Compared to the mainstream American horror genre, this is an absolute masterpiece (96 per cent on rottentomatoes).

Birdman (U.S.) Alejandro González Iñárritu’s black comedy is a whip-smart tale of a fading Hollywood superhero’s theatrical quest for respect.

The Lego Movie (U.S./Australia/Denmark) One of the smartest animated features ever made, this is a delight for all ages. Our guide in the LEGO universe of favourite characters is Emmet, a typical construction worker mini-figure, who goes up against the controlling schemes of the evil Lord Business. (More than just kids’ stuff, the global passion for this ingenious Danish invention is also evident in an excellent 2014 documentary *Beyond the Brick: A LEGO Brickumentary*.)

Force Majeure (Sweden/France/Norway) A razor-sharp satire of gender expectations takes an upper-class Swedish family on a luxury ski holiday out of their comfort zone to upsetting effect (perhaps for some male audience members too).

Foxcatcher (U.S.) This true story of wrestling triumph and tragedy features a trifecta of great performances by Steve Carell as the moody billionaire John du Pont, and the Olympian Schultz brothers Mark (Channing Tatum) and David (Mark Ruffalo), whom he lures into furthering his ambitions.

Ida (Poland/Denmark/France/UK 2013) A heart-wrenching story of a nun novitiate’s journey of discovery and Jewish heritage in early 1960s Poland. Along with luminous black-and-white cinematography, Agata Trzebuchowska is amazing as Anna, the religious young woman who must come to terms with terrible secrets of a Nazi wartime past.

Whiplash (U.S.) A terrific two-hander about a virtuoso student drummer (Miles Teller playing for real) and his foul-mouthed, hard-driving instructor (J.K. Simmons), who pushes their abusive relationship to a place beyond musical limits.

Interstellar (U.S./UK) It’s the rare sci-fi blockbuster that merits critical kudos. Matthew McConaughey stars as the father, chosen for a fated galactic mission, whose parental love may be the only force of “quantum entanglement” to save a dystopian earth.

Honourable mentions: *The Imitation Game*, *The Theory of Everything*, *Leviathan* (Russia), *Winter Sleep* (Turkey), *Selma* and *A Most Violent Year*, *Mr. Turner*, *Two Days, One Night*, *Still Alice*, *American Sniper*, *The Homesman*, *The Past*, *Snowpiercer*

Documentary picks

The Look of Silence (Denmark/Finland/Indonesia/Norway/UK) Joshua Oppenheimer’s *The Act of Killing* was an extraordinary examination of the impunity enjoyed by perpetrators of the 1965-66 Indonesian genocide. This follow-up focuses on the victims’ families as they encounter the

killers of their loved ones — seen through the eyes of an optician and his elderly parents whose older son was among the massacred

Citizenfour (Germany/U.S.) Laura Poitras' pointed exposé of the national security surveillance state. Ironically she had to move to Germany to be able to tell this risky undercover story that includes whistleblower Edward Snowden's sensational revelations about the secretive, and deceptive, U.S. National Security Agency's massive snooping on citizens the world over.

The Overnighters (U.S.) This intimate look at the dark human side of the shale energy boom in North Dakota focuses on the polarizing efforts of a local pastor to shelter troubled migrants, and packs a late punch that leaves one reeling.

Virunga (UK/Congo) A penetrating and profoundly affecting exploration of the challenges facing the protectors of Africa's famous national park that is home to an endangered population of mountain gorillas.

Return to Homs (Syria/Germany) Filmed under high-risk circumstances during three years of Syria's ongoing savage civil war, writer-director Talal Derki does an outstanding job of portraying its effects through the different experiences of several young men. Homs has been one of the worst affected cities under siege from repressive regime forces.

Above All Else (U.S.) An exceptional story of ordinary citizens' resistance to the corporate steamroller of Big Energy, specifically the case of TransCanada's legal-political machinations employing colluding state power and "eminent domain" expropriation to build the southern leg of the controversial Keystone XL pipeline project over the concerns and objections of affected landowners in east Texas.

Life Itself (U.S.) This CNN film brings to the screen some of the memorable highlights from the career of late, great movie critic Roger Ebert, drawing on his eponymous 2012 autobiography.

Last Days in Vietnam (U.S.) Director Rory Kennedy, youngest child of Robert F. and Ethel Kennedy, was born after her father's assassination during the 1968 presidential campaign in which he was a leading voice of opposition to the Vietnam War. An award-winning filmmaker, she has produced the most complete, revealing and agonizing account of the panicked, chaotic final weeks of that war as North Vietnamese forces closed in on the besieged capital of Saigon.

Cesar's Last Fast (U.S.) Bobby Kennedy also has a connection to this moving film, by Richard Ray Perez using some footage from the late Lorena Parlee, that provides revealing insights into the courageous, and at times contentious, leadership of Cesar Chavez, whose California campaign for farm workers' rights galvanized a movement for civil rights and social justice, supported by activists and key political figures like Kennedy.

The Yes Men are Revolting (U.S.) Approaching middle age, the irrepressible agit-prop duo of Mike Bonanno and Andy Bichlbaum are more reflective about how much their sometimes zany antics — fake news conferences impersonating corporate heavies are a favourite — can do to bring about a fairer world on issues from human rights to economic and climate justice.

2015

Top picks

Son of Saul (Hungary) An unforgettable Holocaust drama like no other — a vision of hell from the point of view of a Hungarian member of the Auschwitz-Birkenau *sonderkommandos* (Jewish prisoners forced to do the death camps' dirty work).

Inside Out (U.S.) This Disney Pixar animated triumph is a jumble of memories and emotions that jostle and collide inside the head of an 11-year-old girl, Riley, as she moves with her family from the Midwest to San Francisco.

Leviathan (Russia) This saga of injustice takes place in an isolated village on the shores of the Barents Sea where the bleached skeleton of a whale stands as a metaphor for the corruption of state and church that picks society's bones clean.

Spotlight (U.S.) Director/co-writer Tom McCarthy shines a sobering spotlight on the scandal of clerical sexual abuse of children that plagued the Boston archdiocese, covered up by the church hierarchy until exposed by the Boston Globe's dedicated team of investigative reporters

The Big Short (U.S.) Adam MacKay helms a terrific ensemble cast in this brilliant adaptation of the Michael Lewis book about how a collection of outsiders and oddballs outsmarted Wall Street by shorting (i.e. betting against) the corrupt subprime mortgage market that triggered the second biggest financial crash in history.

Carol (U.S.) Based on Patricia Highsmith's 1952 novel, director Todd Haynes' story of a forbidden romance between a rich, older, married woman and a young New York shopgirl achieves a striking emotional depth and intelligence thanks to superlative, nuanced performances by Cate Blanchett and Rooney Mara, as well as masterfully evocative cinematography.

Dancing Arabs (Israel/Germany/France) This compelling drama from Sayed Kashua's semi-autobiographical novel penetrates the faultlines of a divided society when a West Bank Palestinian boy and an Israeli girl fall in love.

Room (Canada/Ireland) With a screenplay by Emma Donoghue adapted from her acclaimed novel, director Lenny Abrahamson brings a sensitive touch to this moving story of an abducted young woman who gives birth to a son in confinement and lives to protect him for five years before escaping. Brie Larson and Jacob Tremblay are extraordinary as mother and child.

Me and Earl and the Dying Girl (U.S.) A trio of Pittsburgh high-school seniors learn about life and loss, marvellously played by Thomas Mann and RJ Cyler as movie-making misfit buddies, and Olivia Cooke as the afflicted girl.

Star Wars: The Force Awakens (U.S.) Everything about "Episode VII" is epic, and, as importantly the effects, are accompanied by a story that reconnects to the magic of the original trilogy.

Honourable mentions: *Mad Max: Fury Road*, *Macbeth*, *Brooklyn*, *Dheepan*, *Trumbo*.

Documentary picks

Salt of the Earth (France/Brazil/Italy) This luminous homage to the work of renowned photographer Sebastião Salgado, co-directed and written by his son, Juliano Ribeiro Salgado, and German master Wim Wenders, offers a remarkable window on the human condition.

Racing Extinction (U.S./China/Hong Kong/Indonesia/Mexico/UK) Oscar-winning director/oceanographer Louie Psihoyos leads an intrepid crew in a globe-spanning investigation, sometimes involving risky undercover operations, of human activities from resource depletion to climate change, that threaten the survival of other species in this “anthropocene” age.

Democrats (Denmark) Director Camilla Nielsson gained behind-the-scenes access to the protracted, often tense, negotiations over a new constitution for Zimbabwe that took place between the party of autocrat, Robert Mugabe, and the main opposition party.

(T)ERROR (U.S.) This film is the first to secretly probe and expose the shady details of an undercover FBI counterterrorism “sting” operation against several Muslim suspects

Welcome to Leith (U.S.) A chilling account of how notorious white supremacist Craig Cobb and a band of neo-Nazi supporters attempted to take over a tiny town in North Dakota, intimidating the longtime local residents until they fought back.

Meru (U.S.) The Himalayan summit of Mount Meru is considered the world’s ultimate climbing challenge and this captures the extraordinary attempts to conquer it by a three-man team, finally successful in 2011. Their personal stories are as compelling as the cinematography is stunning, fully justifying the movie’s tagline “Believe in the impossible.”

Haida Gwaii: On the Edge of the World (Canada) This exploration of the British Columbia coastal islands delves deeply into their significance as the homeland of indigenous cultures facing the modern challenges from resource development threatening ecosystems and ways of life. The resilience of the Haida in overcoming “cultural genocide” and the preservation of some of the earth’s most beautiful natural habitats strike notes of hope in this gorgeously filmed feature.

Something Better to Come (Denmark/Poland) Director Hanna Polak devoted 14 years to following the fate of Yula from girlhood to young adulthood. Yula and her alcoholic mother are encountered on society’s extreme margins among those whose home is Europe’s largest landfill outside of Moscow.

TransFatty Lives (U.S.) When diagnosed with ALS, Patrick Sean O’Brien, a popular New Jersey DJ nicknamed “TransFatty,” didn’t withdraw into despair. Instead, he had the camera turned on himself in a journey that has included both terrible challenges and the joys of becoming a new father.

Becoming Bulletproof (U.S.) More than a movie about people struggling with disabilities, this engaging feature shows what they can do *making* their own movies. The filmmaking collaborative Zeno Mountain Farm runs actors’ camps in which disabled participants learn how to produce short films, including a shoot’em-up western in the one delightfully showcased here.

Honourable mentions: *How to Change the World, This Changes Everything, Listen to Me Marlon, Going Clear: Scientology and the Prison of Belief, Hitchcock/Truffaut*

2016

Top picks

La La Land (U.S.) From its soaring opening on a traffic-choked Los Angeles freeway to its last wistful note, writer-director Damien Chazelle's dreamland story grabs your heart. At its centre is the relationship between Mia, aspiring actress and playwright, and Seb, a purist jazz pianist. Emma Stone and Ryan Gosling have terrific screen chemistry in the lead roles.

Moonlight (U.S.) An extraordinary depiction of an African-American boyhood to manhood on the mean streets of Miami. The story, adapted from the play "In Moonlight Black Boys Look Blue," is that of a diminutive, bullied son of a drug-addicted single mother, who wrestles with his identity and sexuality in a rough and tough world.

Manchester by the Sea (U.S.) A deeply affecting story of familial love and loss that centres on the character of Lee Chandler, who has withdrawn into self-imposed isolation following tragic circumstances. That world of private hurt is broken open when Lee's older brother dies suddenly and he is entrusted with the guardianship of his high-spirited teenage nephew.

Arrival (U.S.) Quebec director Denis Villeneuve brings a remarkable humanistic quality to this science-fiction epic in which the world is confronted with the arrival of giant alien spaceships in a dozen scattered locations around the planet, including one in Montana and several in Russia and China.

Embrace of the Serpent (Colombia/Venezuela/Argentina) The haunting account of explorations by Europeans in the Amazon wilderness, drawing on the diaries of Theodor Koch-Grunberg. This tale of strange encounters, both harrowing and mystical, involves shamans and Aboriginal survivors of imperial exploitation, weird jungle cults, and the search for a rare plant promising sacred healing.

Rams (Iceland/Denmark/Norway/Poland) Two strong-willed Icelandic brothers and sheep farmers have held a grudge and haven't spoken for 40 years, despite living next to each other. Their prized rams compete fiercely for top honours until the outbreak of a deadly disease in their valley upsets everything and forces a fraternal response to stave off disaster.

The Birth of a Nation (U.S.) An audacious attempt to reclaim the classic 1915 film title for the freedom struggles of African Americans, this stirring recounting of the violent 1830s slave revolt led by charismatic preacher Nat Turner was unfairly pushed aside after allegations surfaced over the controversial past of its writer-director and lead actor, Nate Parker. It deserves to be seen as a milestone in African-American cinema.

Sing Street (Ireland/UK/U.S.) Writer-director John Carney's semi-autobiographical story of teenagers who form a band in 1980s Dublin is the most enjoyable movie I saw in all of 2016.

The Innocents (France/Poland) Originally titled *Agnus Dei*, director Anne Fontaine brings to life a disturbing episode from the end of the Second World War when some of the nuns in a Polish convent were raped by advancing Red Army soldiers.

Closet Monster (Canada) This is the story of a troubled, artistically inclined Newfoundland teenager. Growing up questioning his sexuality, he creates an imaginary safe space that acts as a shield from the misunderstandings of others, including his single father.

Honourable Mentions: The Obama era is coming to an end as Trump takes over, but last year saw the release of two nostalgic features—Vikram Gandhi's *Barry*, about his time at New York's

Columbia University, and Richard Tanne's *Southside with You*, about a day in the life of the future president's budding 1989 summer romance with Michelle when he was still a Harvard law student. Others include *Hell or High Water*, *Zootopia*, *Finding Dory*, *The Jungle Book*, *Moana*, *Kubo and Two Strings*, *The Red Turtle*, *Long Way North*, *Cafard*, *Window Horses*.

Documentary picks

O.J. Made in America (U.S.) Much has been written about the story of former football star O.J. Simpson, his sensational 1994-95 murder trial, shocking acquittal and sorrowful aftermath. 2016 saw two excellent productions recounting the events that created a media firestorm, both made for television. The FX channel presented a dramatization *The People Vs. O.J. Simpson* as part of its American Crime Story series. Even better and more complete was this definitive nearly eight-hour documentary treatment directed by Ezra Edelman. Beyond a masterful exploration of the many details in question, it speaks to the continuing issues of race and class in a divided America.

Fire at Sea (Italy/France) Gianfranco Rosi's striking observation of the impact of the refugee crisis on the tiny Italian island of Lampedusa provides a window into these urgent and compelling events that is less about dire statistics than the intimate human stories behind the headlines.

Tower (U.S.) An extraordinary account of the seminal 1966 mass shooting at the University of Texas in Austin. Seamlessly blending archival footage and interviews with striking animated recreations using the technique of digital rotoscoping, the film makes a powerful statement about the phenomenon of gun violence that, a half-century later, haunts America more than ever.

Voyage of Time: Life's Journey (France/Germany/U.S.) Here Texas director Terrence Malick tackles nothing less than the origins and meaning of the universe, of earth's existence, of the appearance and evolution of life and the human prospect.

After Spring (U.S.) An eye-opening perspective of life inside Jordan's Zaatari camp, the world's largest concentration of Syrian refugees, with a population of over 80,000.

Before the Flood (U.S.) Narrated by Leonardo DiCaprio, this globe-spanning exploration of the effects of anthropogenic climate change and the ecological threats from environmental pollution doesn't hesitate to call out the skeptics and deniers, including U.S. President Donald Trump.

Into the Inferno (UK/Austria) Master filmmaker Werner Herzog teams up with volcanologist Clive Oppenheimer for a fascinating examination of volcanic activity on our largely molten planet, and the mythologies and bizarre beliefs which have arisen from such eruptions.

Sonita (Germany/Switzerland/Iran) The engaging profile of a spirited young woman growing up as an Afghan refugee in Iran. An aspiring rap musician, she fends off traditional family pressures for an arranged marriage in order to pursue her dreams.

Weiner (U.S.) A penetrating look at the rise and mostly falls of disgraced former New York City Democratic Congressman Anthony Weiner. The aptly named Weiner brought himself down by inviting a notorious "sexting" scandal, repeatedly, including during a mayoral bid after resigning his congressional seat. In granting the filmmakers unprecedented behind-the-scenes access, he also can't seem to control his urges, to the exasperation of his wife, Huma Abedin, who also happens to be a longtime top aide to Hillary Clinton. The damaging political postscript to this

documentary exposé is that during the 2016 presidential election campaign, when Abedin finally separated from him, the FBI's investigation into hers and Weiner's emails became linked to Clinton's email woes.

Koneline: Our Land Beautiful (Canada) Director Nettie Wild captures the intense feeling of contrasting ways of life affecting the Tahltan First Nation in their traditional territory of northwestern British Columbia, which is also host to major and sometimes controversial resource extraction enterprises.

Honorable mentions: *When Two Worlds Collide* tells the dramatic story of what has been unfolding in the Peruvian Amazon.

The worst refugee and migrant situation since the Second World War will continue to be a major documentary subject. Especially informative is the two-hour examination, *Exodus*, produced for the PBS program Frontline.

Violence in the form of guns, police and prisons was a hot topic for American filmmakers in 2016. Among the titles: *Under the Gun, Newtown, Midsummer in Newtown, Do Not Resist, Solitary, The Return.*

Gleason is a deeply moving account of a former American football star and his family coping with the ravages of ALS and turning their ordeal into something positive for others.

Life, Animated is a remarkable family story of the ingenious way a severely autistic son learns to communicate through the years and in the transition to adulthood.

Kids and adults will marvel at *The Eagle Huntress*, which follows the exploits of a 13-year-old Mongolian girl who, under her father's guidance, becomes the first female to master the traditional skill of hunting with golden eagles in rugged mountainous terrain.

2017

Top picks

First Reformed (U.S.) Veteran director Paul Schrader's wrenching drama about existential ethical and political choices in a faith arena. Ethan Hawke gives a surpassing performance as an anguished former military chaplain turned pastor wrestling with private demons while also confronting larger issues of social sin as he ministers to a small historic church that is slated for closure.

The Square (Sweden/Germany/France/Denmark) This savage satire of the contemporary art world also exposes social divisions and pricks the elite pretensions of a gullible, well-heeled crowd of benefactors.

Loveless (Russia/France/Germany/Belgium) This bleak family drama takes place in Moscow, where 12-year-old Aloysha, an unwanted child, is staying with his resentful, distracted mother, who is embroiled in bitter divorce and custody proceedings with his father. Not an easy movie to watch, but a deeply affecting portrait of the human and social deficits that accumulate when love is lacking.

Lady Bird (U.S.) This is the best reviewed American movie of 2017, and deservedly so. Actress and screenwriter Greta Gerwig, moving into the director's chair, excels at telling

this semi-autobiographical story of Sacramento Catholic high school senior Christine 'Lady Bird' McPherson as she begins to spread her wings. Saoirse Ronan is a standout.

The Big Sick (U.S.) Co-written by the husband-wife team of Kumail Nanjiani and Emily Gordon, the film has the ring of authentic experience. Nanjiani essentially plays himself as an aspiring Chicago comedian (and part-time Uber driver) who has to fend off his traditional Pakistani-American family's efforts at an arranged marriage.

Call Me By Your Name (Italy/France/Brazil/U.S.) This luminous adaptation of the André Aciman novel is perhaps the year's most poignant love story. During a northern Italian summer the talented son of an American professor of Greco-Roman culture becomes drawn to a handsome research assistant who comes to live with the family for six weeks. A situation fraught with potential for heartache is handled with great sensitivity, eliciting exceptional performances.

A Ghost Story (U.S.) A hauntingly supernatural tale of love, loss and the inexorable movement of time. When a woman abruptly loses her husband in a fatal car accident, she is traumatized by grief but also visited by intimations of his presence in the afterlife — visible to us as a spectre covered in a white sheet with two black eyeholes. In this place of their memories are the marks of the transience of human lives, of the spirits of the past, the ever-changing present, and of speculations stretching into an unknowable future.

The Shape of Water (Canada/U.S.) A mute cleaning woman falls in love with an amphibian-man held captive in a secret 1960s Cold War laboratory. Aided by a troubled neighbour, an African American female co-worker, and a scientist spy who disobeys orders, that bond prevails over the sinister agents of both Uncle Sam and the Kremlin. An adult fairy tale where waters run deep, it's a visual and acting triumph.

Dunkirk (UK/Netherlands/France/U.S.) There was no bigger screen epic than this retelling of the extraordinary events of May-June 1940 when over 300,000 British and French troops, surrounded by Hitler's invading armies and crammed on to the beaches of the Belgian port of Dunkirk, were rescued in a daring cross-channel operation that involved great numbers of small civilian boats. The horror and the heroism are on full display.

The Disaster Artist (U.S.) In 2003 the weird and mysterious Tommy Wiseau, a wannabe actor living in San Francisco, spent millions of his own money and connected with another aspiring actor, Greg Sestero, to make a god-awful melodrama called *The Room*. But in one of those turns of fortune, tagged as "the worst movie ever," it's gone on to become a cult phenomenon. James Franco directs and stars as Wiseau in this hilarious but also oddly sympathetic telling of the making of *The Room*.

Honourable Mentions

Baby Driver (U.S.) Writer-director Edgar Wright delivers a fantastically entertaining crime thriller with Ansel Elgort full throttle in the lead role.

Blade Runner 2049 (U.S./UK/Hungary/Canada) Quebec director Denis Villeneuve pulls off a stunning sequel to the iconic original sci-fi dystopia, and the cinematography by Roger Deakins is superlative. Welcome back Harrison Ford too as an elderly “replicant.”

Mudbound (U.S.) A strong acting ensemble brings to life this riveting story of tragic racial divides in rural Mississippi as two Second World War veterans return to their family’s farms.

Get Out (U.S.) African American writer-director Jordan Peele scored a breakout success with the sharp satire embedded in this interracial horror movie with a difference.

Novitiate (U.S.) The deeply observed 1960s story of a young woman pursuing a religious vocation, the crucible of personal decision coinciding with a time of great change within the church.

Documentary picks

Faces Places (Visages Villages, France) This delightful collaboration between octogenarian master filmmaker Agnès Varda and gonzo photographer JR. captures images of ordinary French people and their life, then celebrates these through large-format black-and-white prints put on striking display, the process enlivened by the impromptu banter between Varda, JR and their subjects.

Last Men in Aleppo (Denmark/Syria) Directors Feras Fayyad and Steen Johannessen provide an extraordinary window on the death-defying work of Syrian “white helmets” — unarmed civilian first responders — trying to save lives in the besieged areas of the city of Aleppo (which was Syria’s largest) during bombardment from regime and Russian forces.

Intent to Destroy (U.S.) The first great genocide of the 20th century was that of Armenians in the crumbling Ottoman Empire, beginning 1915 during the First World War. Master documentarian Joe Berlinger presents a multi-layered perspective on these terrible events and the subsequent denials by the Turkish state and its apologists.

Tomorrow (*Demain*, France) This is an enlightening and empowering 2015 film about meeting global environmental and socio-economic challenges through innovative, locally based solutions. As the filmmakers explore practical examples in a number of countries, anyone looking for positive alternatives will be inspired.

Chasing Coral (U.S.) An extraordinary exploration of the damaging effects of ocean temperature rise and acidification on coral reefs around the world. Using time-lapse photography, director Jeff Orlowski and his team (*Chasing Ice*) capture some of the most stunning undersea images ever put on the screen, and the scientific implications for the planet are equally compelling.

Makala (France) A close-up observation of the arduous life of a young man in the Democratic Republic of Congo. We watch his labours as he makes charcoal, then travels on foot with a huge load to the city where he hopes to earn enough to buy

medicine for a sick child. Every step is an immersion in the kind of hard realities still faced by many of the world's poor.

Rumble: The Indians Who Rocked the World (Canada) Co-directors Catherine Bainbridge and Alfonso Maiorana present a revealing and enlightening portrait of renowned musicians with indigenous roots who shaped the history of North American popular music. That includes seminal guitarists like Link Wray and rock stars like Jimi Hendrix. Often their indigenous ancestry was little known or ignored.

Let it Fall: Los Angeles 1982-1992 A number of films, both narrative and documentary, have addressed police and racial violence in America past and present (e.g., *Detroit*, *The Blood is at the Doorstep*, *Strong Island*, *Whose Streets?*, *Do Not Resist*, *Baltimore Rising*). Several (*Gook*, *LA 92*) are about the devastating riots that afflicted parts of Los Angeles in the summer of 1992, triggered by an all-white jury's acquittal of five police officers despite the graphic video evidence of their savage beating of a young black man. This Netflix production presents the most comprehensive account of those events, the decade that led up to it, and the aftermath that is of continuing relevance in a racially divided country.

Human Flow (Germany) Renowned Chinese artist-activist Ai Weiwei's stirring 26-country exploration of the human face of the global refugee crisis.

Kedi (Turkey/U.S.) "Kedi" is the Turkish word for cat, and this amazing tribute to the free-ranging cats of Istanbul will not only appeal to feline lovers, but provides a unique perspective of their social and cultural contribution to one of the world's great cities.

Honourable Mentions

500 Years (U.S.) Veteran documentary filmmaker Pamela Yates tells the story of the indigenous Mayan people of Guatemala and their resistance to systematic oppression, with a focus on courageous women leaders and their fight to bring the perpetrators of genocide to justice.

Dawson City: Frozen Time (Canada/U.S.) In the hands of writer-director Bill Morrison, the amazing discovery of a frozen archive of old nitrate film reels and stills brings back to the screen the brief but fascinating drama of how the Klondike gold rush briefly transformed this Yukon outpost.

Bombshell: The Hedi Lamarr Story (U.S.) The incredible life story of the Austrian actress of part-Jewish ancestry who left Nazi Europe before the war, became a glamorous Hollywood star, invented a "frequency hopping" communications technique (her scientific curiosity supported by billionaire Howard Hughes), but died a forgotten recluse.

The Work (U.S.) A remarkable, emotionally raw account of a four-day group therapy session inside Folsom Prison in which inmates interact with members of the community.

A Better Man (Canada) Issues of gender violence are tackled through an intimate personal lens as Attiya Khan confronts an abusive former boyfriend and challenges him to acknowledge and work through the consequences of his actions.