

Film picks of '99

by [James M. Wall](#) in the [January 26, 2000](#) issue

Bringing Out the Dead, director Martin Scorsese's frenetic examination of three days in the life of a paramedic, is easily my choice for the best film of 1999. Most critics have compared this picture to *Taxi Driver*, Scorsese's earlier venture into the mean streets of New York City, but a better comparison is with his film *The Last Temptation of Christ*, in which another healer and savior begs to be relieved of an impossible assignment thrust upon him by a demanding supervisor. *Bringing Out the Dead* is written by Paul Schrader, Calvin College's contribution to Hollywood and Catholic Scorsese's most valued creative companion.

You don't have to be religious to appreciate the power of this picture, but it sure helps—especially if you are willing to look more deeply into the story of paramedic Frank Pierce's three nights on ambulance duty with three different partners, each of whom has found a different way to avoid the pain of failure: an obsession with food, religion or violence. Pierce feels he is a failure; too many people are dying on his watch. Each night he is reminded of his failures by the haunting face of a young girl who died under his care. Pierce, like Jesus in *The Last Temptation*, begs to be released from his assignment, but his supervisor can only promise maybe to fire him tomorrow—but not tonight, because “I need you out there.”

The film's final image is a classic artistic expression of religious piety: Nicholas Cage, as the suffering servant paramedic, nestled in the bosom of a woman whose name is Mary. There are other signs of a religious sensibility in the film, as when Pierce says: “I came to realize that my work was less about saving lives than about bearing witness.”

The second best film of the year is Stanley Kubrick's *Eyes Wide Shut*, which made only a brief theatrical appearance before disappearing into cinematic limbo, driven there in part because like Scorsese, Kubrick refuses to cater to popular taste. None of Kubrick's pictures—ranging from *2001* to *The Shining* to *Lolita*—were initially commercial successes, but they persist in the imagination because Kubrick is an artist with a vision of the dark side of the human condition and the talent to convey

that vision. This final film—he died before it was released—is dark throughout its depiction of a married couple toying with infidelity. The picture’s unsettling venture into the dream life of an upscale New York City couple is a conservative morality tale, driven by Kubrick’s insistence that even if there is no God, we are at least obligated to behave ethically.

David Lynch’s first-ever G-rated film, *The Straight Story*, a joyous celebration of life for all ages, is my choice for third place. Lynch is better known for stronger stuff, especially *Blue Velvet*, an exploration of evil, and the television series *Twin Peaks*, a weird descent into the unconscious. In *The Straight Story* Lynch explores new territory in a lyrical portrait of a 73-year-old man’s journey across Iowa on a lawn mower tractor. Richard Farnsworth (who was 78 when he made the film) plays Alvin Straight, an Iowa widower who first learns that he has medical problems and then that his brother is dying.

Straight’s journey allows Lynch to linger lovingly on Iowa’s landscape of fields of grain and long stretches of lonely highway. But more important, Straight becomes a force for good to everyone he encounters on his impossible trip, from a teenage runaway to a veteran of World War II, who talks about his long-suppressed war experiences. No film in recent memory equals this one in its ability to say yes to life.

The remaining top films of 1999:

American Beauty is a picture that Lynch might have made in his darker period. Like *Blue Velvet*, it begins as a portrait of the ideal middle-class suburban family, but director Sam Mendes quickly unveils the family’s dysfunctions, including a father (Kevin Spacey) whose midlife crisis leads him to lust after his daughter’s classmate and a mother (Annette Bening) with her own identity problems. The “American Beauty” in the title is simultaneously the rose of that name, carefully tended by Bening; the blond teenage cheerleader that Spacey thinks could be his; and suburban life. The film’s ending is both justified and satisfying, a moment of grace in a cauldron of anger and hopelessness.

A research scientist, played by Russell Crowe, discovers in *The Insider* that the media-driven culture in which he lives will open doors for him to expose the lies of the tobacco industry and then, just as easily, will slam them shut when another powerful industry, a television network, decides it cannot afford the price of the scientist’s courage. No one’s integrity emerges unscathed from this examination of

the folly of a culture that continues to tolerate and even abet an industry that sells a dangerous and addictive drug to children.

Death and how to live with it is the central point of *The Sixth Sense*. Featuring Bruce Willis as a child psychologist, it was directed by M. Night Shyamalan, a 29-year-old native of Madras, India. Shyamalan was raised by Hindu parents and is now a Catholic. This film warrants several viewings. The second time around take note of Shyamalan's use of the color red, which plays an important role in Hindu thought. To note one example, when a mother comes to understand her son better near the end of the film, she is wearing red.

Cookie's Fortune is a fun picture by director Robert Altman that begins with a wonderful celebration of everyone's eccentricities. The film's ensemble cast includes Patricia O'Neal as the family matriarch; Glenn Close as the church drama director who also wants to direct the drama of her own family; Julianne Moore as her not-so-bright sister; and Charles S. Dutton as Willis, the African-American man accused of a murder no one believes he could have committed. Asked why he doesn't think Willis is guilty; the local sheriff, played by Ned Beatty, answers, "because I fish with him"—an observation that is also a comment on the power of community.

The Cider House Rules has been described as a caring, loving, old-fashioned movie. Yet it deals with illegal abortions, death, revenge and a bunch of disappointed orphans who grow too old to be adopted. How can such material evoke tender affection? The answer is in the film's source, John Irving's 1985 novel. Irving wrote the screenplay for director Lasse Hallström's film, the first time Irving has himself adapted one of his own novels for the screen.

Irving is a writer who explores troubling topics from a caring, concerned sensibility, finding hope and humor in the most unlikely places, as, in this instance, St. Cloud's, the orphanage and hospital in Maine to which women came in pre-*Roe v. Wade* days to either leave behind an orphan baby or have an abortion. Presiding over this institution, assisted by two nurses who give the orphans an abundance of maternal care, is Dr. Wilbur Larch (Michael Caine), addicted to ether, and a surrogate father to the orphans (whom he nightly describes as "Princes of Maine, Kings of New England"). His favorite is Homer Wells, whom Larch hopes will replace him one day as administrator, doctor and unofficial abortionist. The film is beautiful, thanks to its New England scenery, a compelling story about love and responsibility, and the quiet wisdom of Homer Wells.

I went to see *Toy Story 2* in order to check it out for the grandchildren and came away convinced that it is one of the year's best pictures for all ages. The technology has advanced so rapidly that the film's animation is even better than that of the original *Toy Story*. And a big surprise for an animated film: the story line has its serious side and just might lead to some discussion about the ambiguity of decision-making, when the toys discover that, like their human owners, they are mortal. They face a choice: live in Japan in a permanent toy exhibit, or stay at home in the toy box until their inevitable dismissal. After all, as one older toy points out, boys and girls grow up, and they don't take their toys to college or on their honeymoon. What will it be, a short life of love or a long life of loneliness? This is a film to enjoy and ponder.

The most satisfying theological film of the year, and my final selection, is Neil Jordan's screen version of Graham Greene's *The End of the Affair*, a treatise on God's role in the affairs of men and of women, and more specifically, in the affair that a novelist who closely resembles Greene conducts with another man's wife. Ralph Fiennes and Julianne Moore, as Maurice and Sarah, are the lovers who meet in wartime London and who separate, after he is almost killed in a bombing raid. Two years later they meet again, and with the help of a private detective Maurice discovers what ended the affair. Since this was Greene in his earliest faith-struggle period, God was involved. The film is faithful to the struggle so evident in Greene's writings, as Sarah prays for miracles and Maurice begs God, should he actually exist, to leave him alone.