



Dorothy (Judy Garland), The Cowardly Lion (Bert Lahr), The Scarecrow (Ray Bolger), The Tin Man (Jack Haley) in *The Wizard of Oz* (1939).



The journey on the yellow brick road only brings Dorothy, the Lion, the Tin Man and the Scarecrow to the destination of self-realisation. Ultimately they have no need of the Wizard, a god-like figure, whose technological facade is exposed to reveal a bumbling old man

The Hollywood creed

Based on the book *Eyes Wide Open: Looking for God in Popular Culture* by Dr William (Bill) Romanowski¹

Lots of religious-subject films of recent years—and latterly the ‘bleeding Mary’ controversy on *South Park*²—have provoked a reassessment of the relationship between the contemporary narrative of the Christian faith and the Hollywood cultural landscape. Like art, movies have a cumulative impact on our culture. Artists draw on the prevailing social mores and contribute to the development of the moral landscape. This article explores some of the divergences between Hollywood and biblical worldviews within the storylines of movies. In his book *Eyes Wide Open*—a play on Stanley Kubrick’s film *Eyes Wide Shut*³—Bill Romanowski suggests better terms of engagement between the Church and Hollywood.

Regardless of an artist’s faith convictions, films and art examine life in a broken world that is at once hostile to, and yet in search of, God. This is a rich avenue for evaluation. The contemporary Church needs to focus on the cultural landscape that is embedded in a narrative film and direct our energies toward a critique of film values and perspectives rather than hiding from

this marketplace of ideas that surrounds us. One way to approach modern art is to consider it as a map of reality. Every artist has a life vision which is manifest in his or her creative work; this becomes a model, or a map, of reality.

When we view movies, we suspend our disbelief. We know movies are not real. We’ve all experienced moments when we’ve sat there at the end not wanting to leave the world created, the characters we’ve walked with, or burst the fantastical bubble. We allow the projections to take us to another world. Knowing it’s unreal, we still have physiological responses (tears, sweaty palms, fear, terror, exhilaration). Sometimes people actually clap or cheer. We cover our eyes, we laugh, all-the-while knowing it’s just a movie, an illusion. Despite their unreality, movies engage our emotions and thoughts. *The Matrix*⁴ is about a simulated cerebral ‘reality’ that people exist in, unaware they are doing so.

The movie or TV screen is a barrier that distances us from the action taking place and the characters involved. We know we’re not going to be glanced by a blow from King Kong or attacked by a flying dragon, or hit by flying car debris. Hollywood even plays with the exceptions: *Last Action Hero*⁵ where a boy gets caught in the space between the audience and the

Kathleen Kelly (Meg Ryan) and
Joe Fox (Tom Hanks) in *You've Got Mail* (1998).



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Rocky II, III, IV and V)***

Rocky Balboa (Sylvester Stallone) in *Rocky* (1976).

movie, or *The Ring*⁶ and *Frequency*⁷ where reality comes 'through' the movie or radio. We understand we are transported into the minds, bedrooms and lives of the characters we are viewing, and as such, we are involved in conversation that influences us. It's an imaginative 'reality'.

Research shows that it is not a single movie or art work that develops social opinion, but rather the cumulative effect of many movies over time. Christians need to engage with and understand the cultural framework of cinema; they are involved in the same world that artists are. In one sense it is a contest of ideas and ways of being. Every artist has a life vision. Hollywood literally projects vision, but they are visions based on attitudes and values at variance with the scriptural account of truth. Romanowski describes this variance across seven categories: religion, humanism, love and sex, materialism, gender stereotypes, individualism and violence.

Hollywood's vision of humanism, for example, Romanowski calls 'the Wizard of Oz syndrome'. Hollywood art presents a view that everything needed to secure our own destiny and salvation is within ourselves. The journey on the yellow brick road only brings Dorothy, the Lion, the Tin Man and the Scarecrow to the destination of self-realisation. Ultimately they have no need of the Wizard, a god-like figure, whose technological facade is exposed to reveal a bumbling old man. This journey to self-realisation is the backbone of most Hollywood stories. It is founded on the notion that people are basically good and only need to discover their own potential. Ordinary men can become god-like figures controlling their own fates through individual effort while making the world a better place to live. The key to success is believing ... in yourself.

Hollywood films tend to deal with social issues by reducing them down to individual matters. Social, political, economic problems are presented as





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Bert Monroe (Anthony Hopkins) in *The World's Fastest Indian* (2006).



The Simpsons



Homer: 'So I figure I should just try to live right and worship you in my own way'

God: 'Homer, you've got a deal, now excuse me, I have to appear in a tortilla in Mexico...'



individual problems to be resolved at a personal level. *Mr Smith Goes To Washington*,⁸ *A Few Good Men*,⁹ *The Pelican Brief*¹⁰ and *Mission Impossible I, II, III*¹¹ feature heroic individuals who weed out institutional corruption. Happy, resolved endings present romantic love conquering all, while 'the baddy' is led off in handcuffs. This suggests we can find in personal relationships the peace and harmony that escape us in the contradictions of our complex and unjust social world. In *You've Got Mail*¹² Joe Fox (Tom Hanks) intentionally and without care destroys the small family bookstore of Kathleen Kelly (Meg Ryan) with his massive Manhattan super chain. She says part of her has died, but love and romance overcome all. The two characters are able to transcend their differences and find personal satisfaction in love and life. This is the Hollywood doctrine of individualism. God does not call us to be rugged individualists, but to be part of a community. We are to live in relationships with others, accountable to God, and responsible to one another.

Another key variance of the Hollywood creed is religion. In an episode of *The Simpsons* Homer decides he's not going to church any more.

Homer: 'God ... I'm not a bad guy, I work hard, I love my kids, so why should I spend half my Sunday hearing about how I'm going to hell?'

God: 'Hmm, you've got a point there. Y'know, sometimes even I'd rather be watching football. Does St Louis still have a team?'

Homer: 'Y'know what I really hate about church? Those boring sermons.'

God: 'I couldn't agree more. That Reverend Lovejoy really displeases me. I think I'll give him a canker sore...'

Homer: 'So I figure I should just try to live right and worship you in my own way.'

God: 'Homer, you've got a deal, now excuse me, I have to appear in a tortilla in Mexico...'

Homer has Western religion down well. Most Westerners see religion as a private matter. Living right and worshipping God in our own way gives priority to Western values of individualism rather than the authority of scripture or church tradition. Humans can serve God as they please and individuals are their own authority for right living and appropriate worship. Eighty percent of Americans incorrectly believe that the Bible says: 'God helps those who help themselves'. That maxim is actually attributed to Benjamin Franklin and it is a theme of countless films. Such a view does not imply that we are 'dead in our sin'¹³ but that we are capable of making our own salvation with a little help from God. God is not the source of our redemption but a magical outside assistance. He is an aid to self-reliant individuals on their journey to self-realisation. These films wear away at the consequences of human sin and eliminate the need for Christ while elevating man's role in the process.

Artists draw upon these values to create artistic or symbolic maps of the world in which we live. Art, movies and music are invisible blueprints, templates of reality, that people use to interpret their experience and guide their behaviour. The contours of this map are the ideals, beliefs and values widely shared by people. After a lucky escape, people will often say 'I need to go out and buy a Lotto ticket'. That is a shared cultural myth about the power of luck or a benevolent Fate.

The American narrative goes like this: a rugged masculine individual overcomes obstacles and trials in life, to win a measure of success climbing from rags to riches. The myth exhorts us to shake free of the living past in a struggling ascent to realisation of promise and a gracious future. If you work hard, with a little luck, you can overcome all obstacles and accomplish anything and realise dreams. It is the story of *Rocky*.¹⁴ The opening scene of *Rocky* is a Byzantine Christ; the camera pans down to show us a boxing man. The camera makes an unspoken statement that Rocky is a kind of messianic figure, a saviour. Christ is watching over him. Films are full of these religious signifiers. Rocky's training symbolises his personal struggles and his ascent. In one scene he pounds up the steps of the Philadelphia Art Museum. People still bound up the steps of the museum today, even videotape themselves doing so. It is one of the top tourist attractions in the City of Brotherly Love, like the *Lord of The Rings* locations in New Zealand. People want to cross over the threshold to 'get into' the movie.

In the end Rocky does not win the fight, but he goes the distance, holds out for 15 rounds against the world heavyweight champion. This gives him the right to win the girl, get married, start a family, and acquire material wealth (the themes of *Rocky II, III, IV and V*). Rocky never has to tell us about the dream, it is conveyed through the characterisation and the struggle. Cultural myth IS the story of *Rocky*, of *Erin Brokovitch*,¹⁵ various Bruce Willis characters, of *Billy Elliot*.¹⁶ Each film exalts the individual hero rather than the victims. Individual actions and goals work change. The ideal creates a sense of limitless opportunity and one's own power. Thousands of movies employ the same narrative structure. We can understand these films as our own cultural liturgy, ritualistic stories repeated over and over again, reinforcing a distorted myth of life.

Billy Elliot (Jamie Bell) in *Billy Elliot* (2000).



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The Wizard (Frank Morgan) in *The Wizard of Oz* (1939).



The British film *Billy Elliot* is structured similarly to *Rocky*. An individual overcomes obstacles to achieve something unprecedented. Like *Erin Brokovich* the film is grounded in real events (the 1980s labour strikes in Britain). Billy has to break through class barriers in order to achieve his dream of the ballet, an occupation that runs against his society's ideas of masculinity. Billy's success is not measured by material gain, but the extent to which he grows his talent. It is the ideal of liberation, the freedom to be who we want to be. But this film is tempered by British attitudes about change, upward social mobility, and accepting the inevitable which is a distinction from Hollywood optimism. Billy's achievement is not so much an ideal as an exception. As Billy goes off to London to join the Royal Ballet, we see his father and uncle traipse back into the mine, the union broken. Movies give us an insight into the values and ideals of a particular culture.

In 1920 the editor of the Manawatu Daily Times observed that the capture of the film market by Americans meant that New Zealand youth were seeing life through the artificial, spurious glare of Broadway New York. In 1945 a New Zealand film critic said if there was such a thing as New Zealand culture it was to an extent a creation of Hollywood. Only drinking tea was more popular in New Zealand than going to movies, and official statistics seemed to back him up. For many years, New Zealanders were among the most frequent moviegoers in the Western world. Now 'Hollywood' has come to New Zealand (*Willow*; *Xena*; *Hercules*; *Lord of the Rings*; *The Lion*, *The Witch and The Wardrobe*; *The Last Samurai*; *The World's Fastest Indian*, etc). The Church here needs to acknowledge the visions that come with it, understand them, and critique them against God's vision in the narrative of scripture while we navigate real/reel life.

John Stringer

1 *Eyes Wide Open: Looking for God in Popular Culture*, Brazos Press, 2001, a Gold Medallion winner, for Dr William Romanowski, from the Evangelical Christian Publisher's Association. Professor Romanowski also made a three-part video series based on *Eyes Wide Open* (as above), the 2002 Aegis Award winner. *CS Arts* March 2007 featured an interview with Dr Romanowski.

- 2 *South Park* episode 'Bloody Mary' screened C4/TV3 10 May 2006. Produced by Comedy Central.
- 3 *Eyes Wide Shut* (1991), director Stanley Kubrick, (from a book by Arthur Schnitzler) and script by Stanley Kubrick and Frederic Raphael.
- 4 *The Matrix* (1999), written and directed by the Wachowski Brothers.
- 5 *Last Action Hero* (1993), director John McTiernan.
- 6 *The Ring* (2002), Japan/USA, director Gore Verbinski, from a novel by Koji Suzuki, screenplay by Erin Kruger.
- 7 *Frequency* (2000), director Gregory Hoblit, writer Toby Emmerich.
- 8 *Mr Smith Goes to Washington* (1939), director Frank Capra, writer L R Foster, screenplay Sidney Buchman.
- 9 *A Few Good Men* (1992), director Rob Reiner, play and screenplay Aaron Sorkin.
- 10 *The Pelican Brief* (1993), written and directed Alan J Pakula, from a book by John Grisham.
- 11 *Mission Impossible I* (1996), director Brian De Palma, writer Bruce Geller; *Mission Impossible II* (2000), director John Woo, writer Ronald D Moore; *Mission Impossible III* (2006), director J J Abrams, writers Alex Kurtzman-Counter, Roberto Orci, J J Abrams.
- 12 *You've Got Mail* (1998), written & directed by Nora Ephron.
- 13 The Bible, Ephesians 2:4-5.
- 14 *Rocky* (1976), director John G Avildsen, writer Sylvester Stallone.
- 15 *Erin Brokovich* (2000), director Steven Soderbergh, writer Susannah Grant.
- 16 *Billy Elliot* (2000), UK/France, director Stephen Daldry, writer Lee Hall.