

# Top ten films

by [James M. Wall](#) in the [January 31, 2001](#) issue

The Coen brothers, Joel and Ethan, are off-beat filmmakers, but their latest movie, *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*, is the best film released in 2000. *O Brother* is a tall tale of three 1930s convicts who escape from a Mississippi prison road gang and begin a journey that the film claims is loosely based on Homer's *Odyssey*. George Clooney's portrayal of Ulysses Everett McGill will evoke memories of Clark Gable. McGill, the leader of the escapees, is determined to get back home to his wife, Penny. He leads because, as he points out, he is the only one in the group "capable of abstract thought."

Once unchained the escapees encounter some Homeric characters, including a blind poet who predicts their future, a Cyclops (John Goodman as a one-eyed itinerant Bible salesman), and three beautiful sirens washing clothes beside a stream. The film's real strength, however, is its soundtrack of traditional early southern folk, blues and gospel music, performed by authentic southern musicians. (The actors mouth the lyrics.) A D. A. Pennebaker documentary of a Nashville concert with these performers will be out soon.

In Coen style, the escaped convicts are comedic figures, but the film respects its religious and cultural materials, even as it resurrects stereotypical southern images. The film is not condescending. A portrayal of a river baptism, for example, is accompanied by a deeply moving rendition of "Down in the River to Pray," in a scene in which two of the convicts are saved, religiously speaking.

You won't need CliffsNotes on the classics to appreciate *Almost Famous*, my second favorite film of the year, only fond memories of the rock music of the 1970s. Director Cameron Crowe offers an autobiographical recollection of his own teen years. As a 15-year-old, he wrote an article for *Rolling Stone* about a traveling second-level rock band. Crowe came to the attention of *Rolling Stone* editors after he had persuaded the editor of a small rock periodical to let him write concert and album reviews. In the film, editor Lester Bangs (Philip Seymour Hoffman) warns William Miller (the Crowe character) not to get too close to his subjects, but this proves to be

impossible advice for a star-struck 15-year-old. (Bangs is real; he helped Crowe get his start.)

The film is filled with small revelatory moments, enriched throughout with music of the period. One example: William's liberated college professor mother (Frances McDormand) reluctantly brings him to a rock concert, and at the last minute has second thoughts and shouts across the parking lot, "Don't do drugs!," causing youthful heads to swing around to see whose mother is issuing yet another admonition. The film's defining grace-filled moment, however, comes when the band is facing a possible breakup and finds unity on a bus ride home as one by one they quietly begin singing Elton John's "Tiny Dancer." Earlier Crowe films that deserve a video look include a mainstream commercial offering, *Jerry McGuire*, and an even better earlier film, *Say Anything*, that stars John Cusack.

*Unbreakable*, directed by M. Night Shyamalan, appears at first to be a conventional thriller with a surprise ending, a reminder that Shyamalan is also the director of *The Sixth Sense*, the critical and commercial success of a year ago. But even though this is a deeper film than *The Sixth Sense*, it is still important not to reveal the ending because part of the film's pleasure comes from the uncertainty of its vision—until its surprising conclusion. What is its vision? Try, as a starter, the quest for one's special gift. Everyone is special, of course, but some are more special than others, as comic superhero stories remind us (the film's opening suggests the importance of comics in its narrative).

*The Legend of Bagger Vance* is directed by Robert Redford, an actor/director whose recent films have been quiet and reflective (*A River Runs Through It* and *The Horse Whisperer*). The pace is dictated by the early morning quiet of a misty golf course laid out along Georgia's ocean coast. Bagger Vance (Will Smith) appears one night in 1930 to Rannulph Junuh (Matt Damon) and encourages him to compete against famed golfers Bobby Jones and Walter Hagen. Redford includes a nonspeaking part for O. B. Keeler, a real-life *Atlanta Journal* sports writer (with whom I once worked) who is fondly remembered as a Boswell to Bobby Jones.

You need to know two things about *Jesus' Son*. The title has nothing to do with parentage; it comes from the lyrics of a song about heroin. Second, this is not a film for viewers with an aversion to depictions of drug addictive behavior or with a low tolerance for vulgar language. Directed by Allison Maclean with a script drawn from short stories by Denis Johnson, the film features Billy Crudup as a drug-abusing Iowa

drifter who plunges into the hell of addiction and then gets clean while working in a home for the disabled.

A perceptive supervising nurse tells him he must learn to touch his patients to reach them in their loneliness. Eventually, he is himself touched emotionally by a fellow AA member (Holly Hunter in a cameo) and by an Amish wife he hears singing in the shower. Crudup's experiences with the Amish wife lead to magic moments from one of Johnson's short stories—moments that Maclean carefully translates to the screen.

*Jesus' Son* makes an interesting companion to a more highly publicized picture, *Traffic*. Director Steven Soderbergh delivers a superbly told commentary on the so-called drug war in this country. Three separate but parallel stories—color-coded for ease in viewing—expose the futility of police efforts to win that war, beginning with the story of a new drug czar in Washington who takes the assignment and within a few days discovers the impact of drugs on his own family.

Jack Black, who has a key role in *Jesus' Son*, plays one of record store owner John Cusack's employees in another film on my top ten list, *High Fidelity*. British director Stephen Frears takes Nick Hornby's much-acclaimed London-based novel about music-obsessed young people and successfully transfers it to Chicago. This is not a film about music, however, but one that uses music as a thematic counterpoint to certain pivotal personal moments. Cusack organizes his record collection, for example, not by performers or topics, but autobiographically, by when he bought a record and why. Discussing the film's identification of music with youthful suffering, Cusack said, "If you can make pain a little bit transcendent, it means maybe you are suffering for a reason."

*The Big Kahuna* is a filmed stage drama with a screenplay by its original author, Roger Rueff. Kevin Spacey and Danny DeVito star, and Spacey produces, which suggests he liked the play well enough to back it with his considerable prestige. You wouldn't know it from reading most reviews, but at the heart of this drama are intense conversations about God, Jesus Christ, death and salvation. The dialogue is littered with profanity, but it is insightful. Irony and evangelical Christianity battle to a draw, while friendship, commitment and a desire to know God win.

*Chocolat* is a fable that sets up a struggle between a certain narrow form of religious faith and a belief in love as redemptive. Appropriate to the fable format, even the bad characters are redeemed (except for one). The film begins when Vianne (Juliette

Binoche), a wandering mystery woman, arrives in a French village to open a chocolate shop. Since it is Lent and the local mayor sees chocolate as an indulgence that must be put off until Easter, Vianne has few customers.

Except, that is, for her landlady Armande (Judi Dench) and a married couple whose love life is restored by the magic beans dispensed by Vianne.

Soon others are drawn into Vianne's chocolate spell, and good things happen to everyone who succumbs to her tempting fare. Lasse Hallstrom, the director of last year's superb *The Cider House Rules*, maintains a light touch in a film both uplifting and sweet.

Krzysztof Kieslowski's *The Decalogue* is a series of ten one-hour dramas originally made for Polish television in 1988-89. Until this year the series was available only at film festivals and special showings. A longstanding dispute over copyright has kept it from general release. Now that this issue is settled, the films have been shown for the first time this year in theaters and are now available on video and DVD, which qualifies them for my top ten list of 2000.

Each episode in *The Decalogue* is inspired by one of the commandments (the Catholic/Lutheran count, not the one that non-Lutheran Protestants use). Kieslowski insisted that he did not intend to make films about the commandments but merely drew his inspiration from them. The result is a series of cinematic short stories probing profound truths and asking questions, but not offering solutions, for as Kieslowski has noted, art at its best does not need to provide answers.