

"People can invent the best and the worst for you." - Before Sunrise (1995)

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## THE TEN BEST UNSEEN FILMS OF 2006

by Phil Hall  
(2006-12-27)

In keeping with our mission to celebrate independent and underground cinema, Film Threat would like to offer an encore appraisal of the best films that never received a wide release in 2006.

These films represent the finest in feature, short, online and non-fiction filmmaking. A few of the films were in very limited art house release and a few are already on DVD, but they never received the wealth of attention they so richly deserved (hence their designation "unseen"). Perhaps this annual line-up can shine a much-needed light on their greatness.

### FILM THREAT'S TEN BEST UNSEEN FILMS OF 2006

1.) ["Vajra Sky Over Tibet"](#) – John Bush's stunning documentary on the resiliency of the Tibetan people to keep their Buddhist faith alive despite the Communist Chinese occupation of their nation is not only the year's best, but it is also among the finest non-fiction films on the subject of religion. Surreptitiously shot on location, Bush captures the intellectual complexity and artistic brilliance of the Tibetan Buddhist traditions in the face of brutal Chinese repression. All told, this is an extraordinary achievement at every possible level.

*STATUS:* Currently playing in limited theatrical release and festival engagements; a DVD release is expected for 2007.

2.) ["Soldier"](#) – Daniel J. Pico's riveting adaptation of David Bianchi's poetry performance is a shattering denunciation of war in general and the Iraqi fiasco in particular. Bianchi, who stars in this 10-minute film, brilliantly captures the anguish and chaos of the Iraqi occupation from the viewpoint of young American soldiers sent into the Baghdad slaughterhouse. The final image, with the splattered blood of the fallen creating a grotesque version of the American flag, is the most harrowing single shot captured on camera.

*STATUS:* Currently playing in festivals.

3.) ["Arlit: Deuxieme Paris"](#) – From Niger comes this astonishing documentary on the decline and ruin of a uranium mining town in the middle of the Sahara. Idrissou Mora Kpai explores a world left in a weird state of perpetual waiting: uranium-poisoned residents waiting to die, Africans waiting for a chance to exit their continent for life as illegal workers in Europe, and locals waiting for the possibility of Arlit to regain its former vibrancy and wealth. This is a disturbing experience that ranks among the finest in African cinema and non-fiction filmmaking.

*STATUS:* Currently available only for non-theatrical viewing from California Newsreel; no theatrical or home entertainment release is planned.



"Vajra Sky Over Tibet"



"Soldier"



"Arlit: Deuxieme Paris"

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4.) ["Beat the Bastard Down"](#) – Baltimore filmmaker Jimmy Traynor achieves a personal best in this highly satisfying revenge comedy about an oleaginous realty whose misuse of women boomerangs back on him. Steve Kovalic, a long-time member of Traynor's ensemble, shines in a wonderfully malicious performance as the victimizer-turned-victim. Amazingly, the entire feature was improvised and shot over a tight 32 hour period.

*STATUS:* Currently playing in microcinema presentations.

5.) ["9 Drawings for Projection"](#) – At a time when most animation seems to consist of hideous CGI misadventures with talking animals and cutesy inanimate objects with obnoxious personalities, this collection of nine short films from South African animator William Kentridge provides some much-needed adult relief. Focusing on the decline and fall of a mining mogul's empire, Kentridge's films explore issues of avarice, lust, jealousy and shifting South African power politics. The black-and-white, dialogue-free imagery is haunting and surreal, and the resulting collection confirms that animation can be much more than kids' stuff.

*STATUS:* Currently playing in limited commercial presentations.

6.) ["The Woman with the Hungry Eyes"](#) – Hugh Munro Neely's documentary traces the mystique and magic of silent movie femme fatale Theda Bara and discovers a great deal of wonderful surprises along the way. Utilizing footage from the relatively few surviving films from Bara's career plus a wealth of rare still photographs, the film offers a much-needed appreciation on the career of this groundbreaking performer.

*STATUS:* Currently playing in limited commercial presentations.

7.) ["Rent-a-Copz"](#) – Funnymen Ryan Ondriezek and Jeremy Mongillo created this highly amusing parody of "COPS," with the duo starring as self-important mall security guards whose attempts to bring law and order ends in chaos. Wonderfully original sight gags, a rich stream of offbeat commentary ("I'm not discriminating; I hate kids!") and winning performances by Ondriezek and Mongillo helps fuel this very funny comedy short.

*STATUS:* Available for online viewing.

8.) ["The Pod"](#) – If you love somebody, would you take a mind-altering drug for them? Jeremiah Kipp's effectively creepy short focuses on a downtown New York couple who test the boundaries of their relationship via a narcotized link. A wonderfully sinister production design keeps the viewer on edge, while the sublime Larry Fessenden confirms his standing as a national treasure as the sinister drug dealer responsible for this adventure.

*STATUS:* Currently playing in festivals.

9.) ["Phished"](#) – Scott Cohn's jolly yet compelling four-part episodic online film following the misadventures of an average Joe who discovers that his financial data has been stolen via the Net (or, in cybertalk, phished). Originally created for Symantec's Safetytown microsite, the film is not a commercial – instead, it stands on its own merits as a work of wit, style and high-tech substance.

*STATUS:* Available for online viewing.

10.) ["Don't Worry Honey, I Live Here: How Locals Celebrate Mardi Gras"](#) – Jeremy Campbell shot this celebration of New Orleans' biggest social event between 2001 and 2003. Today it serves as a poignant reminder of the city's pre-Katrina glories – as well as a record of the various racial and social divisions that divided the city's multicultural population. A wealth of Bayou-flavored music, rude behavior and unfettered hedonism is captured in this joyful cinematic kaleidoscope.

*STATUS:* Available on DVD from the filmmaker.

**HONORABLE MENTION:** ["Liberty Street: Alive at Ground Zero"](#) offers a poignant elegy to the residential neighborhood surrounding the World Trade



"Beat the Bastard Down"



"9 Drawings for Projection"



"The Woman with the Hungry Eyes"

Center; ["Liberia: An Uncivil War"](#) documents the African republic's descent into an internecine hell; ["Long Way From Home"](#) follows three girls in their rocky integration of a prestigious New York academy; ["The Langley Duo Sings The Lion Sleeps Tonight"](#) finds British 16-year-old Luke Mallord and Joe Whitbread in a buoyant lip synch rendition of the classic pop tune; ["loudQUIETloud: A Film About the Pixies"](#) follows the innovative alt-rock band in their long-overdue reunion concert tour; ["A Cinematic Valentine"](#) is Ryan Dacko's loving tribute to the screen's greatest lovers; the short ["Robota"](#) and the feature ["Blood Tea and Red String"](#) provide ample evidence that innovative stop-motion animation is alive and well; and the viral video ["Officer Roger Hosey Gets a Taser Shot in the Ass"](#) provides a hilariously weird glimpse into the world of the police department in China Grove, North Carolina.



"The Pod"

And special honorable mentions for the long-overdue arrival of two missing films into mainstream release: Daniel Bourla's 1968 experimental feature ["The Noah"](#) and Grigory Kozintsev's 1964 adaptation of ["Hamlet,"](#) both of which have come back via DVD.



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