

Ten best films of '04: Hotel Rwanda tops the list

by [James M. Wall](#) in the [January 25, 2005](#) issue

Paul Rusesabagina, a member of the Hutu majority tribe in Rwanda, is married to a member of the Tutsi, the minority tribe that colonial powers installed as the nation's rulers in an interference tactic that was common during the 19th century. By 1994, the year in which Terry George sets his film *Hotel Rwanda*, the Hutu majority was engaged in a genocidal conflict. More than 800,000 Tutsis and many moderate Hutus were slaughtered.

American actor Don Cheadle, who plays Rusesabagina, a hotel manager, is the film's moral center. Quietly efficient in providing good service for white European guests at the Mille Collines, a Belgian-owned luxury hotel in Kigali, Rwanda's capital, he is also the classic tradesman, swapping Scotch for protection and expensive cigars for food supplies.

When the genocide reaches the hotel walls, with machete-wielding Hutus roaming the streets, European tourists and United Nations peacekeepers flee. Left alone, Rusesabagina turns his hotel into a sanctuary by bribing, cajoling and outsmarting leaders of the genocide. He even dares to tell a general that one day he will need a defense against war crime charges. Rusesabagina saved the lives of more than 1,200 Tutsis and Hutus. This portrait of love, family and courage in a world gone mad is the best film of 2004.

Sideways is a portrait of four stumbling souls who long for a way out of their darkness but are obsessed with their own daily existence. Most of us can identify with these people if we pay attention to hidden crevices in our own souls. What makes this film work is Alexander Payne's obvious love for his characters in spite of, or because of, their limitations.

His four principal characters desperately need a note of grace in their lives, and Payne obliges. His vision is consistent with that in earlier films of his: *Citizen Ruth*, *Election* and most recently, *About Schmidt*. As he did with Jack Nicholson at the end

of *About Schmidt*, Payne finds a way to suggest the presence of grace, even when that grace note is as simple as a knock on a door.

Finding Neverland is a story of a creative writer at work. When J. M. Barrie wrote *Peter Pan* in 1904, his career as an established London dramatist was at a low point. But because of his strong reputation, his producer was willing to risk money on a story about pirates and a boy who did not want to grow up.

Barrie knew that his play would have to reach beyond the usual staid opening-night British audience, so he brought in children from a nearby orphanage and seated them throughout the house. It worked.

Director Marc Forster (*Monster's Ball*) visually evokes the creative ideas in the mind of a writer—not an easy task in movies. For example, when the children bounce on their beds in protest at having to go to sleep, in Barrie's imagination they fly out of the window to Neverland and joyous freedom.

Ray, based on the life of blind musician Ray Charles, also treats creativity in the making. Charles died before the film's release in 2004, but not before he had approved a rough cut of director Taylor Hackford's film, which depicts Charles's drug use and philandering as well as his journey out of poverty.

Charles was not a leader in the civil rights movement, but he did refuse to perform in a Georgia segregated theater—an event that sets up a scene in which the Georgia legislature later apologizes to Charles. This biographical film depends heavily on the acting of Jamie Foxx, who is able to embody Charles's unique walk and swaying piano-playing style. The film is filled with examples of the variety of musical genres that Charles mixed and blended so well.

If *The Aviator* does nothing else, it will replace the image the public has of Howard Hughes from his final years; he died in 1976 as a drug-addled, mentally disturbed billionaire surrounded by aides catering to his every whim. In the hands of Martin Scorsese, this film soars with its portrayal of Hughes as a young man wildly spending an inherited fortune.

In his depiction of Hughes's frenetic quest to always be the best, Scorsese captures the obsessive nature of a talented genius addicted to movies and airplanes. Leonardo DiCaprio, An almost certain Oscar nominee for his portrayal of Hughes, captures the man's dark descent into the mental illness that eventually isolated him

from society.

A road journey undertaken by a young Ernesto “Che” Guevara forms the narrative for Walter Salles’s *The Motorcycle Diaries*. Drawn from Che’s own journal and a book written by his traveling companion, the film suggests that the future revolutionary leader in Cuba witnessed poverty and injustice for the first time as he and his friend traveled from his native Buenos Aires to Venezuela and back in 1951-52.

The film’s source material confirms the image of a young Che volunteering to work with lepers and encountering the suffering of Latin America’s poor. Brazilian director Salles (*Central Station*) does not connect the young Che to the Che who was the intellectual strongman for Fidel Castro, except to identify him as “Commandante Guevara” in the film’s written postscript. Two other films about Guevara, one by Steven Soderbergh, are in the planning stage. They will most likely give a more complete picture of the man whose portrait as a radical icon adorned many college dorm walls during the 1960s.

I hesitated to include the Korean film *Spring, Summer, Fall, Winter . . . and Spring* in my list only because of my limited grasp of the film’s Buddhist sensibility. But this work of beauty and commitment to the unity of all life demands to be included.

Director Kim Ki-Duk’s film covers the lifetime of a young Buddhist boy in training to be a monk. Shot entirely on a remote lake where an aging monk lives on a houseboat, it depicts the seasons as background for the boy’s personal growth, downfall and emergence as an adult teacher. The monk’s teaching techniques seem harsh (“You will carry guilt in your heart as a stone”), but the quality of life on his houseboat-shrine leaves the viewer inspired and hopeful.

Control Room is the best documentary of the year, easily surpassing Michael Moore’s *Fahrenheit 9/11* because it reveals, but does not argue, its thesis: Westerners must pay attention to the Arab perspective if they are to understand the Middle East. Director Jehane Noujaim’s documentary focuses on a few days of interviews and news reports in Arab television network al-Jazeera’s headquarters in Doha, Qatar. U.S. Marine public information officer Lieutenant Josh Rushing, doing his best to put a positive spin on the U.S. invasion, exposes his own innate honesty as he acknowledges the U.S. public’s lack of understanding of the Arab perspective on the U.S. invasion.

I was initially turned off by the relentless violent flogging of the helpless rebel in Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ*. But a half year later I cannot deny that what Gibson depicted is found in the Gospels. He is not the first interpreter to employ his art to shape his vision of Christ's passion. Nor can we ignore the fact that James Caviezel as Jesus, and Maia Morgenstern as his mother, convey the humanity of the son-mother relationship in a manner rarely captured in previous Jesus films.

Viewers see mother and son play together during a morning break from his carpenter work, and feel a mother's anguish as she races to the side of her son as he falls under the burden of his cross. Jesus' temptation in the garden evokes the reality of that moment. Gibson wants you to know that when the devil tempts, he speaks with soothing promises.

You need not accept Gibson's theological worldview to acknowledge that he is a talented film artist. Does he do justice to the resurrection? Of course not. But neither has any director before him.

Finally, the year's best children's film: *The Polar Express* tells Santa's story from a new perspective, mixing awe, wonder, humor and just a sprinkling of danger, none of it life-threatening.