Top films of '05

By James M. Wall in the February 7, 2006 issue

George Clooney had two films in release in 2005, both of which make my list of the year's top ten films. The first, ***Good Night, and Good Luck,*** takes a sharply focused look at a moment when TV journalist Edward R. Murrow (David Strathairn) exposed the shallowness of Wisconsin senator Joe McCarthy's obsession with communism (McCarthy plays himself in archival footage). Clooney both directed and scripted the film and also plays a supporting role. He yields the main performance to Strathairn, who speaks in Morrow's somber, clipped style for a dead-on portrayal. The picture, shot in black and white to evoke the era, captures a time when Murrow was at his professional peak. The film also depicts CBS's reluctance to support Murrow, and its insistence that in return for his courageous documentary work he conduct celebrity interviews with pop stars like Liberace, an assignment he detested. The film is set primarily in small smoke-filled studios that highlight the toxicity of the era, a not-so-subtle reminder that lung cancer ended Murrow's career prematurely. Jazz numbers sung by Dianne Reeves relieve the tension. *Good Night, and Good Luck* is the year's best film, a tribute to journalism at its finest.

Syriana. The title of this film is never explained, but off-screen interviews reveal that U.S. policy makers informally refer to "Syriana" when they envision re-creating a "greater Syria" in the image of America. Clooney, who co-produced the film (based on Robert Baer's *See No Evil*), plays an over-the-hill CIA agent who is betrayed by his superiors. The film parallels *Traffic*, a film by director-writer Stephan Gaghan about drug addiction. In *Syriana*, Gaghan uses the same format to highlight another addiction—Americans' addiction to oil—and to suggest that the U.S. motive for the Americanization of the region is control of its oil supply. He is unstinting in the harshness of his vision, most notably illustrated in the CIA-orchestrated murder of an Arab leader who dares to defy the U.S. by trading oil to China. The hostility to *Syriana* from conservative critics and columnists suggests that Gaghan has struck a nerve in American politics. What is surprising about Gaghan's portrayal is that none of his Arab characters makes any reference to Israel, a false note in a film that portrays Arab anger at the U.S.

Munich. Fans of *Pulp Fiction* will recall that just before Samuel L. Jackson's character kills two men, he quotes several verses from Ezekiel 25. In his book *Vengeance*, the source for *Munich*, George Jonas cites the same passage ("and they shall know that I am the Lord, when I shall lay my vengeance upon them"). In the film, a secret Israeli Mosad hit team targets 11 Palestinian leaders in revenge for the deaths of Israeli athletes at the 1972 Munich Olympics. Israel has never acknowledged its role in the assassinations, and several pro-Israel books written in the 1980s deny the single-hit-team theory. But this did not deter Steven Spielberg, one of Israel's favorite directors, from risking his pro-Israel credentials with a film critical of revenge as a national strategy. In the film, one Israeli gunman argues that the killings only extend the cycle of violence. The film explores complex political and moral questions so effectively that hard-liners on both sides have denounced it. Israel supporters strongly object to what they see as Spielberg's "moral equivalency," the suggestion that both sides have their motives and that both sides are wrong in the way they act on those motives. Palestinian supporters say that the arguments on behalf of their longing for a secure homeland are overshadowed by major characters who insist that Israel must do "whatever it takes" for its own security.

A History of Violence. Vengeance is also the theme of Canadian director David Cronenberg's film, a portrait of the violence that lurks quietly beneath the surface of small-town America. Viggo Mortensen, who played a warrior king in *Lord of the Rings* , is Tom Stall, a restaurant operator who has a picture-book wife and two young children. Stall also has a well-hidden past, one that's exposed by the media after he defends his restaurant's customers against two drifters who violently invade his comfortable world. This exposure forces Stall to confront the violence in his past, which leads to a classic brother-to-brother confrontation. The film ends with a gentle conclusion: reconciliation is always possible, but never easy.

Crash. Writer-director Paul Haggis examines the U.S. racial divide in a series of interconnected short dramas that reach a powerful conclusion. It is a painful film to watch because Haggis offers no comfortable side with which the viewer can identify—until, that is, a conclusion provides a note of grace-filled hope. The racial bias of both black and white characters is exposed, leaving everyone culpable. Haggis's unexpected connections drive the narrative. As in many Krzysztof Kieslowski films, there are moments that suggest a transcendent hand is at work—if viewers are open to this possibility as they follow the narrative's coincidences and

accidental developments.

Transamerica. Felicity Huffman completed this film before she became one of the lead actresses in television's *Desperate Housewives*. In *Transamerica* Huffman plays Stanley, a man who wants to become a woman (Bree) and is receiving hormone treatments in preparation for a surgical transformation. One barrier remains: Stanley must obtain the permission of his psychiatrist to have the operation, and he can't get her endorsement until he settles his relationship with a teenage son he's never met. In the hands of writer-director Duncan Tucker, this story unfolds as a trans-American journey in which Stanley/Bree slowly reveals himself/herself to the rebellious son (Kevin Zegers). There are funny moments, and Huffman is spectacular as a man desperate to fulfill a childhood dream. The film is both lighthearted and realistic in its attitude toward Stanley/Bree's parents—a father who accepts the choice to shift genders but doesn't understand it, and a mother who's rigidly opposed. The son? His changing attitude is the heart of the film.

Capote. In order to research what becomes his most noted work, *In Cold Blood*, Truman Capote (played to perfection by Philip Seymour Hoffman) travels to Kansas, meets killer Perry Smith (Clifton Collins Jr.), becomes emotionally attached to him, and exploits the relationship as a way to dig more deeply into the story. Harper Lee (Catherine Keener), Capote's close friend from childhood, travels with him and gives him support and some much-needed criticism. Keener's performance is even better than her work in *The 40-Year-Old Virgin*. Hoffman is a strong contender for a best-actor nomination.

Broken Flowers. Director Jim Jarmusch takes viewers on journeys. In *Dead Man*, he followed Johnny Depp across the wilderness of the 19th-century wild West. In *Stranger Than Paradise*, he escorted three lonely young people from New York to Cleveland and then to Florida. In *Mystery Train*, a Japanese couple traveled across the Pacific to Memphis. In *Broken Flowers*, he leads Don Johnston (Bill Murray) on a cross-country journey that retraces Johnston's past relationships, one of which may have made him a father. Jarmusch makes his films look effortless and casual, never pressing for effect, just searching. In Bill Murray he has found his best lonely traveler yet. Murray does find a young man who could be his son. But is he? On a Jarmusch cinematic journey, it's always hard to tell.

Cinderella Man. This fine film has received very little attention. Perhaps it's the subject matter and the setting—boxing in the Depression years. The rise of fighter

Jimmy Braddock (played by Russell Crowe) is a true story. Braddock is a man of the streets, a loving, responsible father who is barely supporting his family with occasional boxing matches and whatever work he can find. He exercises by tossing around heavy bales on the docks and running through the city streets. This unemployed Irish fighter catches the nation's fancy when he upsets Max Baer (Craig Bierko) for the title of world heavyweight champion. During one fight, the local priest invites the entire parish to attend the fight and pray for victory. They come and Braddock wins. This story of the dark days of the Depression deserves to be seen and heard.

Kingdom of Heaven. Director Ridley Scott's latest film of 11th-century epic battles and human drama has also been overlooked. It may be that unlike Scott's hit films (*Gladiator*, *Blade Runner*, *Black Hawk Down*) this picture suffered at the box office and with critics because its story about the city of Jerusalem paints a favorable portrait of Islam. Mixing a fictional love story with historical characters, *Kingdom of Heaven* tells of Crusader knights who lose control of their holy city, which had been conquered 200 years earlier by European Christians in a bloody massacre. Now the city is recaptured by a Muslim army under Saladin (Ghassan Massoud), who, unlike the Christian victors, is magnanimous in victory. This is a difficult story to present to Western audiences after 9/11, but it deserves further attention as the American public slowly becomes aware of Islam, a religion with a sacred book, a rich history and a strong tradition of divinely inspired values.