

Using Films in Christian Communication

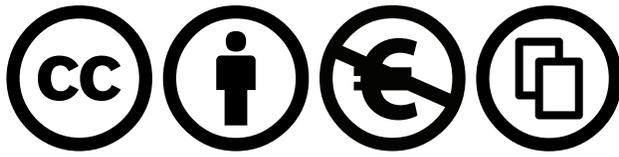
Tony Watkins



Text

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Life in the mediasphere



Sean Penn's wonderful film *Into the Wild* (2007) tells the true story of a young man who abandons normal middle class life, gives everything away and hitch-hikes to Alaska where he plans to live in the wilderness. He wants to be surrounded by a beautiful landscape, not a cityscape. Most of us rarely stop to reflect on the landscapes or cityscapes where we live because our attention is largely captured by the 'mediascape'. The media surround us for most of our waking hours. We constantly consume radio

shows, social media, websites, advertisements, music, television, magazines and more. Sometimes they invade our lives, whether we like it or not; other times, we actively turn to them for information or entertainment. They are so much a part of the background of our lives that we seldom pay close attention. We forget what we see and hear almost immediately. Some media have a much greater impact, however. One in particular combines huge popularity with massive impact: film. It is true that many more people watch television than go to the cinema. But very many people buy or rent DVDs, or watch movies on television. There are very few television programmes which impact us as strongly (exceptions include *24*, *Lost*, *The West Wing* and a handful of others) as films do. There are plenty of poor films around, of course. But even watching a fairly average film is often a more memorable experience than watching most television programmes.

Intense experiences

Why do films have such an impact on us? It is not just a matter of how much time we spend watching them. Rather, it is because of the way we watch them. We are intentional about it. We actively choose to go to the cinema, buy DVDs or stream movies on the Internet. It costs us in both time and money, so we feel cross when a film is poor. When we go to the local multiplex, we engage with the film even more actively than we do at home. Not only have we made a deliberate choice about what to watch, but the darkness, big screen and intense sound create a much more vivid experience. These factors combine to focus our attention – usually – in a quite intense way. With potent experiences like this, it is no surprise that films have a strong impact on people.

What films do to us

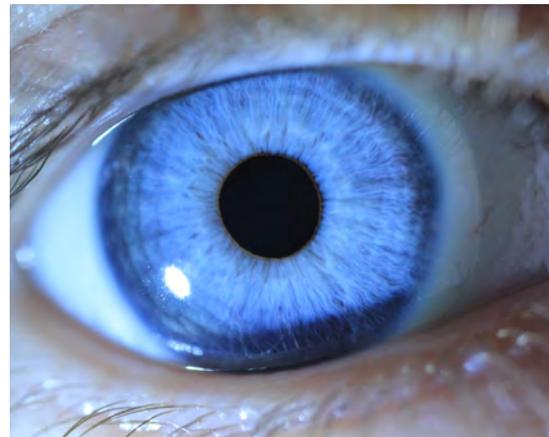
Films tell us stories which draw us in. They make us laugh and cry; they thrill us and scare us; they transport us to faraway places and bring to life things we could only dream of; they stretch

our thinking and enable us to see life through different eyes. Films tell stories about characters with whom we identify to a greater or lesser extent. It may be because we feel we are like those characters, or it may be because we share similar goals. So, at some levels, films hold up a mirror, helping us to see something of what we're like or what our society is like. However, films also shape us. We see ourselves and our world reflected back to us, but they are distorted reflections. We easily forget that what we see on screen is a distortion or, at least, a very narrow slice of reality. And then what we see gets into our heads and takes root, whether we realise it or not. Over time, the beliefs, values and behaviour we see on screen starts to seem normal, and our own beliefs, values and behaviour begin to subtly shift. Gradually the distorted reflection is less and less of a distortion.

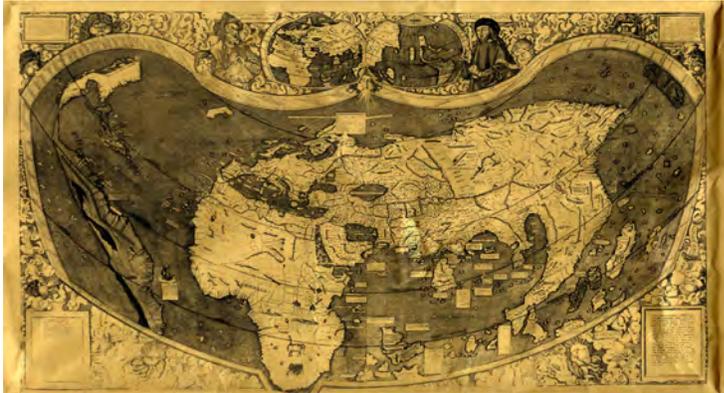
Shaping worldviews

What this means is that films – and other media – influence our thinking, our values and eventually our behaviour. It usually happens gradually, but occasionally there can be a dramatic shift. A film like *The Blind Side* (John Lee Hancock, 2009), in which Sandra Bullock plays a Republican Christian mother who takes in a very disadvantaged African American boy, can inspire people to be compassionate to others. Although since 9/11, it seems that film-makers have become more obviously political, most of the time, film-makers are more concerned to tell a story than to actively promote their own beliefs and values. However, it is inevitable that their perspectives shape the stories they tell and the films they make. And as viewers, we take in at least some of the underlying ideas, whether we realise it or not.

These underlying ideas and values are mainly communicated through the story itself: what actually happens and what is said on screen. But the way the story is told and filmed can also encourage people (perhaps in subtle ways, or maybe quite blatantly) to accept some perspectives and to reject others. *Lord of War* (Andrew Niccol, 2005) tells the story of an arms dealer, Yuri (Nicolas Cage), who loses almost everything yet learns nothing from the experience and goes back to arms dealing. Yuri experiences no redemption, and he is far from being a positive role model, but the way the film is made encourages us to recognise that his behaviour and attitudes are morally defective. In *Creation* (Jon Amiel, 2009), Charles Darwin's friend, the local minister (Jeremy Northam), is portrayed quite negatively, reinforcing the feeling that science and religion are at war. Given the power of movies, it's no surprise that they play a part in shaping our culture. Over time, they contribute to the weakening of some ideas or values which are prevalent in society, and to the strengthening of others. Expectations of love and romance in the modern world have, to a large degree, been created by the movies. Like it or not, films shape our thinking.



Film and worldviews



While films tell stories and may have all kinds of things to say about love or politics or society or all kinds of other things, under the surface they are expressions of worldviews. A worldview is a person's most fundamental convictions about reality. James Sire defines a worldview as 'a commitment, a fundamental orientation of the heart, that can be expressed as a story or in a set of presuppositions'.¹

They shape our lives; they are the foundations on which all of our decisions are based. Surprisingly, perhaps, many people are not very aware of their own worldview, never mind the worldviews of others. This is as true of film-makers as anyone else. They make films without necessarily being aware of how their basic assumptions about reality are affecting every choice they make along the way.

Seeing and navigating

How is it that worldviews affect all these choices? Our worldviews develop in response to the things that happen to us and ideas which we encounter. We draw conclusions about the way the world works and if those conclusions get reinforced by new information, we gradually develop our particular way of looking at the world. J. Mark Bertrand says, 'A worldview is an interpretation of influences, experiences, circumstances and insight.'² That's why people often draw an analogy between worldviews and spectacles or contact lenses which we wear constantly. They govern the way we view everything we encounter and therefore the way in which we respond. We probably see things in similar, though not precisely the same, ways to many of the people around us. Our worldview – our way of interpreting the world, our set of assumptions – is unique to us because of the particular set of experiences we have had.

Another analogy which people sometimes use is that of a map. Mark Bertrand says we should think of old sea charts, with 'sketchy outlines of unknown coasts, uncharted islands, and sea

¹ James R.W. Sire, *Naming the Elephant* (IVP, 2004) p. 122.

² J. Mark Bertrand, *Rethinking Worldview: Learning to Think, Live and Speak in the World* (Crossway Books, 2007) p. 26.

serpents coiled in the margin',³ rather than highly accurate modern maps. Worldview maps are approximations to what is really real. Nevertheless, like the old sailors, we trust them to navigate through life, and when we're sailing in familiar waters they serve us very well. It's when we venture somewhere new that we sometimes discover that our worldview map is not a good guide.

Creativity and worldviews

The creative process of writing, filming and editing is driven by the need to tell the story (or sometimes, it seems, by the need to string together a series of spectacular effects). Nevertheless, questions of worldview are inescapable here since, as we have seen, they lie at the root of everything we think and do. When someone sits down to write a screenplay, they bring to the task their individual way of looking at the world. Their experiences contribute to what is written; the ideas they have encountered form places constraints on the narrative which takes place. Similarly, when filming starts, the director works within his or her worldview and will portray reality in certain ways, whereas another director might portray it in very different ways. The filmmakers' worldview maps lead them in some directions, not others; they see the world through their lenses, not someone else's.

Since worldviews are these 'fundamental orientations of the heart', and since worldviews inevitably shape the things we do and say and create, it is important for Christians to be aware of them. That means more than simply acknowledging their existence, but working to understand what the worldview is. In terms of the map analogy, we need to try to discern the major features of someone else's map and see if we can identify where it differs from our own. With respect to engaging films, therefore, we need to be alert to clues within each film which may help us to identify the contours of the underlying worldview.

³ Bertrand, *Rethinking Worldview*, p. 31.

Worldview dimensions

There are five key dimensions of any worldview map to which we we need to pay very careful attention. They may seem a little abstract or theoretical at first. In fact, all of them have significant practical implications for life because they form the foundation on which the rest of life is lived. They are all inter-related, and each of them has many smaller features which we could to pay attention to. I can only introduce each of them briefly here.

1. Reality

The first dimension is reality itself. What kind of world do we live in? What really is real? Is it just the physical world, or could there be a spiritual world, too? And if so, what kind of beings live in it?

Film has become a global medium, but the majority of the films we see are the products of western culture – a culture which has been profoundly shaped by Christianity for centuries. As a result of this, a significant number of films assume a broadly Judeo-Christian view of reality.

That is, the material world is not the sum total of what is real; there is also a spiritual realm. Occasionally, there are films which make this very explicit. *Bruce Almighty* (Tom Shadyac, 2003) and *Evan Almighty* (Tom Shadyac, 2007) are two obvious examples. *The Exorcism of Emily Rose* (Scott Derrickson, 2005) is another. Here Christian and rationalist perspectives on the nature of reality are pitched against each other in a tense court-room drama with horror sequences.



Often the existence of some spiritual reality is explored through stories in which the central characters are asking big questions about life, or are facing some major crisis. Michael Keaton's directorial debut, *The Merry Gentleman* (2009), hints at the possibility of a spiritual reality: one of the two main characters, played by Kelly Macdonald, is inspired by a statue of Jesus she sees when wandering into a church one day. It seems that she is not at all sure of whether or not God really exists, yet there is a faint suggestion that a higher power may be at work behind the scenes.

Challenging perspectives

Over the last century or so, several intellectual movements have strongly challenged traditional Christian beliefs. In particular, atheism has become an enormously significant force in the west. Very many films contain no reference to, or even a hint of, God or a spiritual dimension to life. That doesn't necessarily mean that they are based on an atheistic worldview, though. Obviously,

spiritual dimensions simply aren't a particularly relevant aspect of many stories. Some films, though, clearly have a view of reality which excludes the spiritual, or is at least sceptical about the idea.

Woody Allen's well-known scepticism about the existence of God is expressed in many of his films. In *Vicky Cristina Barcelona* (2009), for example, Vicky (Rebecca Hall) and Cristina (Sacrete Johansson), meet an artist, Juan Antonio (Javier Bardem). He invites them to join him for a weekend in Oviedo, where he plans to visit a sculpture he finds inspiring. The statue he shows them is of Jesus on the cross. Cristina asks him if he is very religious. Juan Antonio insists strongly that he is not, and adds, 'The trick is to enjoy life, accepting it has no meaning whatsoever.'

Ricky Gervais's atheism is clear in his film *The Invention of Lying*. It is about a world where people can only speak the truth until Gervais's character, Mark, suddenly discovers the ability to make things up. One of the things he dreams up, in order to comfort his dying mother, is the idea of a kindly 'Man in the Sky'. Everyone automatically believes that Mark is telling the truth, so his falsehood spreads like wildfire, and he embellishes it further. Eventually he has huge numbers of followers believing his lie. The implication is clear: religion is nothing but a human invention to stop us feeling afraid.

The nature of reality is clearly a central question in Jon Amiel's film about Charles Darwin, *Creation*. It shows Darwin (Paul Bettany) struggling with the question of suffering in the world. He is troubled by the apparent cruelty of the natural world, and he presses his friend, the local vicar, on the question of why God created 900 species of intestinal worms. Much more personally, Darwin is torn apart by grief over the death of his much-loved daughter Annie, aged 10. Darwin has concluded that, if there is a God, he has done nothing other than start everything off, and is not at all involved in the world.

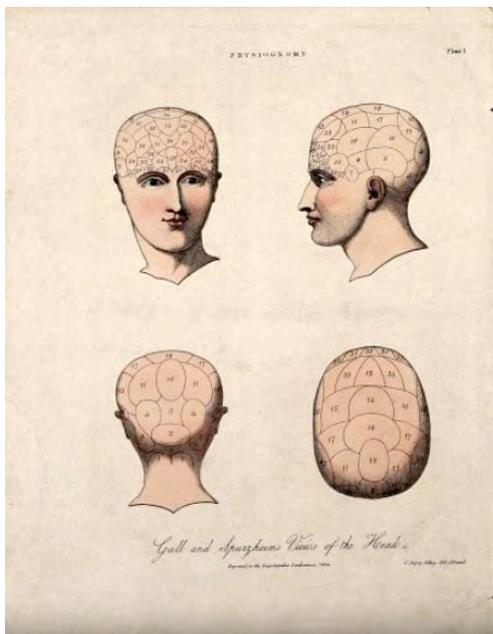
Reality and illusion

Eastern ideas have been an influence on films since the hippy days of the late 1960s, but particularly since the emergence of New Age spirituality in the 1980s. The eastern understanding of reality is that the physical world is illusory, and that the only true reality is spiritual. This perspective comes through very strongly in the *Matrix* trilogy. Hindu and Buddhist ideas pervade all three films (along with many other influences, including Christianity, Greek myths and postmodernism), especially in its questioning of the nature of reality. In *The Matrix* (Andy and Larry Wachowski, 1999), Neo (Keanu Reeves) discovers that the apparently physical world in which he had lived his entire life is, in fact, an illusion – a computer simulation called the Matrix. He is rescued into another level of reality – a world largely destroyed through warfare between humans and machines. He learns to control the Matrix 'reality' by his mind; there is nothing he cannot do while he is within it. But at the end of the second film, *The Matrix Reloaded* (2003), Neo is able to use his mind to destroy enemy sentinels in the 'real' world (that is, not inside the

Matrix). It is evident that this level of reality can be no more real than the Matrix. Westerners instinctively assume that this, too, is a computer simulation, and that there must be yet a further level of reality which really is physical. The Wachowskis never resolve this because, in eastern thinking, however, there is *no* physical reality; it's *all* an illusion.

Most films coming out of Hollywood don't deal with the question of reality very explicitly. They take for granted the existence of the material universe and sometimes have a vague suggestion of some further spiritual dimension. That's because, even now, the traditional Judeo-Christian view of reality is still the default way of thinking for the majority of people. It's a dualist view – seeing reality as composed of two distinct aspects. The rise of eastern and pagan or nature-based spiritualities, however, has led to beliefs about spiritual reality becoming increasingly fuzzy. We are at an interesting – and confusing – point in the development of worldviews in the west with people hanging on to some aspects of a Judeo-Christian worldview while rejecting the specifically Christian understanding of what it means and bringing in eastern or pagan ideas in their place.

2. Humanity



The second key aspect of worldviews is the nature of human beings. What does it mean to be human? This is closely bound up with the question of reality, of course. Are we simply physical beings – very clever animals or biological machines – or are we also spiritual beings? What happens when we die? The question of our identity – what and who we really are – is so important to us that is vital to reflect specifically on what films say about the matter.

The possibility of a spiritual dimension to human beings is obviously often explored in films which are about death. *The Lovely Bones* (Peter Jackson, 2010) is about the abduction, rape and murder of a twelve-year-old girl, Susie (Saoirse Ronan). Much of the film is about her experiences after death. She is in limbo, a beautiful in-between state; she is dead but not in

heaven, and often aware of what is happening in the world of the living. There is no mention of God in the film, yet it assumes that life continues after death and that we might go to heaven. This kind of God-free afterlife is what many people in western cultures now believe. They have rejected the traditional Christian belief in a day of judgment followed by eternal life or expulsion from God's presence, but they don't want to let go of the idea of heaven. It's exactly what we get in Ridley Scott's *Gladiator* (2000) which it concludes with a powerful death sequence in which the hero (Russell Crowe) is reunited with his murdered family.

Life after death

What Dreams May Come (Vincent Ward, 1998) is primarily about the afterlife, following the death of the central character Chris (Robin Williams). He has made it into heaven because he was basically a decent man, not because of any faith. There is no indication of how he is judged to have reached the required standard; it's simply a question of cosmic cause and effect, like karma. His wife Ann (Annabella Sciorra), however, commits suicide because of her unbearable grief and therefore ends up in hell, so Chris, feeling that this is unjust, sets out to rescue her. It seems to be a mixture of ancient Greek and eastern ideas of life after death, with a little Christian material thrown in for good measure.

Chris Sinkinson says that, 'Contemporary western culture is now trying to find a new concept of death.' He notes that in *What Dreams May Come* and in *Flatliners* (Joel Schumacher, 1990):

. . . the experience after death is related quite directly to how we think in this world. The after-death world is a place of our own imagination and its contents depend upon the kind of moral imagination we have had. A suicide victim is portrayed as being in hell. The hell is of her own making as she has chosen a thought world of intense self-pity. Even in heaven, God is nowhere to be found in the world of *What Dreams May Come*? One character admits not knowing where God is but speculates; 'He's up there somewhere shouting that he loves us and wondering why no one is listening.' The film portrays heaven as the product of our personal imagination and not the gift of a personal God.⁴

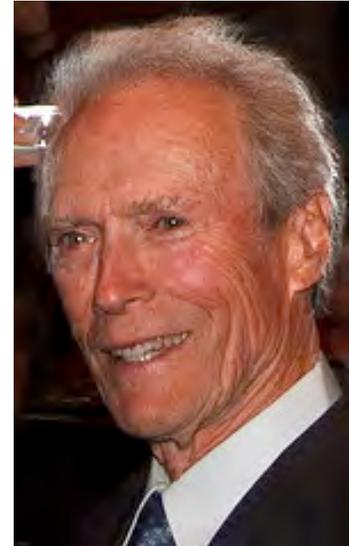
In eastern thinking, death leads to successive cycles of reincarnation until a state of nirvana, or enlightenment, is reached. It is still relatively uncommon in western cinema, though it is clearly present in the *Matrix* trilogy, particularly with the reincarnation of The Oracle (Gloria Foster/Mary Alice), and it is discussed in Richard Linklater's *Before Sunrise* (1995) and *Before Sunset* (2004). The most entertaining film about it is *Dean Spanley* (Toa Fraser, 2008), in which we gradually realise that the Dean (Sam Neill) had previously been a dog.

Burdens of life

The nature of humanity is explored in other ways, too, of course. *Cold Souls* (Sophie Barthes, 2009) tells the story of a man (Paul Giamatti) whose soul is weighed down but who engages the services of a company which stores or exchanges souls. It is a biting satire on a materialist view of human nature and on the contemporary willingness to sell our souls in a bid to gain short-term happiness. What Paul finally realises is similar to what Joel (Jim Carrey) realises in *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* (Michel Gondry, 2004): that we must accept the bad aspects of life as well as the good to be authentically human. Suffering and pain are part of reality, at least in this world.

⁴ Chris Sinkinson, 'World Religions: A Matter of Life and Death', *Culturewatch*, 2000.

Clint Eastwood has directed a number of films in recent years that very thoughtfully examine aspects of human nature and identity. *Mystic River* (2003) explored similar territory to *Unforgiven* (1992): the capacity for evil that lurks in the human heart, and therefore also the yearning for some kind of redemption (these also relate to other worldview aspects which we shall consider shortly). In contrast, Paul Thomas Anderson also points to the darkness within us in *There Will Be Blood* (2007), but with little or no sense of redemption being genuinely possible. Eastwood's films seem to be rooted in a basically Christian worldview which highlights our fallenness, insists on moral absolutes and offers the possibility of redemption. *There Will Be Blood*, however, seems to suggest, when taking into account its mockery of religion, that there is nothing beyond us. Therefore there is ultimately nothing driving us other than simple self-interest, which expresses itself aggressively when the pressure is on. This is nihilism.



Eastwood's pair of films from 2007 about the Battle of Iwo Jima, *Flags of our Fathers* and *Letters from Iwo Jima*, both explore some of the tensions in human nature: our capacity for courage as well as fear, and our sense of responsibility to others as well as the instinct for self-preservation. They reflect the Christian view of human beings as being capable of immense good because we are God's image-bearers, and of immense evil because we are fallen. More recently, Eastwood's *Gran Torino* (2009) and *Invictus* (2010) have explored in very different ways the importance of realising that all human beings share a common humanity, and that we are at our best when we act for the good of others.

3. Morality

Some of the issues which we have just raised in relation to human nature are profoundly moral questions. What does it mean when we say that darkness and evil reside in the human heart, and that genuine goodness can be found there too? What makes for a good person, or a bad person? What makes things like courage and honour good, and cowardice and self-interest bad?

There are moral questions in most films, and they are often linked with the motivations of the main characters. Why is this character making that particular moral choice? We need to think about what their basis for ethical decisions is. One of the most common approaches to ethics in the west, and which is reflected in many films, is called *consequentialist ethics*. It is about making choices on the basis of what the outcome will be. In *The Fantastic Mr. Fox* (Wes Anderson, 2009), Mr. Fox is interested in only one thing: self-preservation. Every choice he makes is motivated by his drive to achieve this one outcome.

Ethical approaches

The main alternative to consequentialism is *deontological ethics*, which stresses doing the right thing according to underlying moral principles, rather than according to what achieves the desired result. A powerful example of this is found in *The Road* (John Hillcoat, 2009). It is set in a post-cataclysmic world which is now dying, and is the story of a man (Viggo Mortensen) taking his son (Kodi Smit-McPhee) on a long walk to try to find somewhere warmer. Along the way they face dangers from the few survivors who will stop at nothing to eke out their existence. Yet despite facing such extreme circumstances that any action seems justifiable (in consequentialist terms), the man insists that they should continue to behave morally. By that he means, behaving in accordance with moral principles which transcend time, place and circumstances.



For a Judeo-Christian worldview, ethics are always primarily to do with what is right before God, rather than with what is expedient. Christian ethics are deontological, not consequentialist, which suggests that there are moral absolutes. Within a naturalist worldview, some kind of consequentialism is the only ethical approach that really makes sense since there is no possibility of transcendent moral values without God.⁵ Yet people still instinctively feel that some things are absolutely, in principle, right or wrong.

Some films tackle the difficulties of making moral decisions head on. In *Gone Baby Gone* (Ben Affleck, 2007), Patrick (Casey Affleck) must make a tough choice. He can follow principles of truth and justice, which is likely to lead to unhappiness, or he can ignore the principles in favour of a happier outcome. But Patrick realises that it's not that simple. Whose happiness should he consider? Who has rights that should be upheld? He can only guess how the future might unfold, and the option that appears to offer happiness may turn out to be a disaster. *Good* (Vicente Amorim, 2008) shows this inability to predict the future starkly in a story of a German professor before the war who abandons his principles in favour of pragmatic considerations, but with devastating results.

⁵ See, for example, William Lane Craig, [Can We Be Good without God?](#)

4. Knowledge

The fourth aspect of worldviews is to do with what we know and how we know it. The films that explore this directly tend to be somewhat philosophical or or rather quirky, such as *I ♥ Huckabees* (David O. Russell, 2004). But the process of investigating and weighing evidence is something which comes up in many films, especially crime dramas. Within a naturalist worldview, the only legitimate sources of knowledge are empirical evidence and logic, both exemplified by Sherlock Holmes (Robert Downey Jr. in Guy Ritchie's 2009 film). But if the worldview underlying a film allows for a spiritual dimension, then other ways of knowing become possible. Intuition is particularly valued in nature-based spiritualities, and revelation is an important idea in many religions. In *Knowing* (Alex Proyas, 2009), Nicolas Cage plays a professor who discerns a pattern in a series of apparently random numbers written fifty years previously – a pattern which predicts major disasters. It shakes his hard-nosed scientific rationalism to its core, and it eventually leads to reconciliation with his father, a pastor.



In contrast to the pursuit of certain knowledge, some films emphasise just how problematic the business of knowing things can be. John Patrick Shanley's *Doubt* (2008) is all about the difficulty, if not impossibility of knowing anything for certain.

5. Salvation

The final aspect of worldviews is the question of what human beings most need in life. We face many problems, but what is the most fundamental of all human problems? And what is the solution to that problem? How can we be saved, in other words? Where can redemption be found?



Salvation and redemption are rarely seen in films within specifically Christian ways, though it may be in the background. In *Amazing Grace* (Michael Apted, 2007), for example, it is clear that the faith of William Wilberforce (Ioan Gruffudd) is what motivates him to fight slavery. Similarly, in *The Blind Side* (John Lee Hancock, 2009) it is Christian convictions which prompts a mother (Sandra Bullock) to give a home to a disadvantaged African-American boy. But in both of these films, the focus is primarily on

what the central characters do to change the world, rather than the faith which motivates them.

Denying redemption

Some films deny the possibility of redemption at all. Martin Scorsese was brought up a Catholic and constantly explores religious ideas in his films, but he seems to have turned his back on Christian beliefs and values. Speaking about his film *The Departed* (2006) he says:

Good and bad become very blurred. That is something I know I'm attracted to. It's a world where morality doesn't exist, good doesn't exist, so you can't even sin any more as there's nothing to sin against. There's no redemption of any kind.⁶

However, at some levels, redemption is what all films are about, as Brian Godawa argues in *Hollywood Worldviews*. They show us characters who have hope restored or relationships mended or all kinds of other limited redemptions. These resolutions inevitably suggest that certain things in life are good, even essential. It may be apparently something as simple as finding a good place to live and bring up a family, as in *Away We Go* (Sam Mendes, 2009), though even here the real focus is on having a good loving relationship.

All you need is love

Love is frequently held up as the thing that human beings need more than anything else. There are countless romantic comedies and melodramas which indicate that once someone has found true love, they have found everything they need. Other films suggest that we need to embrace freedom, perhaps especially films that come out of a worldview which denies any accountability to God, as in *The Truman Show* (Peter Weir, 1998). Some films encourage us to find our true purpose in life which will give true fulfilment, as in *Amélie* (Jean-Pierre Jeunet, 2001) or *Stranger Than Fiction* (Marc Forster, 2006) or *The Soloist* (Joe Wright, 2009). Underlying all these is the longing for ultimate peace – a reflection of the fact that we were created to live in relationship with God.



⁶ Martin Scorsese interviewed by Ed Pilkington, 'A History of Violence', *The Guardian*, 6 October 2006.

Why use film in Christian communication?

Although aspects of the Christian worldview still do hang on in western culture, it's all too obvious that very few films communicate much of it clearly. As I have already noted, films are primarily about telling a story, and often the worldview aspects provide the framework for that story rather than being part of it. And it's also blindingly obvious that many films are expressing other worldviews altogether. Perhaps surprisingly, all this does not create a barrier to using films when communicating. Ironically, at some levels, it's a positive advantage. The reality is that just about everyone is already thoroughly immersed in a culture which is full of competing worldviews. The mediascape is such a part of our lives that we are constantly exposed to a wide variety of influences. In this context, using film does two very important things.



First, it creates an extremely effective bridge into their lives because it is so familiar to them, just as altars and Greek poets were an effective bridge for Paul in Athens.⁷ Using examples from the media world immediately connects with people, especially younger people. This is very often true even when the film is not one which is particularly popular. There clearly are films which barely connect, but younger generations generally have such a high level of media literacy that they respond to the medium of film itself, as well as to the content. As Marshall McLuhan famously said, 'The medium is the message.' When we do use films which are already relevant to our audience, the sense of connection is even greater.

Second, films deal with the big issues of life: subjects like relationships, sexuality, religion, politics, society, the environment, spirituality, meaning, purpose, love, happiness, identity or fulfillment. Any film is always, to some extent, about one of these issues, or something similarly significant. So if we can use film material which deals with one of these weighty themes, we are likely to be in a good position to stimulate some lively conversation. There is a Christian perspective on all these issues, which becomes easy to talk about once we have actually started

⁷ Acts 17:16–34; See Lars Dahle, 'Acts 17 as an Apologetic Model'

talking about the issue in a way that engages people. We need to think carefully about what a film is saying about these big themes in terms of the worldview aspect we have considered above. Then we need to ask how this compares with a Christian worldview.

It is important that we try to use films with integrity. If we just want to use a clip rather than an entire film, we need to put that clip in context and use it in a way that is fair to its context within the film as a whole. Don't focus primarily on finding film clips which illustrate (whether positive or negative) some aspect of Christian truth. Instead focus on exploring how the big themes (which are at the heart of all narratives) are worked out, and on how the five worldview aspects are expressed. It does take practice.

If we are going to use films as a positive way of engaging with people, we will need to be careful not to keep responding critically to the films. It seems very easy for Christians to condemn aspects of contemporary culture, sometimes with good justification. But Paul in Athens was very careful to be positive about some aspects of his audience's culture, as well as being negative about others. We must learn to affirm ways in which films express right beliefs, and right values, show right behaviour, explore the right issues and ask the right questions. It is also important to be clear about ways in which films express wrong beliefs and wrong values, show inappropriate behaviour or neglect important issues. So we need to celebrate the good, but graciously challenge the bad. We need to maintain the biblical perspective of seeing human beings as image-bearing rebels, and the films they make as manifestations of both sides of human nature.

Most importantly of all, we need to be alert for how films illuminate the deepest longings of the human heart, whether for love or freedom or happiness or fulfilment. And we need to recognise that these are just reflections of the deepest longing of all, the yearning for peace with God – a yearning which many people in western culture don't recognise for what it is.