

## what's the story?

Alex Bunn talks films



Everyone loves a good story. We have many art forms that we can tell stories through: theatre, fiction, poetry, song, graphic novels, but where to start? Perhaps the most accessible, universal and affordable ever created is film. In a previous age, art that cost millions could hang on only one wall. But now a film costing \$100M can be projected (legally!) into your home for the cost of a coffee. And have you noticed how films get people talking? And not just about insignificant subjects. There are people who wouldn't touch a book of poetry, go to a play, or come to a lunchtime talk about Jesus. How can we engage with films at a deeper level? And can they help us talk about faith more honestly and winsomely?

### what's the story?

The Bible isn't just a book of doctrine. About 70% is story, vision, symbol and narrative of God's redemptive work in the world. For the most part, Jesus chose to teach through stories and parables. He could have delivered theological facts through logic and abstractions, but instead he chose colourful dramas to engage hearts as well as minds: lost coins, wedding parties and relentless shepherds. So God also loves story-telling.

But which stories capture our imaginations today? One of the draws of a good film is seeing something of our own life story reflected back at us. OK, maybe you didn't want to become a male dancer like Billy Elliot, but perhaps you related to



Alex Bunn is CMF Associate Head of Student Ministries (Field) and a GP in London

## basic film themes:

- **The hero's (main character's) goal that drives the story:** Frodo wants a quiet life in the Shire
- **The adversary or obstacle to the goal:** Middle Earth is invaded by orcs
- **The character flaw:** internal obstacle, a wrong perspective or weakness: Frodo is tempted by power the ring
- **The apparent defeat:** more orcs, and internal squabbles are making things worse
- **The final confrontation:** the battle of the black gate, which allows Frodo to destroy the ring and the evil powers
- **The self-revelation:** what the hero originally wanted was not what he needed!
- **Resolution or denouement, an epilogue showing the results of change:** the end is better than the beginning

Tolkien said that this universal shape of story, with an apparent defeat followed by victory, mirrors the big story of all creation: the cross is the biggest apparent defeat of all, but also the greatest victory.<sup>2</sup>

his desire to escape parental expectations? Perhaps the biggest stories of all are as big as the universe itself, epics about the cosmic battle between good and evil. Tolkien, who wrote the most popular epic yet, believed that we should expect glimpses of the big story in secular art:

*'there is some divine illumination vouchsafed to all men... We should, therefore, expect to find in the imagination of the great Pagan teachers and myth makers some glimpse of that theme which we believe to be the very plot of the whole cosmic story - the theme of incarnation, death, and rebirth.'*

Our culture has been so shaped by Christianity that even today, to borrow a phrase from Scorsese's screenwriter, filmmakers are still trying to make sense of the 'after image' left by the gospel. We can't quite shake it off, the big story is deep in the collective memory, even for those who can't see a reason for 'the hope of glory'.<sup>1</sup> For instance, in the film *Magnolia* there are several uncomfortable scenes of cruelty and denial, and you just want someone to stop it. Then, out of the blue, frogs rain down and totally disrupt the whole order of things. The director later said that he had no idea a plague of frogs was in the Bible! So the biblical narrative and symbols still have power and resonance in a secular society.

### mistakes for Christians: genres

It's quite tempting for Christians to primarily look for films that 'tell the gospel', particularly if there is a messiah figure such as *The Passion of the Christ*, *The Iron Giant* or, more subtly, *Whale Rider*. But Jesus was good at connecting with people as people, which meant talking about a range of 'unspiritual' topics such as money, sex, power, worry, national identity, dieting etc. Consider the Philippian jailer: when he asked of Paul 'what must I do to be saved?',<sup>3</sup> he wasn't just thinking about heaven but his current messy human predicament. Which messy situations do we see in films we can chew over with our friends?

It's also tempting only to watch films that are optimistic or sentimental. There is an argument for avoiding films that are obviously corrupting in terms of sex and violence. Didn't Paul recommend we think about things that are noble, right, pure, lovely and admirable?<sup>4</sup> That might be a command only to watch *Bambi*, if it weren't for the top adjective on his list: whatever is true, think on these things. Many films hold a mirror up to the state of the world and our hearts, and there is a duty to engage with the arts, even if it does provoke us at times.<sup>5</sup>

### learning to interpret a movie

Just as there is a skill to physical exam, there is a skill to appreciating film. There is so much you can miss first time. You will get much more out of a film watching it in a group and asking some basic questions. There is a longer list of questions you can print off<sup>6</sup> but its helpful first to look at the levels at which any film works:

- **the aesthetic level:** God gives many good gifts, one of the first was beauty, something that was deliberately 'pleasing to the eye'.<sup>7</sup> So enjoy the film as art before rushing on to dissect it for its 'message'. Your artsy friends can help you here, ask them! The director will have spent months sweating over minute details, so take time to research and appreciate their craft. For

instance, in *Three Colors: Blue*, Juliet Binoche watches a sugar cube dissolve in coffee for exactly five seconds. Not three or eight. The director, Kieślowski, wanted to capture her absorption as it seemed her life had collapsed down to the size of a crumbling sugar cube, for just the time an audience would catch the message. How did the film work as art?

- **the emotional level:** Ecclesiastes tells us there is 'a time to weep and a time to laugh, a time to mourn and a time to dance'.<sup>8</sup> Some films rightly twist our guts, and its right to pause before skipping to analysis. You don't need to be an intellectual to appreciate *Schindler's List* or *Up*. How did it make you feel?
- **the ethical level:** this is not just about whether the behaviour portrayed lines up with biblical morality, but in what light that behaviour is shown. The Bible does not flinch from depicting pretty depraved behaviour, take Tamar's rape by her brother or the Herod's massacre of children. But the intention is to wake us up to the state of the world, and to call us to change. Does the film portray the seriousness of sin with the integrity of a journalistic expose, or with the indulgence of a tabloid? Does it show the consequences of actions honestly?
- **the worldview level:**
  - **God:** What is reality? Is there a spiritual dimension or God?
  - **man:** What does it mean to be human? Where does our value come from? What is the point of life? What happens after death?
  - **truth:** How do we know what is true? Is science the only way? Where does wisdom come from?
  - **ethics:** Is there such a thing as good and evil? How do we decide what's right and wrong?
  - **redemption:** What is the fundamental problem facing all human beings? What do we most need in life? How can we achieve it?

## what kind of redemption?

*The Seven Basic Plots*, a classic book by Christopher Booker, describes key story plots: tragedy, overcoming the monster, the quest, voyage and return, rebirth, rags to riches and comedy.<sup>9</sup> It's not hard to see resonances with the big story of the fall, a search for redemption, grace and future hope in this list. This shouldn't surprise us, as God has 'set eternity in the human heart',<sup>10</sup> so we have a deep longing for God, even when we fail to recognise what this longing is.

Fundamentally, most films are about redemption of one kind or another, but rarely the Christian kind! Here are some examples:

- **Romantic love** eg *Bridget Jones*, *Love Actually*
- **Self-acceptance** eg *Toy Story*, *Inside Out*
- **Embracing diversity** eg *Zootropolis*, *X-Men*
- **Enlightenment** eg *The Matrix*, *Pleasantville*
- **Life after death** eg *Flatliners*, *Wit*, *The Lovely Bones*
- **Existential choice** eg *Forrest Gump*, *City Slickers*, *Groundhog Day*
- **Resisting technology** eg *The Terminator*, *Bladerunner*
- **Embracing technology** eg *Tron*, *Bicentennial Man*
- **Glory through God's gifting** eg *Amadeus*
- **Resisting a culture of beauty contests** eg *Little Miss Sunshine*
- **Freedom from God's providence** eg *The Truman Show*
- **Humanism over faith** eg *Troy*, *Beowulf*
- **Christian redemption** eg *Les Misérables*, *Shadowlands*, *To End All Wars*

## conclusion

Why not run a film night for medics? Everyone loves a film. They help us to connect as people. They help us connect to each other's stories. Who knows, they may help us connect with God's big story. ■



## recommended resources:

### books

- Godawa B. *Hollywood Worldviews*. IVP, 2009
- Watkins T. *Focus: The Art and Soul of Cinema*. Damaris Trust, 2012
- Turnau T. *Popologetics: Popular Culture in Christian Perspective*. Presbyterian and Reformed, 2012
- Johnson R. *Reel Spirituality*. Baker Academic, 2006

### articles

- Ortlund G. 3 Ways Movies Are Searching for the Gospel. *The Gospel Coalition* 4 January 2016 [bit.ly/2gbowey](http://bit.ly/2gbowey)

### websites with film reviews

- Ransom Fellowship. [bit.ly/2gCuPZ1](http://bit.ly/2gCuPZ1)
- Looking Closer with Jeffrey Overstreet. [bit.ly/2gCnxoj](http://bit.ly/2gCnxoj)
- Arts & Faith. The Arts & Faith top 100 films (2011). [bit.ly/2gPOUw5](http://bit.ly/2gPOUw5)
- Fellows A. Movies and Apologetics. [bethinking.org](http://bethinking.org) [bit.ly/2fOUoEO](http://bit.ly/2fOUoEO)

### REFERENCES

1. Colossians 1:27
2. Tolkien Gateway. Eucatastrophe. [bit.ly/2fVg6Kr](http://bit.ly/2fVg6Kr)
3. Acts 16:30
4. Philippians 4:8
5. Acts 17
6. Watkins T. Twenty Questions to Consider When Watching a Film. *Tony Watkins.uk* 12 October 2010 [bit.ly/2gCkr3s](http://bit.ly/2gCkr3s)
7. Genesis 2:9
8. Ecclesiastes 3:4
9. Booker C. *The Seven Basic Plots*. London: Continuum, 2005
10. Ecclesiastes 3:11