

How Can We See God with that **FILM OVER OUR EYES?**

By Danell Bemis

I recently met a young cousin I had not seen in years. He is a super computer technician, and I soon discovered I was unable to converse anywhere near his level about his work and interests. Yet when our conversation turned to movies, our line of communication suddenly jumped through the generational blockades. We were soon jabbering away about this movie and that movie, whether we liked them or not, and what they really meant.

One can easily assume that since a middle-aged empty-nester and a savvy 20-year-old can make good, animated conversation and forget about supposed differences, the topic, in this case movies, just might be a great tool to fight through other cultural barriers we face in our society.

The world of movies can open doors to communication with someone who is different and to an understanding of why things happen like they do. A movie can tell the story of people who have to make choices and the result of those choices. These stories can help us understand what is going on in our world in faraway places, in the minds of our children, even in our neighbors' back yards. These days we don't sit around a fire and share our history by telling stories. Instead, the art of oral tradition (passing on wisdom, knowledge, and culture through the spoken word) has evolved into creating stories based on a "what if" format cleverly and frequently translated in movie mode.

Pixar's Andrew Stanton, writer/director of *Wall•E* said, "My biggest thing is just that [the viewers] really had a good time - that they really got transported and felt something, because to me, that's a great story and a great movie, that you made me care. And typically that's because you've tapped into some truth. Truth isn't always pretty, truth isn't always fair, and truth isn't always inviting. But when you tap into it the right way you can't ignore it, and it touches you to your core."*

Often in a Christian community, one will hear of

the taboos that turn many away from the real light of Jesus: "Stop! Don't let the world in"; "That's too secular"; "You can't consort with the world. They're sinners"; "That music is of the devil"; "Can't you see they're not like us?" "Can't you hear the rhythm of that beat? Don't you know that's pagan?" "You have to make the right choice." And so on.

Of course we do have to make the right choices.

One can easily assume that since a middle-aged empty-nester and a savvy 20-year-old can make good, animated conversation and forget about supposed differences, the topic, in this case movies, just might be a great tool to fight through other cultural barriers we face in our society.

As followers of Christ, we have to learn to discern what is right and what is wrong, and what we should allow into our heads and hearts (Philippians 4:8). We have to also teach our children to do the same

as they mature and begin to make their own decisions. This does not mean we should "put a kibosh" on everything we see that we don't understand. Nonetheless, we should be able to put into perspective what we take in and think about who is saying it - what it deals with, when and where it takes place, and why the story is being told. "The virtues listed in Philippians are meant to serve as a guide for Christian discernment. This passage should be used not so much to limit artistic engagement but to open the whole world up to Christian treatment and evaluation" (*Eyes Wide Open*, page 143).

In Matthew, Jesus tells us how we should live, think, and treat others. He shows by example that He lived with and walked with those who were not holy but needed His presence in their lives to find God. In the movies, we see a myriad of examples of humankind

needing and searching for God. Just a few examples are the abandonment and aloneness of Will Smith's character, Robert Neville, in *I Am Legend*; Robert Downey Jr.'s portrayal of Tony Stark as a savior to mankind in *Iron Man*; living in grace in *Babbette's Feast*; integrity and heeding a call in one's life in *Dead Poet's Society*; having faith

in the unknown as in Tim Allen's character, Jason Nesmith (*Galaxy Quest*); loneliness and finding love in Pixar's animated *Wall•E*; and instruction on how to make choices that better oneself in *Antwone Fisher*.

If, however, we shun people's words and what they are looking for, how will we understand them? How will we be able to talk to them and show them the Christ whom they seek? We must understand and meet them where they are. We should not fear the messages we hear and see, but instead use them to meet and understand our culture.

The Word of God provides many ways for us to do just that. Matthew 7:24-25 is one of my favorites: "Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine [we read the Word] and puts them into practice [we know, believe, and obey God] is like a wise man who built his house on the rock [through Christ we are prepared to live in this world]. The rain came down [we receive tons of information in the movies], the streams rose [we watch more disasters and life-challenging situations than we can even imagine], and the winds blew and beat against that house [we see how the world responds to adversity, pain, and even hope in a film]; yet it did not fall [we are not blown over, but stand firm in understanding], because it had its foundation on the rock [because we stand on Christ]."

With that foundation we are prepared and able to understand our world through watching a movie (or other media), and to respond in a mature, reasonable, godly way.

"He who has ears to hear, let him hear' (Matthew 13:9, NKJ). I have found that we can glimpse transforming truth through the beauty of art if we put aside fear and judgment and look with 'eyes to see'" (Jeffrey Overstreet, *Through a Screen Darkly*, page14).



Danell LeLaCheur Bemis teaches a humanities course, "Finding God in Film," at Eugene Bible College. Films viewed in class have led to many lively and eye-opening discussions about the story portrayed, the Christians' response, the producers'/directors'/actors' possible thoughts as the film was made, and society's (culture's) view of the story.

*From an article that first appeared in the 06/24/08 issue of *Christianity Today*. Used by permission of Christianity Today International, Carol Stream, IL.) Resources:
1. Detweiler, Craig and Barry Taylor, *A Matrix of meanings: Finding God in Pop Culture*, Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2003.
2. Overstreet, Jeffrey. *Through A Screen Darkly*, Ventura, California: Regal Books, 2007.
3. Romanowski, William D. *Eyes Wide Open: Looking for God in Popular Culture*, Grand Rapids, Michigan: Brazos Press, 2001.
4. <http://www.christianitytoday.com/movies>
5. <http://www.Wingclips.com>