

A critic's choice: Nine picks from 2001

by [James M. Wall](#) in the [February 27, 2002](#) issue

Any year that gives us films from directors David Lynch, the Coen brothers, Steven Spielberg and Stanley Kubrick has to be a good year. True, the Spielberg-Kubrick combined effort, *A.I.: Artificial Intelligence* is not pure Kubrick, since his death required that the work be finished by Spielberg. But it remains the most significant film released in 2001. In a tie for second place on my list are *The Man Who Wasn't There*, by the Coen brothers, and Lynch's *Mulholland Drive*.

My "films to see" list comprises nine movies that will last beyond their theatrical runs and become what Emily Dickinson referred to, in speaking of books of poetry, as "kinsmen of the shelf." These films are "works of significance"—films that deserve to be seen more than once.

A.I. is an unusual venture that might have languished as Stanley Kubrick's final, unfulfilled idea. But Spielberg, a proven director of children, took up the challenge. The film combines his more popular style of storytelling with Kubrick's esoteric and lofty intellectual ambitions. The result is a film about a boy robot programmed to love his human mother, and about a mother who decides to reject that love when the boy's adjustment to human life fails to live up to her expectations.

She does what many unloving mothers might secretly wish they could do with their imperfect offspring: she releases him in the forest. It is a classic fairy tale concept, one that sends David (Haley Joel Osment) on a Pinocchio journey through hell in search of his mother. Earlier, Spielberg displayed his own sense of awe about creation and his ability to work with children in *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (1977) and *E. T.* (1982). Now Spielberg asks the question he posed in *2001: A Space Odyssey*: What does it mean to live in a godless universe? Kubrick does what Ingmar Bergman did for earlier generations: he laments his lack of faith in the reality of God, but plunges ahead in a quest for life's meaning despite God's absence.

The Man Who Wasn't There, by Joel and Ethan Coen, reproduces the feeling of a 1940s detective film, but it owes even more of its tone and spirit to Albert Camus's *The Stranger*. The film's central character drifts through life as if nothing matters (as does Camus's stranger: "Maman died today. Or yesterday, maybe, I don't know")—until he is punished for a crime he did not commit. Billy Bob Thornton is the hapless barber whose wife (Frances McDormand, the pregnant sheriff in the Coens' *Fargo*) cheats on him. The pacing, plot and script borrow from *The Stranger*, *The Odyssey* and *Sullivan's Travels*, while the joyous combination of humor and music will remind viewers of *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*

Mulholland Drive started as a pilot for a television series that was meant to repeat the success of director David Lynch's cult-favorite *Twin Peaks*. When ABC television rejected the pilot, Lynch extended the plot—or more accurately, further confused the plot—into what may or may not be a series of dreams. Lynch's great strength is his ability to portray evil in ordinary people in ordinary settings, as he did vividly in *Blue Velvet*. *Mulholland Drive* resembles *Blue Velvet* far more than it does Lynch's more recent *The Straight Story*. The evil in *Mulholland Drive* is found not in the bad guys of current fame, but in two young women driven by personal ambition.

A Beautiful Mind is based on the life of John Forbes Nash Jr., a brilliant mathematician who still lives and works at Princeton. Sylvia Nasar wrote the biography that provides the film's outline, though director Ron Howard's fictional revision shaped many facts to capture Nash's spirit (offending critics who prefer more literal treatment of real-life stories). Academy Awards voters will look closely at leads Russell Crowe as Nash and Jennifer Connelly as his wife, Alicia. Crowe captures the shuffling shyness of an unadjusted genius who thinks his way to problem-solving in scenes that Howard captures with humor and smooth camera work. Mental illness is involved, but defining mental illness has never been simple, as Nash reminds us when he says that the voices he hears come from the same place that gave him the insights for his Nobel Prize-winning theory.

Amélie, directed by Jean-Pierre Jeunet, is the year's most joyous film, a celebration of the human spirit embodied in the naïve determination of a young French waitress (Audrey Tautou) to interfere in people's lives so as to bring them closer to what is best for them. The picture is hopeful and funny, and at times poignant as Amélie prescribes godlike guidance, and in one instance, some cautionary punishment. Since the world doesn't work the way she thinks it should, she rearranges the order of the universe to bring about a better result.

In the Bedroom is another film that wants to rearrange society. It is drawn from an Andre Dubus short story about death and revenge. This first film of director Todd Fields was developed before the events of September 11, but the drive for revenge fueled by anger over injustice permeates this film. We are reminded of how revenge can become all-absorbing, especially when the justification seems so clear. Sissy Spacek and Tom Wilkinson are the parents whose lives are invaded by tragedy. How they respond provides a film that is painful to watch precisely because it is so honest. No one in the film is without sin but many are quick to throw stones.

The Dish displays some of *In the Bedroom*'s skill at portraying small-town existence, though with a far more positive outcome. Australian director Rob Stitch considers a moment of crisis for the residents of the small community of Parkes, Australia. As the site of a satellite radio telescope, Parkes is recruited by NASA to be a backup site for communicating with Apollo 11. When the primary site loses its signal, the citizens of Parkes must relay the first pictures of a man walking on the moon. An unexpected storm almost causes Parkes to fail. How the people of Parkes, who are well intentioned, naïve and kind, deal with their sudden responsibility makes for a tense, delightful story.

Innocence, another Australian film, makes my list because it presents with considerable insight a rare cinematic subject—a romance between a man and a woman in their 70s. Director Paul Cox, born in Holland, and a citizen of Australia through most of his career, became a well-known name in artistic film circles with his 1983 picture, *Man of Flowers*. Cox is known for films that challenge the conventional. When he learned that a close friend, Sheila Florance, was dying of cancer, he asked her to star in a film about dying. Florance agreed but told Cox, "There is still time to turn me into a star, but let's be quick." She died shortly after *A Woman's Tale* was completed.

Innocence is a sensitive examination of two people who were in love as teenagers but who lost touch as they moved into adulthood and married other people. A chance encounter starts a long-delayed romance, which Cox treats with candor and sensitivity. It is the finest love story of the year.

Baran, Iranian director Magid Magidi's third film, deals with young people living in Iran's Islamic culture (as did his *Children of Heaven* and *The Color of Paradise*). *Baran* focuses on the precarious plight of Afghan refugees who are illegal residents. An award-winning film at the 2001 Montreal Film Festival, *Baran* deserves a wider audience, which it may find now that Afghans have emerged from obscurity.