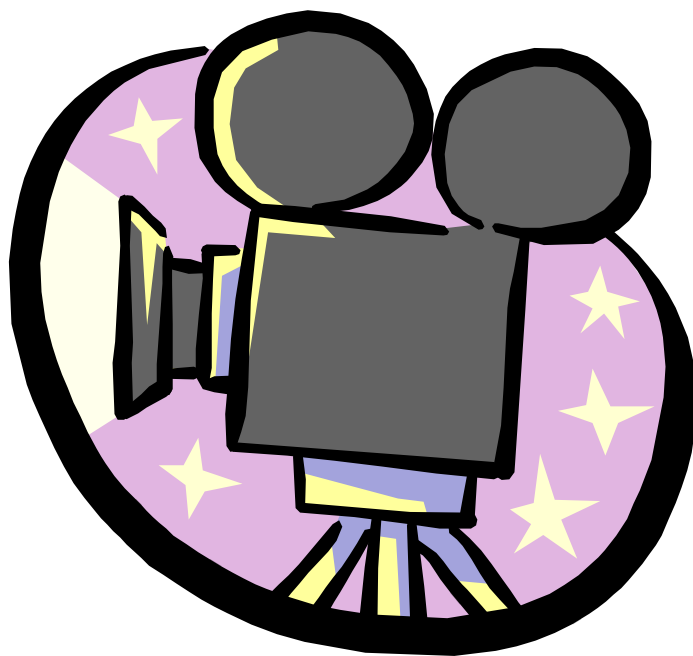


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# Film Reviews 2002



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## Sleepy Hollow



Three or four beheadings into **Sleepy Hollow**, a harum-scarum take on Washington Irving's venerable tale of love, greed and mysticism in the Hudson Valley, one gets the feeling that perhaps director Tim Burton is working in the wrong film. Piffle to the dozen or so decapitations he eventually oversees here. A movie about the French Revolution would have afforded him the opportunity to behead almost a whole social class. Well, maybe next time. Meanwhile, Burton makes do. What the filmmaker gives up in quantity, he makes up for in devotion to detail. Each artistically rendered lopping-off is more gruesome and terrifying than the last. In every instance, the rolling heads screech to an in your face, center-screen stare; the victim's obscene look of horror confirming the obvious.

Think about it, though: Is perfection in this surgical speciality a worthy pursuit for a director of Mr. Burton's calibre? And more importantly, is the end product worthy of our movie-going time. The short answer to both questions is an unmitigated no. But the pity is, just like Terry Malloy in **On The Waterfront**, **Sleepy Hollow** "coulda been sumpin." It "coulda been a contenduh."

Arrogantly dismissing everything but the bare bone basics of the original tale, this rewrite by Andrew Kevin Walker makes the fatal mistake of confusing modernisation for

interpretation. Pandering to what is perceived as the gust populi, he takes the easy way out. It is a short-sighted oversimplification of the artistic process, obviously meant to cash in on the current slice-and-dice craze. But our higher instincts have to believe that a proper reworking of this classic legend that has survived in the national psyche for over 150 years has an essence worth tapping into. That there exists a deep-seated animus, which would not only do the work proud, but, ideally, also find a bigger and better audience than this Philistine version attracts.

Unfortunately, while the risk-taking director has almost always displayed his uniquely bizarre sense of the macabre (**Beetlejuice**, **Edward Scissorhands**), his ruminations here are run of the mill. Though **Sleepy Hollow** has the trademark hue and trappings of a Burtonesque trapeze through the highly imaginative nether world of the mind, the substance beneath the shell doesn't match.

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Likewise, something's amiss in the characterisation department. Heretofore, as either director or producer, Mr. Burton has rarely failed to infatuate via his pantheon of ghoulish and ghostly stick figures (**The Nightmare Before Christmas**) or his darkly drawn cartoonish beings (**Batman**, **Batman Returns**). Yet when the screenplay calls for the sort of real humans that populate Washington Irving's semi-mythic saga, he seems at a loss.

In this rendition, when the head count begins soaring in the Sleepy Hollow of 1799, just two days ride north of New York City, Knickerbocker detective Ichabod Crane is sent to find out why. Portrayed by Johnny Depp in an assignment that seems to allude him, the scientific sleuth arrives with all manner of investigatory contraptions. Informing that some of the gumshoeing gizmos are of his own invention, the bright-eyed bloodhound is painted as the spirit of the next century, a rational humanist with a quirky touch of whimsy. A sharp contrast to the superstition-steeped old burghers (all wonderfully cast) who run the village, he is hesitant to believe that Sleepy Hollow's population is being decimated by, of all things, the headless ghost of a Hessian soldier out for revenge. He surmises that the citizenry shares a guilty secret. But what?

Of course, this earliest of American city slickers is in for a country-style education. And along the way, he, er, falls head over heels for Katrina Van Tassel (Christina Ricci), daughter of

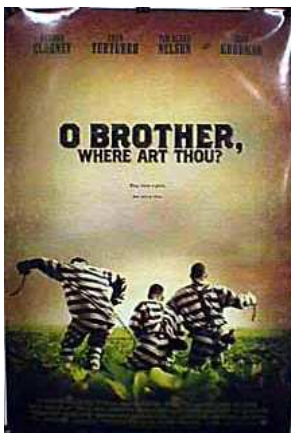
Baltus Van Tassel (Michael Gambon), the hamlet's wealthiest citizen. As the Dutch damsel is for all intents and purposes betrothed to town heartthrob Brom Van Brunt (Casper Van Dien), this makes for a love triangle which is unenthusiastically mixed in with the greater convolutions at hand.

Depp is the outsider, the stranger, the sociologically divergent moral center come to bring reason to the misbehaving folk in the hinterlands, a la Spencer Tracy's one-armed shamus in **Bad Day At Black Rock**. There is promise. He reminds at first of a young Charlie Chan crossed with a rookie Sherlock Holmes. But when the plot can't decide if it's a gothic romance, a detective tale or a monster movie, Mr. Depp's character sympathetically disintegrates into an equally uncertain entity. As the star of **Ed Wood** and **Donnie Brasco** is among this column's favourite young actors, the thespic flub is here noted with a heavy heart. The rest of the film's performances, though not without their colourful moments, are primarily window dressing.

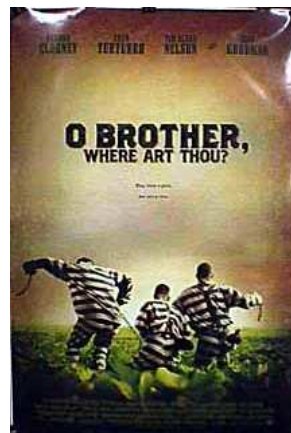
All that remains is the gristle and gore. And though a piker compared to the mayhem Freddy Krueger usually manages to accomplish in feature-length time, you might as well call this "The Headless Horseman Meets Nightmare on Elm Street". With all those decapitations and no strong focus at its core, **Sleepy Hollow** is left with very little to hang its hat on.

Director	Tim Burton
Main Actor/Actress	Johnny Depp Christina Ricci
Rating	ααα

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## Oh Brother, Where Art thou?



Well, it's been two long years since **The Big Lebowski** was released onto a patiently waiting world. Thankfully in the meantime, without prostituting themselves to the marketplace, the Coen brothers have managed to come up with another offbeat masterpiece. What's peculiar though is that **O Brother, Where Art Thou?** seems destined to reach only a select segment of the movie-going population; just like every other Coen film. Why is this? How can something so funny, so smart and so entertaining fail to be embraced by the ordinary man on the street?

Maybe Ethan and Joel Coen are just too erudite for their own good, in terms of what other people can bear? After all, this particular film is based upon Homer's epic poem *The Odyssey*, enough to surely make it unapproachable? Well, no. If this fact wasn't spelt out at the beginning, most folk would never make the connection. You certainly don't need to know anything about Homer to enjoy **O Brother, Where Art Thou?** and during the show you sure don't have time to ponder the similarities. As ever, the script writing is superbly balanced, efficiently hilarious, referential without being obvious and

generally perceptive of human self-interest. It must be fun to work with such rich material.

Of course, it's true to say that the Coen's appear to favour certain actors, including them on a more-or-less continuous basis. John Turturro

(coming close to being unrecognisable) returns here to play inbred Pete Hogwallop, while John Goodman lives up to his character's name, Big Dan Teague. Maybe the Coen's are seen to be perpetuating a clique, from which outsiders are actively excluded? Well, how come George Clooney, as Everett Ulysses McGill, gets the central role in **O Brother, Where Art Thou?** then? Could a more photogenic star have been selected? No, with Tim Blake Nelson along for the ride as self-effacing (and ugly!) Delmar O'Donnel, this theory hardly seems tenable. Given the results, surely cast members are picked purely on the basis of ability?

Still, none of these rebuttals prevent the Coen's from ploughing a furrow idiosyncratic, one that simply lacks wide appeal. This, as an explanation, at least has the virtue of believability. Each and every Coen production is fundamentally different from the last,



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whether in subject matter, style or genre. This is indeed the only way in which the brothers are formulaic! They appear to relish the challenge and rely upon us, the audience, to keep pace. A rewarding approach for sure since **O Brother, Where Art Thou?** is an exceptionally satisfying film. It takes a little while to warm up but from there on in the trajectory is ever skywards.

This is a great tale of men seeking one reward, yet through circumstance discovering one both entirely different and of far greater import. The plot is masterful, a sequence of linked episodes drawing the group ever further into their ordeal; to an endpoint obscured from all but the blind seer (Lee Weaver). Bits and pieces (characters, connections and hints) move in and out of focus, often looking inconsequential and yet you find all of these ingredients essential in the final product. It's remarkable to realise how even the classical Siren's fail to look out-of-place in this Depression era, a testament to Joel Coen's directorial skill. Overall, the

movie betrays an enviable completeness of vision and who cares whether the parent of this is Homer or a Coen; we're still the beneficiaries.

However, and maybe this is the crucial point, Coen productions are intensely individualistic affairs; they tend to produce extreme audience reactions. So, perhaps you'll appreciate the tangential leanings of **O Brother, Where Art Thou?**, its sparks of brilliance and dramatic variety, or maybe you won't. It could be that the Coen brothers are simply too superficial, too wilful for your tastes (and let's be honest, they're not perfect) to the extent that their work repels you. Well, that's nothing to be ashamed of. But, if you're not swayed by T-Bone Burnett's gyrating bluegrass music or entranced by Roger Deakins' bleached, wheat-crop photography then you might as well start asking for a doctor - you may not have a pulse!

Director	The Coen Brothers
Main Actor/Actress	George Clooney
Rating	ααααα

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## American Beauty



There are many, many films out there that concern themselves with the fabled mom's apple-pie family unit. It's easy to grasp why filmmakers, and by extension audiences, are so captivated by this topic; it allows us to gaze upon a mirror image of ourselves, or what we could be in different circumstances. Of course most of these pictures are intentionally weird and hyper-dramatic, concerned only with the immoral underbelly of our culture. It's a fine tool in the right context, though something of a blunt instrument when you're looking to create a more refined portrait. Fortunately director Sam Mendes displays a delicate and gentle touch, astonishing given that this is his first film.

Certainly he's superbly assisted by Alan Ball's screenplay for **American Beauty** (here also work that is its own debut). Ball manages to create characters that are consistently surprising, but not in an artificial manner. The shocks that emerge arrive naturally, from the way the people are and the situations that condense around them; so when Lester Burnham (Kevin Spacey) starts to re-evaluate his life and how

it's being lived, he does so because of certain catalysts. One's Angela Hayes (Mena Suvari), the precocious and sexually aware best friend of his daughter Jane (Thora Birch). The second is new next-door neighbour Ricky Fitts (Wes Bentley), clean-cut yet slightly too confident for one so young. Both have a far greater impact on Lester than they could ever guess.

Of course (as Mendes realises) no matter how good your source material, the end result depends absolutely upon the strength of the cast. That's why he should be grateful to casting director Debra Zane; somehow she manages to populate **American Beauty** with performers talented enough to subsume their egos. Spacey seems truly plugged into his mid-life crisis, revisiting the themes of his youth while casting off unwanted shackles. His portrayal feels deadly accurate, weighted with joy, amazement and concern. As Lester's wife Carolyn, Annette Bening hovers close to the edge of hysteria, grappling with a career that's beyond her capabilities and a neurotic conviction that everything will work out if you try hard enough. Birch is convincing as their spoilt child, hurt but too cool to show the pain, though she's overshadowed by Bentley. In many ways he embodies

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the spirit of **American Beauty**, while still convincing as a man on the cusp of adulthood.

For most of the running time Mendes directs quietly, letting the actors grow into their roles; perhaps a respect learnt from working in theatre. He does, however, wrap **American Beauty** within quotation marks -- the legacy of re-editing Ball's first draft script after the completion of shooting. Right at the outset Lester informs us of his death and how the film covers the last year of his existence, then at the end he lets us in on what it all means. As it happens this prior knowledge doesn't distract, the story is far too engaging for that, but it does stick out if you start to ponder. A more interesting legacy is the short sequence of Jane being camcordered by Ricky; her words stay with you, later reappearing unannounced. As matters spiral towards a bunch of conclusions, you're drawn to the edge of your seat, expectant and nervous. **American Beauty's** that absorbing and a bit of tinkering around the edge is unlikely to cause a problem.

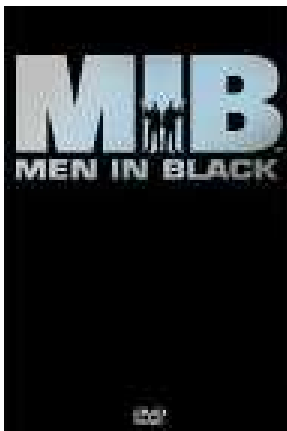
Still, given that this moderately clumsy attempt at setting the context may be down to inexperience, it's handy that a mature hand steers the camera. Conrad L. Hall, almost forty years a photographer, captures a beautifully drawn world. Never jarring in his choice of shot, Hall demonstrates ingenuity and a sense of playfulness; his **American Beauty**

drifts easily between real and surreal, making a delightfully understated marriage. The score complements and underlines this relationship, marking the boundaries of dream thoughts, then evoking memories that we can share with Lester. Driven by superb performances, all of these elements (whether visual, aural or something less concrete) pull together such that the film really fires on all cylinders.

Unlike so many movies, black comedy **American Beauty** feels complete within itself. It's not a message picture, though it's possible to decode a mantra from the drama, and it's definitely not high-concept. What it has is a theme, of looking more closely at life, and vividly drawn characters; these are real people, sedated through complacency, nudged into rediscovering what they'd forgotten about themselves. It's not so much that nothing is as it seems, the film just isn't that cynically manipulative. Instead it shows how if you take folk for granted then sooner or later they'll shock you by acting seemingly out of character; it's not true but your simplistic assumptions make it seem so. **American Beauty** doesn't chart new territory, but then what film does? Instead, intangible and complex, it deals honestly with a fascinating possibility.

Director	Sam Mendes
Main Actor/Actress	Kevin Spacey Mena Suvari
Rating	ααααα

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## Men In Black



A comedy based on the idea that aliens already live among us, merely looking and acting a bit strangely, **Men in Black** makes the best of its meagre plot. Somewhere in the United States, presumably near to the Mexican border, a truck loaded with illegal immigrants motors along. Wary of discovery by border cops, the driver's heart sinks when he catches sight of a roadblock. The game's up and he knows it, being a familiar face to the patrol. However, just as the assorted hopefuls are being lined up, a black sedan barrels to a halt. Disgoring the black-suited figures of Agent K (Tommy Lee Jones) and Agent D (Richard Hamilton), they rapidly assess the situation and airily dismiss the cops. Browsing the parade, K picks out a mumbling oldster and leads him into the trees. Shielded from view, Kay punctures his body to reveal Mikey (John Alexander) cowering inside. A well-known perpetrator, it looks as though K and D are after a different sort of alien altogether.

Back in Manhattan, NYPD officer James Edwards (Will Smith) manages to corner a suspect and proceeds to cuff him. Unfortunately the suspect is a bit of a handful, first pulling out a mysterious weapon (which vaporises when broken), then leaping over James' head and cantering down the street. In a

remarkable chase, which sees the target leap over bridge railings and scale tall buildings, the end comes on a rooftop. Much to James' consternation, instead of giving up the stranger jumps from the parapet, after prophesying that the world is about to end. The very next day, K pays James a visit, intending to straighten him out and uncover the circumstances of the tragedy. Curiously though, instead of erasing James' memory, after extracting all that he needs, K decides to see if he'd make a useful MIB recruit.

Directed to the unremarkable Tunnel Authority building by K, James finds himself tossed (without explanation) into a bunch of over-stuffed hotshots. Since everyone else seems to have a bar of steel for a spine and the standard military grimace, James sticks out like a sore thumb. For the first test, Agent Z (Rip Torn) gets them concentrating on a meaningless exam, while K observes their reactions from behind mirror glass. Obviously someone likes James, because he soon gets selected by K and offered the job of, essentially, intergalactic customs officer. Understandably reluctant to entertain K's delusions any longer, James turns him down flat; after all, there can't really be any aliens, can there? Well, judging by the rowdy, drunken, crazy



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insect-things serving coffee, it's time for some re-assessment. Thus James becomes Agent J, an anonymous and unknown rookie.

A tongue-in-cheek ride of outer-space technology, protoplasmic aliens and witty retorts, **Men in Black** succeeds because it is simply very funny. Working from the excellent premise that Earth is a kind of neutral zone for extra-terrestrial refugees, most of whom wind up in Manhattan, an entire sub-culture takes shape. The MIB's job is to check out the new arrivals and monitor their status. Many aliens take human form and ordinary jobs, which explains a few of the taxi-drivers, while some become famous (Elvis and Sylvester Stallone for example). The public are kept in the dark, via judicious use of memory-erasing devices, while the supermarket tabloids have actually got their facts right. Even better, to maintain their funds the MIB license velcro and microwave oven technology from their off-world chums. Endowed with such a magnificence of detail, it's thus of little importance that the script has no significant depth. It's the usual story of saving the planet to a deadline, which is all that you need to know. **Men in Black** refuses to give you the chance to notice this superficiality while you're watching though, yet afterwards it just doesn't matter.

Similar in spirit to **Mars Attacks!**, **Men in Black** goes one better with its inspired teaming of Smith and Jones. The latter plays his role as a burnt-out and cynical long-serving MIB member arrow straight. Barely cracking a smile throughout, his deadpan delivery sets up Smith perfectly. An utter contrast,

Smith is cocky, naive and blessed with great timing. Everything seems to amaze him, yet he always manages to rise to the occasion. Linda Fiorentino (Dr. Laurel Weaver) and Rip Torn do well in what are essentially bit parts, created more as catalysts of the Smith-Jones chemistry than as characters in their own right. Perhaps the greatest accolade should go to Vincent D'Onofrio however, for a stunning performance as the bug inhabiting Edgar. Every movement and word is a bitter struggle, a dance of jerky stanzas and limbs that refuse to obey orders. It's inspiring merely to watch D'Onofrio stagger around, despite the fact that he doesn't make much of an assassin.

A definite surprise with **Men in Black** is that while the special effects are imaginative and effective, Barry Sonnenfeld prevents them from dominating. Instead a whole range of tentacle waving, body-changing, bizarre life forms are consigned to the background, adding to the richness of the film rather than distracting from the actors. Even waves of neat devices, like ray-guns and a rocket car, fail to intrude on the Smith-Jones double act. With knowing humour, they hog the foreground and effortlessly carry the movie. It's kind of ironic really, given that the MIB are meant to blend in, with agents never being noticed except as the shadows that operate on the margins of society. So, add in another fine Danny Elfman score, some rapid editing and a bunch of sight gags, then shake vigorously to get a winner. No more than a light-hearted romp, **Men in Black** doesn't get ideas above its station; that's its secret.

Director	Barry Sonnerfield
Main Actor/Actress	Tommy Lee Jones Will Smith
Rating	aaa