



In Search for Direction, Movies Often Find a Grounding

In the series-ending episode of the best television show that never caught on (it only lasted two seasons), a mysterious company called *Quo Vadimus* buys the parent company of the show and saves it from certain cancellation. When the show's producer (Felicity Huffman) meets the company's mysterious owner in a bar (yes, he's mysterious, too; you'd have to see it), he tells her the name is Latin for "Where are we going?" This question was central to two great movies last year (*Up* and *Up in the Air*) and prompted me to take look at others that provide a directional cue in the title.

Up

★★★★

2009, Rated PG, 96 minutes

This animated feature from Pixar is a touching story about an introverted, bitter old man (voice of Ed Asner) who lives his whole life dreaming of going on a big adventure with his out-going wife. She is the spark in his life that keeps him going, from boyhood on through adulthood, and when she dies before he does, he doesn't know what he's going to go. When commercial development encroaches on the home the two had made together, he finally decides to seek the adventure the two always promised each other. He elevates the house with a massive amount of helium balloons (it's animated, so it works) and heads

for points south, but not before picking up a pudgy stowaway who makes him re-examine his life even further.

Up in the Air

★★★★

2009, Rated R, 109 minutes

George Clooney is a professional terminator. He flies the country firing people for company bosses who don't have the guts to do it themselves. He is content to do this while pursuing his goal of racking up massive amounts of frequent flier miles so that he may someday join an elite group of frequent travelers. His philosophy of life, one around which he has even developed a self-help seminar, is keep moving and keep your baggage to a minimum, especially your emotional baggage. A series of events including the training of a young and eager associate (Anna Kendrick), an opportunistic affair with another frequent traveler (Vera Farminga), and his sister's wedding all force him to take another look at whether his life's pursuit has all been for nothing.

Sideways

★★★★

2004, Rated R, 126 minutes

Former college roommates Miles and Jack (Paul

Giammati and Thomas Haden Church) head to California's wine country on a week-long road trip for a few last hurrahs before Jack is to get married. They try hard not to annoy each other while Miles fights the depression of his recent divorce and Jack feeds his need to sow as many wild oats as he can. And they both fail miserably. Along the way they meet a lovely waitress, Maya, (Virginia Madsen) and wine pourer, Stephanie, (Sandra Oh) who prove to be their long- and short-term love interests. Directed by the always innovative and clever Alexander Payne, this was one of the smartest comedies of the last decade.

U-Turn

★★★

1997, Rated R, 125 minutes

Sometimes, it just doesn't pay to get out of bed. Two-bit gambler Sean Penn is on his way to Vegas to pay off a debt when his car blows a radiator hose near a desert town. He limps his car to a garage where his troubles begin with the surly grease monkey (Billy Bob Thornton). He then finds more trouble with a blind beggar (Jon Voight), the local femme fatale (Jennifer Lopez), her jealous husband (Nick Nolte), the town sheriff (Powers Boothe), a crazed teen (Claire Danes), and her nutty boyfriend (Joaquin Phoenix). Nothing goes right as he spirals downward in conspiracies of theft, murder, incest, adultery, and just plain elitism, finally wishing only to escape before he finds himself dead. Oliver Stone directs this over-the-top calamity where everything is just a little too convoluted. Even though it's loaded with talent, it never seems to rise above a B-movie drama.

Falling Down

★★★★

1993, Rated R, 113 minutes

Michael Douglas is D-Fens, a name taken from the license plate of the car he abandons in an L.A. freeway traffic jam. He decides it would be quicker to leave the car and just walk (and haven't we all been there). His trek along the mean streets of Los Angeles quickly leads to encounters with a hostile world and societal ills, from rude grocery clerks to gang bangers, and he responds with forceful violence that makes him an outlaw. He is pursued by Robert Duvall, a cop on his last day before retiring. The two head for an ultimate confrontation where they can debate what's wrong with the world today.

Turn Left

★★

2006, Not Rated, 75 minutes

This low-budget crime spree drama features four thugs driving from Oregon to Vegas for a big casino heist. Their plans quickly unravel when their hot-headed associate can't control his desire to kill, hardly a good strategy when you are trying to lay low. The four fight a lot, even having a heated discussion on which way to turn, as their destination and big payday proves to be more and more elusive. Told in a non-linear series of flashbacks and jumps-forward, I give the creators a little credit for trying to do something different, even though it never quite rises above the bad acting.

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