

Willem Dafoe's 20 best films – ranked!

[Andrew Pulver](#)

20. Tom & Viv (1994)

Dafoe wasn't natural casting as the clerkly TS Eliot in this literary biopic, which chronicled the poet's troubled first marriage – and it showed, despite his customary actorly intelligence. If nothing else, it proved that, his highbrow credentials notwithstanding, Dafoe wasn't really cut out for the anglophile heritage pics that littered the 1990s.

19. Mississippi Burning (1988)

A technically precise but essentially unrewarding role in the Alan Parker civil rights pic. Dafoe plays a straight-arrow fed investigating the disappearing of vote-drive volunteers in the Klan-haunted 60s deep south alongside co-star Gene Hackman, who has much the showier role. Leading with razor-sharp side parting and horn-rimmed specs, it's one of a long succession of cops and authority figures that has paid Dafoe's rent over the years.



As Ward in Mississippi Burning. Photograph: Cinetext/Orion/Allstar

18. Finding Nemo (2003)

An inspired bit of voice casting that gave Dafoe his biggest box office result to date. He played Gill, the “tank gang” leader who teaches Nemo self-reliance and – crucially – comes up with the schemes to get the fish out of the dentist’s waiting room. Surreal in itself to hear Dafoe’s gravelly tones in a Disney picture.

17. Spider-Man (2002)

Dafoe was an early-ish adopter of the new wave of comic-book pics; he wasn’t the first choice for the Green Goblin supervillain role, but it turned out a smart move on director Sam Raimi’s part, with Dafoe’s ability to project both complete sincerity and terrifying menace brought to bear –

especially in the now celebrated mirror scene, where the two halves of his personality argue with each other.

16. The Loveless (1981)

Dafoe's first lead role was for a fresh-from-film-school Kathryn Bigelow, co-directing with future Wild at Heart producer Monty Montgomery. A slice of early-80s 50s-revival chic, Dafoe is the super-hunky leader of a Wild Angels-ish outlaw biker gang. Presumably prioritising his work with avant-garde performance outfit the [Wooster Group](#), Dafoe isn't really relaxed in front of the camera – but he looks amazing, like Audie Murphy's crackhead cousin.



As Vance in The Loveless. Photograph: Collection Christophel/Alamy

15. Streets of Fire (1984)

Dafoe doesn't have a whole lot to do until the last 20 minutes of Walter Hill's DayGlo rock'n'roll musical, and his twitchy greaser supervillain Raven is basically a nastier version of The Loveless' Vance. But he makes the most of the climactic fight scene, giving it maximum voltage as he pummels Michael Paré with a platelayer's hammer.

14. Auto Focus (2002)

Paul Schrader has given Dafoe a good number of top-notch supporting roles, and this one, as the alleged murderer of sleazeball TV actor Bob Crane, is one of the most interestingly modulated. As video whiz John Carpenter, Dafoe moves from ingratiating manipulator to desperate killer with impressive conviction.

13. White Sands (1992)

Dafoe proved he could carry a mainstream picture with this entertainingly twisty and atmospheric cop thriller directed by Roger Donaldson. Dafoe plays a smalltown lawman who enthusiastically stumbles into a high-stakes espionage kill-off; the patsy-type role doesn't exactly play to his strengths, but he's the movie's solid centre.

The Last Temptation of Christ. Photograph: Snap
Stills/REX/Shutterstock

12. The Last Temptation of Christ (1988)

This was supposed to be Dafoe's big breakthrough to leading-man status – as ever, he gives it his all, successfully conveying the deadly seriousness of director

Martin Scorsese's intent. But it didn't really happen for him: Dafoe's self-lacerating contribution was overshadowed by the wider furore, as the film was engulfed in protests, threats and bans.

11. Platoon (1986)

Dafoe had a huge mainstream hit with Oliver Stone's vision of the Vietnam war as a lawless charnel house. His role, memorably encapsulated in the film's Christ-like poster image, is the film's moral conscience, the good angel in Charlie Sheen's ear. But, as we know, he is cut down by Tom Berenger's brutal Sgt Barnes and then [finished off in slo-mo by the Viet Cong](#).

10. Wild at Heart (1990)

Dafoe is in David Lynch's Palme d'Or winner for less than half an hour, but what an impact he makes. As sneering triggerman Bobby Peru, equipped with pencil moustache and prosthetic additions to his already-prominent choppers, Dafoe achieved his most alarming grotesque yet. The scene where he terrorises Laura Dern's Lula is still genuinely upsetting.

9. Shadow of the Vampire (2000)

Dafoe got a best supporting actor Oscar nomination for his role in this enterprising take on the making of the influential silent film Nosferatu. Under the layers of makeup and bald

cap, Dafoe does an excellent job of making his Schreck/Orlok vampire-actor seem eminently plausible.

As Max Schreck in *Shadow of the Vampire*. Photograph: Saturn Films/Bbc Films/Allstar

8. To Live and Die in LA (1985)

In retrospect, the high point of Dafoe's mainstream pomp. As the vicious counterfeiter Rick Masters, Dafoe makes for a properly scary Hollywood bad guy, opposite William Petersen's 501s-wearing secret service agent Richard Chance. With Masters' background as an artist, it's a role that could cleverly take advantage of Dafoe's never-buried-far sensitive side.

7. Tommaso (2019)/Siberia (2020)

In Abel Ferrara, Dafoe has found a partner willing to give

him free rein to explore his out-there preoccupations – as well as being one of the few directors to give him serious leading roles. These two films, unofficial companion pieces, are arguably Ferrara's most personal, and show Dafoe at his best: articulate, committed and unfazed by even the weirdest dramatic situations.



As Martin in *The Hunter*. Photograph: Allstar/Magnolia Pictures

6. *The Hunter* (2011)

Dafoe has had to range widely in search of suitably heavyweight roles, and this one took him all the way to Tasmania. As a freelance secret operative assigned to hunt down the supposedly extinct Tasmanian tiger, he could deploy the tricky actor's craft of just doing things

methodically, on his own for long periods. There's a moral crisis thrown in, too, at which Dafoe is a past master.

5. The Florida Project (2017)

Dafoe got another supporting actor Oscar nomination for this fatherly role, in which he radiates concern and exasperation in equal measure as a Disney World-adjacent motel manager. The main focus of his anxiety are mother-and-daughter pair Halley and Moonee (Bria Vinaite and Brooklynn Prince); they, in truth, are the film's stars, but Dafoe is the ballast.

As Bobby in The Florida Project. Photograph: Cre Film/Kobal/Rex/Shutterstock

4. Antichrist (2009)

Whether or not you buy into the sincerity of arch provocateur Lars von Trier's occult horror (and the [Guardian's Peter Bradshaw certainly didn't](#)), there's no doubting the total commitment of Dafoe and Charlotte Gainsbourg, the two main players in this dance of trauma, sex and death. Dafoe is a therapist attempting to treat his

grief-consumed wife after their toddler son falls to his death; his super-earnest articulacy is infused with an unfamiliar note of superciliousness – though it's of course abandoned by the time of the film's nightmarish climactic confrontation.

3. At Eternity's Gate (2018)

With his seamed and blocky visage, Dafoe was perfect casting for Vincent van Gogh in Julian Schnabel's treatment of the painter's turbulent final months, and the film is very much a communion from one artist to another. The director focuses on Van Gogh's act of looking, and as the possessor of Hollywood's most piercing stare, Dafoe carries it off beautifully, as well as convincingly handling the more troubling later episodes. Many have tried to portray artistic rapture on screen without looking like an idiot; Dafoe is one of the vanishingly few who have pulled it off.

2. The Lighthouse (2019)

There is something about being matched with a gifted co-star (see *Antichrist*) that brings out the best in Dafoe, and this two-hander with Robert Pattinson has the added sense of the passing of a baton to a new generation. As the elder and crustier of a pair of men looking after a lighthouse in the late 19th century, Dafoe handles some ripely ornate dialogue with aplomb in a battle of wits and authority with the sulky Pattinson. And like Lars von Trier, director Robert Eggers goes full eco-freaky and puts Dafoe through the

wringer physically; the actor's battered body stands up well.

1. Light Sleeper (1992)

In the early 90s, before the juicy supporting roles and eye-catching cameos began piling up, Dafoe looked as if he had a long stint as a leading man in front of him, the sort of career Johnny Depp or Robert Downey Jr have had.

Looking back, it's clear that Dafoe was a shade too uncompromising to connect with audiences in the same way. But this now-unfashionable Paul Schrader film gave Dafoe a near-perfect role: a drug courier with an emotional investment in his clients, lovelorn over his ex-wife, and the unwitting focus of the romantic attentions of his supplier (played by Susan Sarandon). *Light Sleeper* allowed him to convey all the subtleties that make him a great actor: conviction, honesty, self-doubt and weakness. One of the great performances, well worth revisiting.

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