

REEL SPIRITUALITY 2007

Steve Taylor writes: I have a secret. It is deeply personal, so please treat it with respect. This is my secret: God speaks to me in the dark. With my eyes wide open.

I am talking of course, about movie watching. My secret is that my spirituality has been profoundly shaped by movie moments, including the ending of *The Matrix* and the honesty of *The Interpreter*.

And I am not alone. While historically many Christians grew up thinking film was bad, the reality is quite the opposite. Movies today are an essential vehicle for the formation of spiritual and cultural identity.

In fact, if the apostle Paul were to wander our cities today, I have a hunch he would stop outside our movie cinemas. He would point at the latest movie blockbuster. Just as in Athens

(Acts 17), he would applaud the box office for taking religion seriously.

Movies are a mirror on contemporary culture. If Paul took the time to read his culture's poetry, then Christians today should take movie-going seriously. And I am not only talking about *The Passion of the Christ* or *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*.

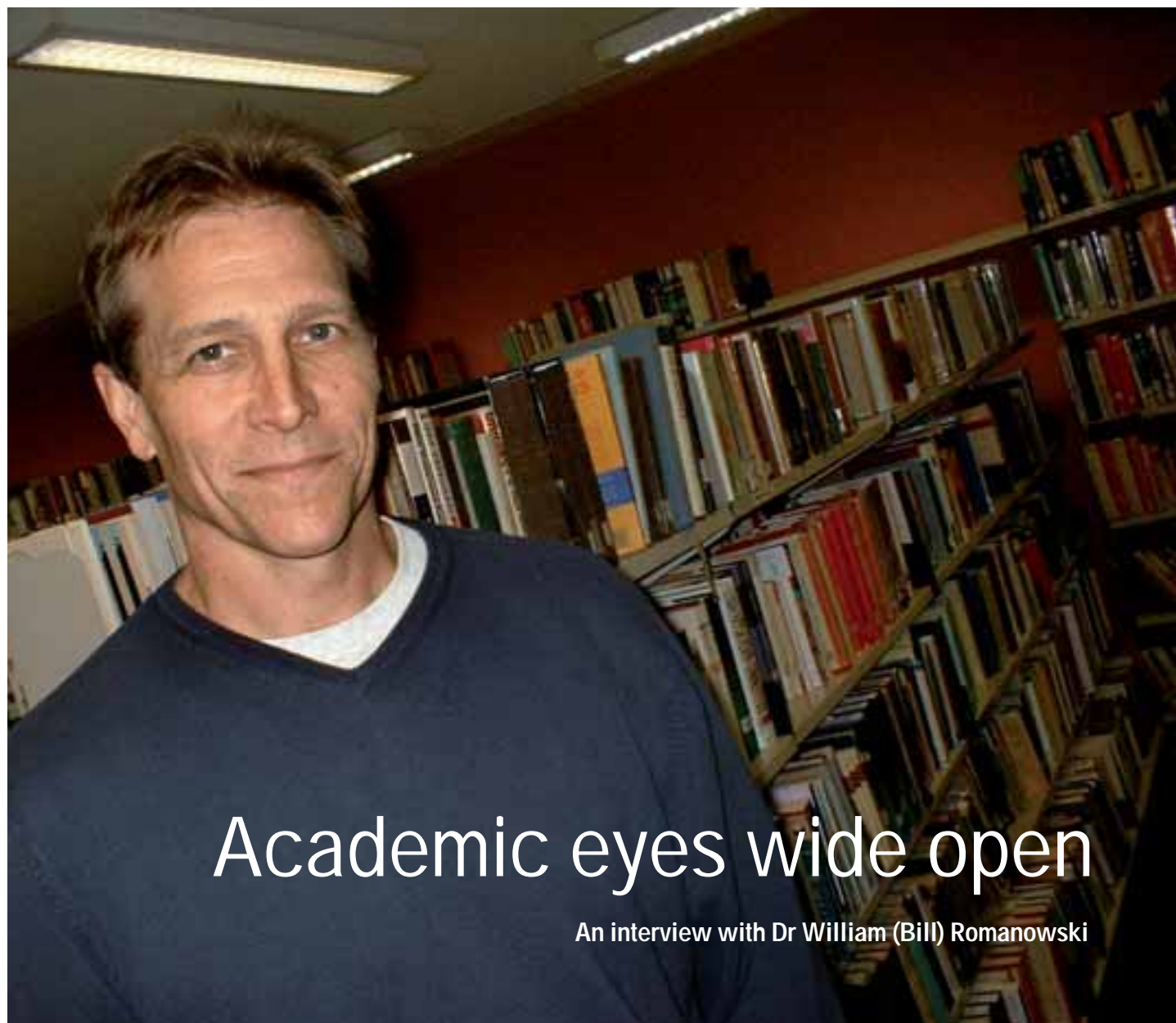
The task of being a Christian has always been a conversation between faith and culture, between our stories and God's story. The apostle Paul had developed the skills to engage the spirituality of his culture. Can we?

'Who are we?' is the question being asked by movies like NZ's *Sione's Wedding*. 'What is wrong?' is the question being asked by *Crash* or *Out of the Blue*. 'Is there a remedy?' is the question being asked by *Shawshank Redemption*, *The Interpreter* or *The Three Burials of Melquiades Estrada*.

In 2007, Bible College of New Zealand is offering a 14 week course titled 'Reel Spirituality'. Each week a variety of films: Jesus movies, Hollywood blockbusters, Kiwi films, will be discussed with the aim of listening to, and engaging with, the spirituality of our culture.

Those wanting to deepen their appreciation of movies as a spiritual discipline can seek more information from Bible College of New Zealand (Christchurch) on 03-3544270 or chch@bcnz.ac.nz

Plus – Otago University are offering in 2007: RELS 103 *Spirituality in Film* (summer school and second semester) 18 points. With a decline in formal religion in the West, contemporary film has become an important vehicle of religious and mythic meanings. This paper examines the spiritual significance of film. Lecturer Eric Repphun, M.A. Associate Lecturer, University of Otago, Theology Department.



Academic eyes wide open

An interview with Dr William (Bill) Romanowski

“My parents divorced... Some years later, my father was hit by a car and became a quadriplegic. While he was on a respirator in an Intensive Care Unit at the hospital, my mother remarried him

Opposite: Bill Romanowski. Photo: John Stringer.

‘An all-round brainy geezer and lovely with it,’ is how an English rock fest described him. With a name like ‘Romanowski’ you’d expect something interesting and engaging, and Dr Bill Romanowski’s tour on popular culture and film through Auckland, Wellington, Christchurch and Dunedin in association with Carey Baptist College in 2005 delivered the goods. I caught up with the Professor (of Communications Arts and Sciences at Calvin College, Grand Rapids, MI, USA) during his Christchurch visit.

As well as working as a musical and dramatic performer, Romanowski lectures on film and pop culture and their relationship to the Christian church and mindset. He has authored several books: *Risky Business: Rock in Film* (co-authored, 1991); *Dancing in the Dark: Youth, Popular Culture and the Electronic Media* (co-authored 1991); *Pop Culture Wars: Religion and the Role of Entertainment in American Life* (1996); *Eyes Wide Open* (2001), which title plays on Stanley Kubrick’s 1999 film *Eyes Wide Shut* starring Tom Cruise and Nicole Kidman. A second expanded and revised edition of *Eyes Wide Open: Looking for God in Popular Culture* is in production and due for publication in January 2007. It adds several new chapters and focuses on being a tool for liberal arts colleges and educational contexts exploring media, film and popular culture.

Romanowski’s background is in American culture studies, specifically the intersection of American christianity, popular art and culture. He received his BA from Indiana University of Pennsylvania, his MA from Youngstown State University, and a PhD in American Culture Studies from Bowling Green State University.

JS: What does your research centre on specifically?

‘My research interests are centred on what was known for a long time in conservative Protestant circles as the “worldly amusements”. Although I continue to write about popular art and culture; my teaching, speaking engagements and research agenda have increasingly focused on the cinema.’

What are you working on at the moment?

‘Currently I am working on a history of the Protestant negotiation with the American film industry. Based largely on original historical sources, this is a significant yet untold story that goes to the heart of the role of religion in a democratic society. It traces what scholars have identified as an “epochal...transition from Protestant America to pluralist America” by focusing on a crucial aspect of contemporary life – the emergence of the cinema as a means of mass communication.’

What is your background and where did you grow up?

‘I grew up in a working-class Catholic home. My parents separated when I was sixteen and then divorced about ten years later. There’s actually an incredible story there. Some years after the divorce, my father was hit by a car and became a quadriplegic. While he was on a respirator in an Intensive Care Unit at the hospital, my mother remarried him to be able to care for him. I still find it remarkable. Anyway, I had a Christian conversion experience in college and afterwards worked for a campus ministry for twelve years before completing a PhD in American Culture Studies.’

What led you into the academic/popular culture realm?

‘I was very interested in music and was playing about - guitar and piano. Along the way I developed a show, writing and performing a solo act in which I played a character that lived through the history of rock’n’roll. I changed costumes, had a slide show and did impersonations of Elvis, the Beatles, Bob Dylan, Barry Manilow, disco, up to punk and New Wave music on MTV. That got me interested in American history, popular art and culture. I was never good enough to make it at music. A guy once told me my music “grieved” his spirit. I did a pretty good Dylan, but we’re talking about a folk singer that a critic once described as having a voice that sounded like “a dog caught in barbed wire” or something like that. Anyway, researching that show sparked my interest and so I went on to pursue American cultural studies at the doctoral level. A book I co-authored with a Professor when I was a doctoral student expanded my research interests in both popular music and film. My writing has moved decisively into film studies (which is what I teach).’

What do you feel is one of the great mistakes in the church’s dialogue with popular culture?

‘The church is still trying to overcome a long history of spiritual denigration and elitist attitudes about popular art and culture that resulted too often in censorial strategies. Church leaders perceived the entertainment media of the day (whether novels, theatre or motion pictures) as a competitor in the battle for people’s hearts and minds. Consequently, the church has not fostered enough of a community and tradition in the arts that would support artists and help churchgoers better understand and appreciate the popular arts. Too many church folks think of popular art as a vehicle for evangelism or an educational tool instead of understanding popular art as art, evaluating works in terms of aesthetic quality and representations of life that help people navigate in the world.’

A favourite movie, and why.

‘That’s a difficult one. I don’t really have a favourite film, but I like many for different reasons (comedy, cultural insight, artistically sound). I will say that my appreciation for New Zealand cinema was greatly enhanced by my visit and watching a documentary on the Kiwi cinema narrated by Sam Neill¹ with my class at Carey Baptist. Fascinating stuff. I see that Keisha Castle-Hughes² is in a couple of films coming out soon. She was spectacular in *Whale Rider*³.’

John Stringer

1 *Cinema of Unease: A personal Journey* (1995), a documentary/ biography, directed by Sam Neill who was co-writer with Judy Rymer.

2 Keisha Castle-Hughes, is in *The Nativity Story* (2006), USA, director Catherine Hardwicke, writer Mike Rich.

3 *Whale Rider* (2002), NZ/Germany, director Niki Caro, writer also with Witi Ihimaera, from whose novel, published 1997, Reed Auckland, New Zealand, the screenplay was adapted.