While it's a bad weekend for new film releases ("Alpha Dog" and "Primeval" are the top options), there's still alot going on in the film industry ... which Mitch reports on in this week's edition of "The Crystal Ball". Mitch tells us about the newest James Cameron film, updates us on "The Hobbit", and also hits on some of the other significant releases slated for the next couple months.

I think there must be a rule that states that every year there has to be a really stupid movie that ends up in the Top 10 in regards to box office. “Madagascar”, “Meet the Fockers”, “Elf”, “Austin Powers in Goldmember”, and “Rush Hour 2”, to name the ones from the past five years.

For 2006, that movie is “Night At the Museum”. And it’s about to have its fourth straight week on top as there is nothing new coming out that is worth watching.

News & Rumors:

~ Most of you have probably already seen this, but James Cameron is about to direct his first film in ten years (not counting the fictional “Aquaman” in HBO’s “Entourage”). “Avatar” may just end up being as big of a hit in 2009 as Titanic was in 1997. The film will be 40% live action and 60% CGI, utilizing a new technology to film and show in digital 3-D. The story itself is sci-fi, centering on a wounded ex-Marine who is unwillingly sent to settle (and exploit) a distant planet called Pandora. Once there, he is caught up on a battle for survival by the planets native inhabitants, and falls in love with one of them. Supposedly, Cameron has vowed to keep the budget “below $200,000,000”. Yeah, and I vowed to take it easy on Christmas expenditures

this year as well. And that worked out just about as well as the vow I took the previous year(s).

~ Why bother with one Avatar when you can have two? M. Night Shyamalan is said to be writing a live action script based off the Nickelodeon japanimation series “Avatar”, and will also direct it and produce it. I wish my workplace was as goofy as Hollywood. If I were to do something so stupid as to lose my company as much money as M. Night cost Warner Brothers for his disaster “Lady in the Water”, you think they’d say “no big deal…here’s a raise and a promotion!” and then give me the figurative keys to another expensive toy?

~ And the soap opera surrounding “The Hobbit” goes on. New Line co-chairman has come out and vowed that Peter Jackson will “never direct the LOTR prequel on my watch”. Here’s to hoping that LOTR fans can do to him what Browns fans did to John Collins in his power play last year.

~ The nominations for the top prize in the annual Director’s Guild of America award are out. Martin Scorsese is the favorite for “The Departed”. The other nominees are Bill Condon for “Dreamgirls”, Alejandro Gonzalez Inarritu for “Babel”, Steven Frears for “The Queen”, and Johathan Dayton & Valerie Faris for “Little Miss Sunshine”. Two interesting notes. First is that the winner of this award has gone on to win the Oscar for Best Director 52 out of 58 times. Second is that Clint Eastwood was overlooked for his work on “Letters From Iwo Jima”. Winner to be announced February 3rd.

~ Dave Matthews will have a guest role on “House” later this year, playing a musical savant and piano prodigy who comes down with the obligatory mysterious ailment that can only be cured by Dr. Sunshine himself. Maybe House can cure his semi-obnoxious singing voice.

~ No truth to the rumors that Spike Lee will direct a fictionalized account of the Ohio State/Florida national championship game, and call it “I’m Urban Meyer’s Beyotch”. David Strathairn is a good pick to play Jim Tressel.

~ Donald Trump vs Rosie O'Donnell. I haven't been this ambivalent about a fight since the last Notre Dame/scUM football game.

This week's new releases:

The skunk-fest of releases so bad they had to be dumped in January or February continues. Seriously, this is almost as bad as last September in terms of NOTHING worth seeing other than the previously released films. Just catch up with the good ones you haven't had a chance to see yet, and hold on for "Letters From Iwo Jima" and "Little Children".

But this is nothing new. Last year, January gave us such wonderful films as "The Passing", "BloodRayne", "Grandma's Boy", "Last Holiday", "Tristen & Isolde", "Big Momma's House 2", and the mega-hit "Annapolis".

Hold your nose and wade in…these movies are so bad that I can't even come up with enough clever snide remarks about them, hence possibly the briefest "beerbuzzes" you've ever seen.

Best recommendation…stay home and watch the NFL playoffs all weekend.

Title: **Alpha Dog**

Starring: Emile Hirsch, Justin Timberlake, Bruce Willis, Sharon Stone

Plot: Adaptation of a true story about a young LA drug dealer that abducts the younger brother of a business rival.

View Trailer

The BeerBuzz: Justin Timberlake as a heavily tattooed punk, and the “moral center” of a group of sleezy slackers. That is enough right there to let me know this is going to be crap.

Title: **Primeval**

Starring: Dominic Purcell and Orlando Jones

Plot: A South African warlord is after a news team (Purcell and Jones) trying to capture of a 25 foot crocodile.

View Trailer

The BeerBuzz: Let’s cross “Anaconda” with “Hotel Rwanda!” Brilliant!!! Best idea since the fictional “Spring Time For Hitler” from “The Producers”.

Title: **Stomp the Yard**

Starring: Columbus Short, Meagan Good, Ne-Yo

Plot: A young man avoids juvenile hall by enrolling in a black university in Atlanta, where he's recruited by two fraternities to step-dance for them in a national competition.

View Trailer

The BeerBuzz: I didn't get "Step Up"…so I doubt I'll get this. Then again, there are probably not many young African-Americans that can understand my fascination with "Lord of the Rings". Cue up Weird Al Yankovic's "I'm Just White and Nerdy" video. (Damn me! Now I can't get that friggin' song out of my head).

Title: **Arthur and the Invisibles**

Starring: Freddie Highmore, Mia Farrow, Madonna

Plot: In an effort to save his grandfather's house from demolition, a boy hunts for a hidden

treasure in the land of the Minimoys. (who might be small versions of Leonard Nimoy?)

View Trailer

The BeerBuzz: Strictly for the little kids, this movie is getting universally panned as being as bad or worse than “Flushed Away”.

Title: **Curse of the Golden Flower** (Opening nation wide)

Starring: Chow Yun-Fat, Gong Li

Plot: Palace intrigue in China as the Emperor plots to poison the Empress who is having an affair with her stepson.

The BeerBuzz: Very stylized martial arts film with many Shakespearean overtones. Visually stunning movie that is more in line with “Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon” than director Zhang Yimou’s last two movies, “Hero” and “House of Flying Daggers”. Not sure about anything else in this movie…but Gong Li and that push up outfit I saw in the trailer gets a “thumbs up” from me.

New DVD Releases on Tuesday, January 16th

Movies released this week that will ever show up on my Netflix Queue? ZERO

Employee of the Month – Two worthless losers; one a slacker and the other a kiss-ass, vie for the "Employee of the Month" award as some Office Depot clone in hope that they can nail Jessica Simpson. You just can't find high brow entertainment like this every week.

Gridiron Gang – The Rock teaches a bunch of losers to be "winners" by strapping on pads and destroying people's ACLs. For the record, there was a great football movie last fall in "We Are Marshall", a very good football movie in "Invincible", and a piece of garbage football movie. Guess which one I'm thinking about?

Texas Chainsaw Massacre: The Beggining – How it all began for a family of freaks and sick lunatics. When I saw that, I thought it might be a docudrama about Michael Jackson and his family.

The Protector – Maybe people aren't as stupid as they sometimes seem. The Weinstein Group, which seems to put out more bombs than Raytheon, tried to pass this stinker off as being something "from Quentin Tarantino", as if he wrote or directed it. He actually had nothing to do with it, other than agreeing to have his name attached for the US release as "Quentin Tarantino Presents…The Protector". The audiences saw through the B.S. and wisely stayed away, and it made less money than "How To Eat Fried Worms". Perfect.

Idiocracy – Mike Judge last directed a movie with 1999's cult favorite "Office Space", a movie that bombed at the box office, but found fame once it hit DVD. He may have another one here, a biting satire in which normal schlep Luke Wilson is frozen for 500 years, and wakes up to a world so dumbed down that he is easily the most intelligent man on the planet.

Broken Bridges – Hey! Toby Keith made a movie! And it sucked its way to only $250,000 at the box office…or roughly what "Pirates of the Caribbean" took in per afternoon. Or to put it another way…it took in one fifth as much as the Dixie Chicks documentary, "Shut Up and Sing". By the way…Tim McGraw's movie "Flicka" made over $20 million…AND he gets to sleep with Faith Hill. Tim wins.

Calendar Watch:

Next week *Letters From Iwo Jima* (maybe…they keep announcing tentative wide scale release dates for this, and then keep moving it back *), The Hitcher, The Dead Girl,*
and finally a small expansion of
The Good German
and
The Last King of Scotland
to over 300 theaters…which may mean you'll finally be able to see them.

Upcoming Biggies (click on the hyperlink to view the available trailers).

Notes on a Scandal – Oscar hopeful with Cate Blanchett and Judi Dench as a teacher involved in an affair with a young student, and the colleague who betrayed her. Limited release in December, no dates yet given for nation-wide release.

Smokin’ Aces – January 29th – Interesting concept…Jeremy Piven as a motor-mouthed Vegas stand up comedian who decides to rat on the mob, setting up competing hitmen vying for the bounty in this action comedy.

Hannibal Rising – February 9th - Tale of how the young Hannibal Lecture became the cretin we all know and love. As you know, February release dates normally indicate a bomb, and the fact that I still can't find a trailer for it might indicate a delayed release or the Worst. Movie. Ever.

Ghost Rider – February 16th - Nicholas Cage turns into a motorcycle riding superhero with a flaming skeleton head. Bad, bad vibes about this one.

The Number 23 – February 23rd – Mystery/ Supernatural Thriller with Jim Carrey and Virginia Madsen. I'm hoping this is the exception to the "February Stinker" rule.

Zodiac – March 2nd - Jake Gyllenhaal and Robert Downey, Jr star in the tale of the Bay Area serial killer.

Wild Hogs – March 2nd - John Travolta, Tim Allen, Martin Lawrence and William H. Macy as four middle aged buddies take off for the open road on motorcycles, only to end up crossing paths with a Hell's Angels gang. Might be the Movie to Beat when it comes to next year's "Razzies" for "Worst Picture".

300 – March 9th - Frank Miller adaptation of the Frank Miller graphic novel about 300 Spartans defending Greece from the entire frickin' Persian Empire. Filmed in the same style as "Sin City".

Reign Over Me - March 9th – First major fictional piece dealing with the effects of 9/11 on the families, starring Adam Sandler in an impressive looking dramatic role (if you can believe it) and Don Cheadle.

Shooter – March 16th - Political thriller with Mark Wahlberg as a sniper trying to stop an assassination.

Sunshine – March 16th – A team of eight scientists are sent off in a spaceship to try to re-ignite part of the dying sun.

Lucky You – March 16th – Long delayed film centered around the World Series of Poker with Eric Bana and Drew Barrymore.

Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles – March 23rd – They're baaaaccccckkkk. Supposedly a little more adult oriented than the campy films from the 80s.

Rescue Dawn – March 30th – Christian Bale as a pilot shot down in Laos in the early years of the Vietnam War, and his efforts to escape captivity.

Grind House – April 6th - Two one-hour short horror stories, one from Robert Rodriguez, the other from Quentin Tarantino. (April). I may hate slasher films, but this one looks too good to miss.

The Kingdom – April 20th – Jamie Foxx, Chris Cooper, and Jennifer Garner in a story about an American team sent into the Middle East to investigate a terrorist attack on Americans in Riyadh.

Spider-Man 3 – May 4th - The webslinger versus Venom, Sandman, and Harry Osborne picking up his father's GoblinGear.

Shrek the Third – May 13th – Shrek & Donkey…together again. This time with the jolly green Scottish ogre trying to push off the king's crown onto a young Arthur.

1408 – May 13th – John Cusack as a famed debunker of paranormal activities encountering real terror in this adaptation of a Steven King tale.

Pirates of the Caribbean: At the World's End – May 25th - Captain Jack goes for the hat trick.

Ocean's Thirteen – June 8th – Ellen Barkin replaces Julia Roberts and Catherine Zeta-Jones in this edition. Talk about a "Brian Giles for Ricardo Rincon" level trade. Will someone please stick a fork in this franchise?

Fantastic Four: The Rise of the Silver Surfer – June 15th – This time the quartet go up against the Silver Surfer and the return of Dr. Doom. Please be better than the first one! (the trailer does look awesome).

Evan Almighty – June 22nd – Steve Carell's Evan Baxter from "Bruce Almighty" is now a Congressman chosen by God (Morgan Freeman) to receive His powers. A reported budget of over $200 million on this will either make it this year's "DaVinci Code" (big budget, big box office) or this year's "Poseidon".

Live Free or Die Hard – June 29th - John McClane strikes again (probably with his walker).

Transformers – July 6th – Michael Bay (hack, spit) tries to spin a former children's cartoon into an "Independence Day" type Armageddon movie. As much as I hate to admit it…the teaser trailer looks good.

Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix – July 13th – These movies keep getting darker and better as they go. Voldemort (aka "relative of Art Modell") is back and targeting Harry and his friends for some nasty payback.

The Simpsons Movie – July 27th - ummmm…beeeerrrrrr

The Bourne Ultimatum – August 3rd - Superspy Jason Bourne (Matt Damon) is back and looking for his roots.

The Invasion – August 17th – Nicole Kidman and Daniel Craig in a sci-fi flick about an alien epidemic.

3:12 to Yuma – October 12th – Russell Crowe and Christian Bale in a remake of a classic Western with Bale as a farmer volunteering to escort a criminal (Crowe) to Yuma by train, with a battle of wits ensuing.

American Gangster – November 8th – Denzel Washington as a heroin kingpin from the Vietnam War era (he smuggled it back in the body bags of dead soldiers) and Russell Crowe as the investigator on his trail.

Beowulf – November 16th - Robert Zemeckis gets all medieval on us with a motion capture (like “Polar Express”) adaptation of the epic poem.