

The Ten Best Films of 2007 Were...

End-of-year top-ten lists aren't much more than mind candy to sweeten up the cold, dreary weeks of January and February. They're one of the award season's rites of passage, along with triple espresso morning nominee announcements, bejeweled galas, phallic statuettes, and weepy acceptance speeches. Yes, they're indulgences, but how fun would any year-end film piece be without them?

Let's start at number 10 with the film "Zodiac" by director David Fincher. Viewers looking for "Fight Club II" were yawning, but "Zodiac" had a brooding sense of mystery that lent a new take on the serial killer format. The film compelled visual and intellectual wonder through Fincher's probing questions about the early 70s serial killer that haunted his childhood while growing up in San Francisco. But at 40 minutes in length, the film was too long and its March release was seven months too early.

Denzel Washington and "American Gangster" are number nine. Those of you reading my November review of the film know why: finally Hollywood found a black gangster who was not just a "boy" in the hood.

Ang Lee's "Lust, Caution" ranks number eight. Its graphic sex scenes and Chinese language put off a number of viewers. But squeamishness and subtitles shouldn't discredit the provocative performances of stars, Tony Leung and Wei Tang, and the film's graceful cinematography.

Number seven is the animated pic, "Ratatouille," the best film of the year until some of the heavier hitters came to bat in September. Even still, writer and director Brad Bird's clever allegory about rats in the kitchen, so to speak, has so much fun with its characters you have to remind yourself the food they're eating isn't real.

As you might've guessed, Diablo Cody's hit debut film, "Juno," is on the list. The film's edgy, witty brand of cleverness is entirely different from that of "Ratatouille" and just as effective. Even a little bit more so. It places sixth.

Ranking fifth is "Before the Devil Knows Your Dead," by legendary director, Sidney Lumet. The harrowing setup about two brothers who accidentally kill their mother while, literally, stealing the family jewels suggests heavy drama. But the heaviness goes way beyond suggestion. The opening scene between stars Philip Seymour Hoffman and Marisa Tomei ignites an incredible level of intensity that doesn't let up until the end credits. Not even "The Bourne Ultimatum" managed this.

Director and writer Sean Penn's "Into the Wild" is poetic enough to overcome a few preachy moments to rank fourth. Lead actor, Emile Hirsh, emerges as a star by finding inspiration in the life of a character who abandons law school to become a hobo for two years and die in the Alaskan wilderness.

At number three is a film despised by the box office, “Michael Clayton.” Possibly audiences couldn’t accept George Clooney as a shadowy, middle-aged lawyer who cleans up clients’ messes. But it’s no excuse. John Grisham would kill for this kind of intrigue.

The top two films are almost a toss up. Director P.T. Anderson’s epic, “There Will Be Blood,” excels through the virtuoso performance of Daniel Day-Lewis as an early 20th century oil man whose conscience is the only thing slicker than his trade. It delivers on the potential evident in Anderson’s early hit, “Boogie Nights,” which he betrayed a few years ago during the abysmal last five minutes of “Magnolia.”

However, through no flaw of its own, the film finishes a narrow second on the list to the Coen Brothers’ masterpiece, “No Country for Old Men.” Both films use sociopath characters to explore the emotional and physical violence of American society. But the focus of “No Country for Old Men” is more acute.

The film hinges on a chase involving Josh Brolin as a man who runs off with abandoned drug money and Javier Bardem, who plays a psychopathic bounty hunter to chilling perfection. The Coen Brothers’ visual acuity is so fluent that details absent from the novel of the same name by Cormac McCarthy appear exactly as they might have, if McCarthy had written about them. To make a film feel this real requires an exquisite level of craft. And it’s why the Coen Brothers’ masterpiece edges Anderson’s for top honors.

The Top 10

1. No Country for Old Men
 2. There Will Be Blood
 3. Michael Clayton
 4. Into the Wild
 5. Before the Devil Knows Your Dead
 6. Juno
 7. Ratatouille
 8. Lust, Caution
 9. American Gangster
 10. Zodiac
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The Next Five

11. Gone Baby Gone
12. The Diving Bell and the Butterfly
13. Two Days in Paris
14. Atonement
15. The Bourne Ultimatum

Honorable Mentions

Knocked Up
Breach
Waitress
Sweeney Todd
The Savages
Enchanted
Talk to Me

Worst Six

1. Margot at the Wedding
2. The Darjeeling Limited
3. Moliere
4. The Invasion
5. The Astronaut Farmer
6. Shooter