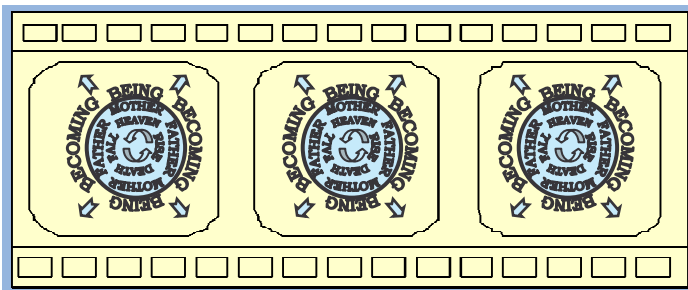


LIFE,  
MYTH,  
AND  
THE AMERICAN  
FAMILY  
UNREELING



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*The Spiritual Significance of Movies  
for the 20<sup>th</sup> Century*



Jeffrey John Stein

Universal Publishers  
Boca Raton, Florida  
USA • 2005

*Life, Myth, and the American Family Unreeling:  
The Spiritual Significance of Movies for the 20th Century*

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*For*

*Mom and Dad:*

*Martha Stein, who gave me the internal resources*

*and*

*Arthur Stein, who provided the external resources*

*Both were so essential*

*Wherever they are,*

*I hope they know I know how much they gave*



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## Author's Note: Relevance

This book integrates many fields using exceptional motion pictures as spyglasses into the souls of our beings. Because fine feature films inescapably tell the stories of our lives through so many different lenses, we hardly realize they offer us entertainment-coated absolution for our disconcerted existence. Like all art forms with which we resonate, films work for us when we exit our limited corporeal beings in flights of mystical communion. They bring needed balance by dramatically engaging us beyond the confines of our economic preoccupations.

Psychology, sociology, history, philosophy, theology, mythology – all the methodologies for unveiling why we are the way we are – inevitably stir our unconscious through the dramatic power of this immersion medium. One purpose of this investigation is to make conscious the filmic revelations of these self-examination approaches so that the lessons we feel can be implemented to liberate and sanctify our lives. Good movies, then, are extraordinary vehicles for manifesting how each of these fields teaches us about who we are. So, in conjunction with the films it discusses, this volume can be used as a “laboratory” supplement for studying American behavior from any of the above perspectives.

My hope is that the depth of analysis offered here will also bring new insights to those concerned with parenting issues, self understanding, and media consciousness – all increasingly relevant areas of concern in contemporary life. Finally, for those interested in telling stories that will truly “move” the rest of us, this book will serve as a secret doorway into the inner sanctum of human character responding to time and place.

## Preface

The state of the American family – particularly declarations of its demise – preoccupied discourse during the past ten decades with more widely broadcast stridency than in any other cycles of history. It is no coincidence that this preoccupation was accompanied by the attention paid to motion pictures. Motion pictures, the mass magnifying glass of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, brought the whole complex make-up of the American family front and center into our consciousness allowing us to examine together its truths and deceptions as we never had before. A thriving business of hysteria sprang out of this consciousness claiming that the greatness of America itself was in peril if the flaws of our families were not corrected.

With alarm clock regularity, motion pictures have been among the foremost causes cited for these flaws by politicians, dogmatists, and self-anointed defenders of morality as one generation has succeeded another. The new medium of exposition was continually blamed for that which it exposed. Such writs of blame exemplified once again an historical human capacity to ignore messages by slaying the messengers. Yes, motion pictures and the family became inextricably entwined during “The American Century.” But it is time to cut through the claptrap of superficial scares to appreciate just how meaningful this 20<sup>th</sup> century nexus was.

Motion pictures are the original purveyors of mass virtual reality. With their hypnotic appeal, they have always been capable of deranging minds not sufficiently balanced in negotiating reality. Like barroom brawling or jumping canyons on motorcycles, they can seduce us into believing we can escape our condition by escaping our good senses.

More significant, though, is the capacity of motion pictures to stimulate real transcendence. It is a capacity separate from the people and machinations behind their creation. It is what I call the sermon of the movies – the metaphor of their *beingness*. Like children born out of parents, movies grow into their own iden-

tity, beings unto themselves, demonstrating beauty or depravity or any combination thereof, as awakeners of our own potentials. With regard to the American family, then, this book asserts that there has been no “moral collapse,” but rather that it has continued to evolve positively through the inevitable changes each age has subjected it to. As such, it dispels the shibboleths of those whose prescriptions for re-creating the “perfect” American family not only leave out the majority of us, but would, in fact, lead to a lesser rather than greater America.

The universal and enduring mesmerization of our population by this form of “edutainment” suggests that beneath everything else, it is the messages of well-crafted movies, rather than their medium, that keeps us coming back. The messages are the multifarious, hypothetical, ethical challenges to which we subject our characters and by which we change our self-conceptions. Though our characters may be worked over by many other forms of influence, none has shown the ability to be so immediately and globally affecting as motion pictures. Drawing on the insights of numerous soul-searchers in diverse fields such as Joseph Campbell, Scott Peck, Carol Pearson, Michael Wood, and William Strauss and Neil Howe, I finally came to know how movies develop such a hold on us. How movies both doom and redeem us. And why, whether we know it or not, we watch movies as if our lives depend on it.

I am suggesting that underneath all the entertainment, exceptional movies offer us absolution for what we have done and not done in our lives. Herein lays the core of the book, which will no doubt cause those who struggle with religious terminology to blanch as much as their theological opposites. The point is that through our identification with protagonists, great movies allow us to subconsciously connect with our higher (and sometimes lower) selves, clearing away our daily compromises in facing life-altering conflicts. In the concrete examples of archetypal life journeys made available to us through film, we ultimately experience empathy, however brief, with the ineffability of our existence. Through such experiential immersion, movies comprehensively reinforce many of the positive tools by which we engage the trials of living. Thus, in transubstantiating with movie characters amidst history, culture, and family, we uncon-

sciously journey through our confusions in arcs that bring us moments of *at-onement*.

This book, then, is about *what* movies do for us. It is about *how* movies exhibit the contradictions, truths, and fantasies surrounding our bedrock American beliefs in things held sacred, including, in this case, our creed of family. It is about *how* the best filmmakers deliver a complex socio-spiritual engagement in the circumstances of our lives. It is about *why* we again and again attend the dark universal tabernacles in which these sermons are offered. And, finally, I believe, it will bring revelation, liberation, and illumination to reader's lives by showing them *how* to look through movies into themselves as they have never done before.

The book is an outgrowth of workshops I have taught throughout the country where participants have echoed the refrain, "Wow, I had no idea all *that* was going on in movies!" To this, I have responded, "Not consciously." But movies wouldn't exert their pull on us if they didn't connect us in some way with the intricate web of passions and concerns that continually roil our lives beneath the surface. What's so exciting is that through movies we can bring the matrix of these connections up into conscious view in order to better understand all the forces that form and control us. Once we consciously recognize these forces, we are freer to respond to them proactively rather than reactively. As such, it is my hope that the perspectives explored in this book will give readers the kind of renewal they have given me – a way of "seeing through the movies" that often allows me to make peace with this fractious world. A peace I can hold onto even after I come out of the dark.



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## PART I

### THE UNIVERSAL TABERNACLE

In 1920 William Butler Yeats asked in his poem, *The Second Coming*:

*And what rough beast, its hour come round at last,  
Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?*

The picture he drew with words in the body of the poem jumps off the page still today from artistic rendering to cinematic vision. Its metaphor poses the stark question about whether our society is really in the throes of end times or just endlessly readying itself for resurrection.



The second stanza of the poem begins:

*Surely some revelation is at hand,  
Surely the Second Coming is at hand.*



*Good Will Hunting* (1997)  
(Miramax / Matt Damon and Minnie Driver)

Imagine yourself back in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century seeing a similar close-up for the first time when May Irwin and John C. Rice locked their mouths together in *The Kiss* (1896)

## The Power of Motion Pictures

Movies and movie-going have changed the course of recorded history faster than any other medium, invention, or activity. This sweeping statement bears repeating. During the last century of the millennium, motion picture movie-going proved itself the most significant agent of change that humankind had yet created. Frank Capra understood this when he wrote, “You can talk to hundreds of millions, for two hours – and in the dark.”

Television is an alternate technology for the delivery of moving pictures. The internet is shaping up to be another such vehicle on a two way street that may affect the 21<sup>st</sup> century as motion pictures did the 20<sup>th</sup>. But both are missing some distinct magnifiers that resulted in the incomparable mark motion pictures left on the past century.

There are many ways to characterize the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The age of accelerating, globe-shrinking communication is perhaps the most pertinent. The ability of human beings to make contact with one another took quantum leaps because of the flurry of inventions that rolled in with the 1900s. The automobile, the airplane, the telephone, and radio drastically quickened the pace with which we were fed information not only about our friends, but also about people and cultures whose lifestyles were strange to us indeed. None of these inventions, however, could hold a candle to motion pictures in making worlds collide. Not only collide, but transform; even homogenize.

The power of pictures themselves contributes to this extraordinary impact. Much has been said about how they are worth a thousand words. Add the wonder of motion, amplify the sound and the size of the screen, and throw in the whiz-bang of tech-

#### 4 / The Power of Motion Pictures

nology and the word count becomes irrelevant. We move way beyond receiving in words to receiving in multi-sensory experiences.

Of themselves, motion pictures are a technological wonder. In their delivery, as well, they are often the first vehicles to demonstrate to mass audiences the latest technological wizardry coming down the pike. With Georges Méliès' *A Trip to the Moon* (1902), millions visualized that trip sixty-seven years before it became actuality. The serving robots now making their ways into our households were anticipated fifty years ago by Robby in *Forbidden Planet* (1956). *Star Trek's* communicators (beginning in 1967) are today's cell phones. Nothing wows us with the possibilities of our human brilliance like movies do.

Great dramatic motion pictures are more than just the result of science, however. Technology only provides the paintbrush and canvass for their art. That art is an amalgamation of all the other arts. Motion pictures are the 20<sup>th</sup> century's synthesis of photography, drama, literature, painting, sculpture, collage, architecture, interior design, music, dance, fashion design, even the culinary arts, etc. When the art of film is realized, the combined effect of all these other arts becomes significantly greater than each alone. Furthermore, feature films incorporate every interest humans have ever imagined. Subject matters range unimpeded from anthropology through zoology, with major strokes of mythology, psychology and sociology deepening each grand composition.

In just one sitting great films condense together all of the above in multi-dimensional, sometimes epic, experiences. With movies we can live whole lifetimes and journey to the farthest reaches of the universe in just two hours. They teleport and time-travel us and exchange our skins for every stripe and hue and then return us to ourselves in less time than it takes many people to commute round trip to work. No other medium has such a capacity to liberate us from our earthly limitations. Movies suck us into their vortexes. The mind warps and body exchanges they initiate make us momentary gods.

Beside their often more elaborate technology, greater reach of creative expression, and epic potential, theatrical motion pictures do two more things that lift them out of the ordinary of

television and the solitary of the internet. First, we give them uninterrupted attention. There is little in distracted, contemporary life that we pay as much sustained attention to as we do the movies. Live theatrical venues may have the same claim on exceptional occasions. And so might churchgoing, if the sermons are inspiring. Notice how these two alternatives, like the movies, get us out of the house and into dedicated environments. Home, where we may all concede the greatest amount of interpersonal attention should be paid, is more often our worst Babel of interruptions, truncated conversations and defective listening. It is a curious phenomena how well we might connect empathetically with children not getting due attention from their parents in a movie story, and then go home and ignore our own children. But, as we shall see, this is only one of the innumerable contradictions we go to the movies to resolve. It's because we give movies such unadulterated attention that they speak so fervently to our subconscious conflicts.

The final and perhaps most potent effect of motion pictures derives from their distinction as a mass art capable of being shared through communal viewing. Something happens in the large group dynamic that doesn't happen at home. It is a silent, unconscious bonding of feelings, emotions, confusions and triumphs with people of all classes and races whom probably we will never know personally. The objective of many church ideals is unwittingly obtained in the movie theater.

You may think too much is made of this. But Frank Capra noted in his autobiography how the pace of films slowed the larger an audience got. In contrast to jubilant executives in small studio screenings, a large audience previewing Capra's *American Madness* (1932) received the film with a big yawn. He concluded that a collective acceleration of reception occurs in a larger group, a kind of corporate mind meld. Accordingly, he speeded up the pace one third by beginning the practice of overlapping dialogue. When he re-previewed the edited film to another large audience, it was a hit. He attributed his mastery of motion picture pacing to this recognition of the power of collective consciousness. Once we get past the popcorn chomping of our neighbors, their initial talking and feet up on the chair backs, a universal joining takes hold in these our modern-day tabernacles

of projection. The "theo" of theology finds an ultimate unconscious home in the "thea" of the movie theater.

Far more than in self-selecting houses of worship or at isolated stage presentations, movie audiences became a metaphor for the Hindu's thousand-headed god. Extending beyond the walls of individual theaters, this amalgamating audience reached around the globe. In common, whether we viewed them in New York or Calcutta, each movie offering challenged our consciousnesses with differing belief systems and alternate lifestyles. Because of this mass effect, whether we liked it or not, or whether we went to them or not, our human spiritual, emotional and physical lives over the past hundred years were incomparably transformed by the movies. By the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, we had become via the movies the six-billion-headed god.

It remains to be seen whether this unifying effect will dissipate because of the advent and widespread use of digital home entertainment systems. It may be that such segregating technology will dissolve the congregational bonding experience that feature motion pictures provided for the past tumultuous century.

### ***"The Kiss" Effect***

May Irwin's and John C. Rice's *The Kiss* (1896) provides a good example of the power for change exhibited by motion pictures. We have become jaded today regarding the swamp of broadcast information in which we wallow. Just over a century ago, however, worldwide information exchange was still rather minimal. In 1896 moving pictures were transitioning from the individually viewed zoetropes to the collectively watched movie screens. One-minute reels of the most ordinary activities were amazing audiences with their magnified motion. A man opening an umbrella and waddling down the street was a miracle of entertainment. Probably no special effect has ever worried audiences like that first locomotive hissing and puffing straight toward them on the big screen.

It wasn't long, however, before movie-goers thought they had seen it all. Producers scrambled for new images to excite

viewers. The scheme of using stage celebrities was hatched. With that light bulb of an idea, Thomas Edison filmed this one-minute smooch scene from the popular play, *The Widow Jones*.

Place yourself back in that era. You've seen the umbrella go up and the train come in. A man and woman kissing seem pretty bland by comparison. Nevertheless, one mate or other hooks you into going. Once inside the theater, you find your mouth agape and mind racing. Never have you observed kissing under such a microscope, and certainly not with two hundred or more strangers sharing that magnified intimacy all around you. Twenty-foot faces up there on the screen sucking on each other and enjoying it! Mouths open, for goodness sake! Eyes fluttering as if on opium or something! And tongues! Are they using their tongues in full public view? Outrageous! Disgusting! Pornographic! Worse still – utterly... FASCINATING!

Subconscious questions fly through your 1896 brain. Do I kiss like that? *Should* I kiss like that? If I did kiss like that, would my chosen darling swoon for me? Would all the world and the pick of the litter be mine if only I kissed like that?

Those disquieting exhibitions of *The Kiss* could not help but cause mass self-consciousness, mass self-examination. The most intimate and personal acts were suddenly opened to macro and microcosmic dissection all at once. Not just our private, but also our corporate consciousness was assaulted from the screen. The mind-altering experience of viewing *The Kiss* demonstrated possibilities for whole new avenues of personal experimentation. It gave rise to a wealth of occupational opportunities for moral critics, as well. Victorianism was publicly breached as this “projected” bite out of the fruit of knowledge got chewed on by the millions.

The world “reeled” with reassessment as it did again and again when confronted by the alternate behaviors the movies revealed. It was no small thing that Gable almost instantaneously gave men everywhere the choice of not wearing undershirts. Likewise, the sudden, global shift when Dietrich put pants on women. Despite how we may look on it now, smoking as a ritual of sophistication, was given the universal imprimatur of seduction for a whole era by Bogart and Bacall. Because of such tectonic displacements, motion pictures naturally became the pri-



mary target for the howlers against change who have continually thrown "the end of decency" and "the fall of tradition" at them like hand grenades into a theater. These grenades are still launched today.

As if these style changes were not enough, they were nothing compared to how movies altered the fabrics of our social, emotional and conceptual lives that this book shall discuss in depth. Please keep in mind, however, that the best movies – the one's we are concerned with here – didn't accelerate our transformations by direct intention. Nor did they do so with either good or evil design. They just did it by exposing every facet of all of our possibilities to everyone one of us, bigger and more immediately than any other medium in history ever did.

That's power.



## **The Projection, Reception, and Reflection**

The unmatched power that occurs within the motion picture tabernacle is the captivation and stimulation of our collective consciousness through the technological wizardry of moving images in conjunction with all the arts and sciences put together. With such power, it is no wonder that movies were blamed from the very beginning for what “traditionalists” have always decried as the increasing ills of contemporary society. Their strident indictments, however, are misdirected for a number of reasons. First, they equate ills revealed with ills initiated. Second, they ignore the fact that as Neal Gabler says, “It is the hero’s values we’re rooting for [in Hollywood films], and those values are almost invariably traditional ones: loyalty, community, integrity, love, individualism, sacrifice.” And third, it may be that their real problem is with the conception of tabernacles themselves. Tabernacles threaten the tombs in which their worldviews are interred.

### **Once More into the Tabernacle**

Tabernacles are not religion specific. They are not limited to churches, temples, mosques, or any sects thereof. They can be found within forests, within bodies, within the imagination. As safe places, they are not partisan politically or economically. Tabernacles, rather, are sanctuaries for connecting with soul, inner being, essence, truth, cosmic consciousness, God, one another, or any of these that move us toward a higher humanity. We do not attend tabernacles to obtain divisive or destructive messages. They are not places where we wish to be separated from or discriminate against each other. To the contrary, they can be any external or internal spaces where we seek enlighten-