

## **HOW TO PUT GOD IN A MOVIE**

An Essay by Albert J. Bergensen

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My co-author has argued that religion arises from experiences of grace, where something happens in human affairs that cannot be attributed to the normal workings of the world, hence suggesting the presence of a larger and more purposeful presence, like God. Such grace experiences, which are sprinkled throughout life, are captured in symbols and passed down through generations in story form, which would now include movies. So far we have focused largely upon the wide variety of symbols used to dramatize this religious imagination, from bright white light (Fearless) and chiropractors (Jacob's Ladder) to beautiful women (Always, All that Jazz), and little old men (Oh, God!). This screening of symbols of grace, from angels to heaven to God seems easy enough. But the process is more complicated, for not every kind of movie is comfortable with hints of God's presence. To explore this issue I want to discuss two general kinds of movies, what I will call the micro realist and the macro realist Science Fiction movie.

## **THE MICRO-REALIST MOVIE**

First, let's ask the question of why we don't see hints of God's presence in many movies. The simplest answer is that this is not a point the filmmaker wishes to make; some sort of divine intervention just doesn't fit the narrative. That's probably the most common reason and makes the most sense. But we can unpack this idea a little.

Movies that are considered serious in the sense of trying to make a comment on the human condition invariably set themselves in a very naturalistic or realistic setting. The idea is to portray emotions, feelings, anger, love, and loss as they really occur and not avoid the unpleasant or smooth over the harsh realities of life. We can call these 'micro' movies because their central point centers on interpersonal relations or the psychological dynamics of their characters. The micro movie gains much of its power from this depiction of human life as it really happens; no punches are pulled and no contrived endings are allowed. It is at it is, or as the filmmaker thinks it is. In this regard, what Tom Wolfe said about the realism of the novel also seems applicable to the realism of the micro movie: "It was realism that created the absorbing or gripping quality that is particular to the novel, the quality that makes the reader feel that he has been pulled not only into the setting of the story but also into the minds of the characters." Even blockbuster action adventure movies flooded with special effects have a commitment to realism as they try to represent things like terrorist attacks, runaway trains, sinking ships, hijacked airplanes, or volcanic explosions, realistically as if you were really there. The emphasis on reality here is ratcheted up to a realistic depiction of the historical event or action-adventure rather than ratcheted down to the human emotion. Some movies manage a naturalism of setting and human response.

Lawrence of Arabia is both the spectacle of the Arab revolt during World War 1 and a personal tragedy. The Godfather is both an historical drama and the personal story of the tragic price a son pays to follow in his father's footsteps in the family business.

Such an emphasis upon life-as-it-is-realism as a story's backdrop has direct implications for placing hints of God on screen, for supernatural intrusions violate the integrity of daily reality, hence the integrity of the very realistic story being told. As a result most movies with a realistic or naturalistic commitment - from serious micro explorations of the human condition to historical dramas or special effects action-adventure spectacles - do not attempt to portray unexplained intrusions that their characters acknowledge as grace experiences. For instance, the film magazine Time Out conducted a reader's poll of the top 100 movies. 'It's a Wonderful Life', with the appearance of Clarence the angel and Wim Wenders 'Wings of Desire' about an angel who falls to Earth, seemed the only God in the movies on their list. Similarly in 1998 the American Film Institute had a distinguished panel select the 100 greatest American movies and Only 'It's a Wonderful Life' and 'Star Wars' (if the 'force' is seen as a metaphor for something like God) seemed like the movies we discuss here. The AFI top 100 starts out with Citizen Kane, Casablanca, The Godfather, Gone With The Wind, Lawrence of Arabia, The Wizard of Oz, The Graduate, On the Waterfront, Shindler's list, Singing in the Rain, and closes with My Fair Lady, a Place in the Sun, The Apartment, Goodfellas, Pulp Fiction, The Searchers, Bringing Up Baby, Unforgiven, Guess Who's Coming To Dinner, and Yankee Doodle Dandy.

(This is outright wrong - Sam Jackson's character has a religious epiphany in Pulp Fiction.) Some of them are about the present, some are about the past, some are made up, but most are based on a world devoid of hints of a divine presence. Realistic movies can be about religion, but mostly where we see human reactions to playing roles in religious organizations (stories about priests, nuns, rabbis, ministers, televangelists), or holding religious beliefs (Ben Hur, The Big Fisherman). But these religious movies are about human nature (as a natural entity) reacting to religious beliefs and institutions, and not an effort at an actual screening of a hint of God's presence.

## **THE MACRO-SCI FI MOVIE**

If it is difficult to have hints of the supernatural intrude into films with a deep commitment to a believable everyday reality, then it should seem the more open-ended, everything-is-possible science fiction movie would constitute a much better backdrop for hints about God's presence. But this isn't so either, although for different reasons. If, in the micro human story movie, everyday reality is just too tight to allow a hint of God to peek through, then the open-ended science fiction is just too loose. In these futuristic worlds anything goes and nothing is impossible. Where reality ends and the supernatural begins is never pinned down, making it extremely difficult to come to the conclusion that something is ever from the other side. How can one suspect God when it might be some alien force or some parallel universe or some cosmic space warp?

Science Fiction movies do, though, have a great deal of extra-worldly intrusions that are not found in micro realist movies, which could, in principal, be taken for hints of God's presence. But by and large, they aren't because it is always possible that there is some natural thing out there that is the cause. (Didn't this guy just prove his own point wrong with this statement.) What science fiction does then is to naturalize extraordinary occurrences, turning potential grace experiences into science-like puzzles, where the normal reaction is to search for a solution rather than be awestruck and suspect the presence of the Devine. No matter how out of the world the initial premise, the rest of the movie turns into a technical game of figuring out how this extraordinary experience is in fact part of the laws of some physics somewhere. (Is this not what the entirety of science is based on?

Even when the characters don't know the exact science of what's going on, the conclusion isn't that this is a hint of God's presence, but that this is simply a world so advanced that we as yet don't understand its operating principals. (Is this not what any sane individual would do?)

## **OH, GOD!**

To get a feel for this naturalizing effect consider the culminating scene in the non-science fiction movie 'Oh God!' where George Burns is in court claiming to be God. Now imagine this same scene in, say, a Star Trek movie. In Oh, God!, no one believes Burns is really God and so he proposes a small demonstration. He starts to walk out of the court-room. Halfway out he turns invisible, then continues to walk out, pushing -without being seen - the doors open at the end of the courtroom to enter the hallway. Here we have a clear commitment to everyday reality - a da in court in Southern California - and a very unnatural, if not downright supernatural, event, turning invisible. The reaction of everyone in the courthouse is shock and amazement. Mouths drop open. They stare in disbelief. They can't believe what they have seen. It brings the whole scene to a halt. No replay this scene as if on board the Starship Enterprise. George Burns starts to walk down the aisle and turns invisible. What is the reaction of Captain Picard or Captain Kirk? Is it amazement, awe, and the sense on their face that they have just witnessed a possible presence of the divine? Probably not. My guess is that they would say something to the effect, "Damn, it's those Klingons again and their 'cloaking device.' They have obviously perfected it to be used on people as well as space ships." And if it wasn't the Klingons it would be some other beings from some planet in some parallel universe. All the things George Burns (God) did to John Denver in Oh, God!, from appearing out of thin air, to making it rain inside his car, to making sounds appear out of nowhere, and creating the presence of, or illusions of, upper floors of an office building, would all be seen to be special powers of some alien creatures or some different physics of some other universe.



The point is it's always something. The extraordinary is never unexplainable.

Therefore it is never an act of grace. And that's the key point of why science fiction is not compatible with screening hints of God's presence.

## **2001: A SPACE ODYSSEY**

The difficulty of creating a sense of awe in science fiction can be seen in the movie 2001: A Space Odyssey which has often been described as having spiritual and religious overtones. This movie is deeply committed to science fiction. It will take something impossible and make it seem possible, from the presence of the black monolith stuck into the surface of the moon, through the exploratory space journey to Jupiter to see where a mysterious signal is coming from. Even the computer that malfunctions, HAL, is believable as what computers might be like in the future. In the end the movie could easily be said to be spiritual or religious, but the characters on the screen give no hint that they are in the presence of something divine or unaccountable.

Dave Bowman (Keir Dullea) the last living person on the space ship finally leaves the mother ship and heads off in his pod toward Jupiter and another monolith seen floating in space. Before considering Dave's reaction to this, shift back to Oh, God! For a moment. Remember John Denver's expression when he discovers the extraordinary things George Burns can and does do. He is shaken to the core and can't believe what he is seeing. Experiencing rain just inside his car, someone who turns invisible and appears and disappears at will, all throw him for a loop. He breaks down and quivers in his bathroom when George Burns appears. And Dave? When he sees and experiences extraordinary things, does he react in the same normal way he had throughout the movie? Is he shook-up, surprised, startled, or fearful to find hunks of metal in space or that he is being transported through a light show reminiscent of a Haight-Ashbury tunnel of visual delights? It doesn't seem like it, or if he is, we would never know. He just keeps going in his pod.

You would never hear him say to himself, “Oh my god, look at those colors, what the hell is going on here, where the hell am I?” And when his pod finally lands, he is in some eighteenth century rococo drawing room where, looking out the pod window, he sees himself walking across the room to see someone else sitting down eating at a table. Does he say, “What is going on here; this is crazy, am I dreaming, on drugs, what?” No, not at all. Well, it gets even crazier as the guy at the table, turns out to be an older Dave, who now gets up and sees someone in bed, and it’s Dave even older yet, and as this dying old man reaches for the monolith, now at the end of his bed, his body is transformed into a glowing fetus.

I understand all of this is supposed to be poetic imagery. And it is. But that is my very point. To attain something extraordinary, hence to hint at something spiritual or religious, requires violating the integrity of the science fiction premise upon which 2001 was built. Up until Dave departed the mother ship, everything seemed quite natural. The monolith discovered on the moon is treated as if it is really there. Heywood Floyd the space scientist flies out to take a look. Great care is taken to make it all seem realistic. He dozes on the flight and his pen floats in the weightlessness of space; he calls his daughter and wishes her a happy birthday on the moon colony’s pay phone; and he casually opens a box lunch and has a sandwich as the space shuttle scoots across the moon’s surface heading toward the implanted monolith. This is followed by the exacting reality of the space flight to Jupiter. Hal, the talking computer of the future, seems real. Dave’s reactions also seem real: he is co-politing the mission, he logically figures out a way to get back on the ship after Hal locks him out; and he reasonably decides it’s time to disconnect Hal. All normal reactions.

What, then, is one to make of Dave's decision to get into his pod and head out alone for Jupiter and that flying piece of monolithic metal? Suicide? That doesn't seem part of the spiritual message this ending is supposed to convey. But if we stick with the science fiction premise so far, there are few other reasonable conclusions. Going off alone is certain death, so why does he do it? There isn't an answer, of course, and that is part of the eternal mystery of this movie. Some say it is supposed to make us think and speculate on that the images that follow are trying to hint at things like human evolution or cosmic rebirth. All of which is fine and these images succeed, more or less, in placing such hints. But what must be recognized is that this effort at the larger cosmic or religious implication is only attainable by rupturing the science fiction premise upon which the movie is founded. Why is the science fiction abandoned? Who knows, but let me suggest that the openness of the science fiction format, in naturalizing everything in its path, now leaves no room at the end of the movie for the intended spiritual mystical religious or cosmic conclusion that is desired.

If the science fiction premise continued, and there was extraordinary intrusion, whether the floating monolith or the Chateau-like room in space, Dave, following the science fiction premise, would be compelled to treat it as a real problem and try to figure out a solution. After all this is what happened when they found the monolith on the moon. No one said this might be some sort of divine signal. They went to investigate as if it were a real phenomenon. And the signal from Jupiter, they went to investigate that too. And Hal's malfunction, it too was treated in a normal rational fashion: disconnect the computer.

But now Dave, at movie's end, doesn't treat his new experiences in this was at all. He seems spellbound by the light show and undisturbed to find someone like himself in this rococo room. The reason, of course, is that Dave is no longer Dave the real space man, but now Dave the cut-out image assembled along with a marble-floored eighteenth century room, the dying old man, and the glowing fetus to create a montage of images that works better as a painting than as a continuation of the science fiction narrative that made up most of the movie.

In short, the movie was stuck. It wanted to make a larger spiritual message but the science fiction format would have absorbed any such outrageous thing it could possibly come up with, so it just switched to being a collage of images. 2001: The Science Fiction Movie ended when Dave left the pod on his own and 2001: The Collage art work began.

It is if Kubrick decided at the end to turn the movie into a painting because he couldn't introduce his spiritual/religious message about human birth/rebirth within the format that had gotten Dave and the spaceship close to Jupiter. The movie screen became a giant collage. In 1914 George Braque assembled a collage titled "Newspaper, Bottle, Packet of Tobacco" and in 1968 Stanley Kubrick ended his space movie with a silver screen collage we could call, "Rococo Dining Room, Old Man Eating/Dying, Glowing Fetus."

I think there was no choice, given the science fiction premise. The passive aggressiveness of science fiction would have absorbed any effort at hints of the extraordinary and without his collage at the end he would have been left with Star Trek or Star Wars, or any other science fiction movie.

The only way out of the science fiction reality is to end the movie and start painting within the movie. Did his collage work? The film is loved, but the ending has remained controversial on the simple grounds that no one seems to know what it really means. I believe that a good part of this comes from abandoning his science fiction medium to insert his collage construction.

## STAR WARS

I mentioned Star wars Earlier, and certainly the notion of the Force seems like a real metaphor for something like a God. Vaya con dios, “May the force be with you,” certainly hints at this. But the naturalizing effect of science fiction can be seen here too, as the force seems a natural entity. Compare, for example, the Star Wars ‘force’ with the Field of Dreams ‘voice’. Both seem supernatural on the surface, but upon closer examination the Force appears more natural. Everyone seems to agree that the Force exists and that some have it and some don’t. Compared to the mystery of the Voice in Field of Dreams, the Force seems more like magnetism, a natural entity to be harnessed for human purposes. Luke Skywalker also isn’t that surprised, confused, or in doubt over the presence of the force in anyway comparable to Ray Kinsella being startled, unclear, unsure, and something in awe when the Voice talked to him. When, for instance, the voice of the deceased Jedi knight Obi-wan Kenobi starts to talk to Luke in the cockpit of his fighter plane is a normal state of affairs. Luke does not say, “What is this, a ghost, I thought you were dead, who are you, what do want, why are you talking to me,” in the surprised and angry tones used by Ray Kinsella when addressed by the Voice. In the Star Wars world, with their special physics, such things seem very plausible, and so Luke just heeds the voice’s advice about relying on the Force rather than his instrument panel to attack the Death Star. When advised “If you build it, he will come,” Ray Kinsella doesn’t say, in a familiar voice, “Voice, is that you,” for in his cosmos there is no such possibility. The Star Wars Force, though, isn’t so much from the other side, as a functioning element somewhere in a science fiction cosmos. Anything is possible, including the power of the Force.

This flexibility neuters the sense of the truly extraordinary and keeps those events from having a grace-like interpretation.

In this regard consider the character of Yoda. Is he a mystery? Not at all. He is just there, this guy with these mysterious powers, that we all believe exist somewhere in the future. Luke is certainly calm about it all. He just wants his lessons. No puzzlement here. I suppose the closest thing we have to a portrayal of something like heaven comes at the end of Return of the Jedi when we see the spirit beings of Darth Vader, Yoda, and Obi-wan Kenobi watching Luke and the others celebrate. I think Luke looks at them and smiles; they look back and smile. A normal day out here in deep space where life on the astral plane is part of normal physics, such that no one is surprised that the deceased should materialize in front of everyone, or that you should recognize their presence. Compare this with the looks of Molly and Sam at the end of Ghost. Molly is amazed that she can see Sam and the emotion is overwhelming that the spirit has become if not flesh, then at least visually materialized in some capacity. Agreed, they were husband and wife and that accounts for a lot of the emotion, but the possibility of a crossing between the living and the dead was also a tremendous emotional experience for both of them.



**MICRO + MACRO = A HINT OF THE DEVINE**

If we eliminate the macro-science fiction movie too, how then does one put a hint of God in a movie? There are no doubt many ways, but here is one. If micro films portray a reality so tightly drawn it doesn't allow for intrusions from the other side, and if the macro science fiction films provide cosmic intrusions, but naturalize them, then what is the correct cinematic formula? The answer is to combine the strength of each genre. From the science fiction movie take the presence of unexplained intrusions into everyday reality, but now insert them into the tightly defined reality of the micro realist movie. The result: things we can't explain plus the awe and amazement produced by the fact that this event cannot be explained in world terms, leaving a hint of God as only other possibility. Both elements are absolutely necessary. It cannot work with only one or the other. In science fiction things happen that are not immediately explainable, which is necessary, but the characters must not suspect it is just another reality warp. This requires a sense of the fixed everyday reality, which the regular micro movies provide. Finally since the characters can't suspect Klingons, they are left with the hint of God, for what else could so contravened the laws of nature. Fixed everyday reality plus a cosmic intrusion: two seeming opposites, which is exactly the formula to allow the hint of God. If you allow too much flexibility in the reality they will always suspect Klingons or space time warps. If you allow no reality flexibility there will be nothing out of the ordinary. Consider a couple of examples of how this works.

In *Oh, God!*, Everyday reality is set in Burbank in the mundane life of an assistant manager of a Food World supermarket (John Denver).

The intrusion: George Burns appearing/disappearing, making sounds, making it rain, etc. right in front of the assistant manager. Because this isn't science fiction, Jerry (Denver) doesn't suspect this appearance/disappearance thing is the work of Klingons or a ripple in the space-time continuum. Throughout the movie it is always just another day in downtown Burbank. Nothing else is possible, which means that what Jerry has been witnessing can't be true, unless what this little old man is trying to tell him is true: he is, in fact, God. In *Field of Dreams*, daily taken-for-granted reality takes the form of Iowa farm country, again, far, far away from R2D2 and C3PO. The rock of this middle American reality is Ray Kinsella (Kevin Costner), a simple, straight-shooting ordinary, non-suspecting family man and corn farmer. The unexplained intrusion: that Voice speaking to him, "If you build it, he will come." Ray doesn't suspect Klingons either, nor his mental health. Daily Iowa reality holds tight: the Voice remains a mystery and is not naturalized. It is from the other side. That is the only possible explanation allowed by the setting of this film.

Or, consider a slight variation on this theme. Instead of metaphors of God and heaven, there is Ground Hog Day, a metaphor for hell. The ordinary reality here: February 2, Groundhog Day on a blustery cold winter day in Pennsylvania and a local news crew sent out to see if Puxutawney Phil, the groundhog, comes out to see his shadow. The cosmic intrusion: Phil, the obnoxious selfish weatherman played by Bill Murray, discovers that for him February 2 repeats and repeats and repeats. He goes to bed every night but when he wakes up it is February 2 again and again. He is trapped in time, in his own sort of hell. Now, instead of Phil the weatherman substitute Captain Piccard from *Star Trek* or Luke Skywalker from *Star Wars*.

If they were to awake and find it the same day repeating, they would immediately suspect someone somehow had managed to figure out some way to stop time, at least in this town on this day. The rest of the movie: figure out how to break their hold and free himself from the time machine. But Phil the weatherman has no such suspicions for his Pennsylvania reality allows no such speculation. Phil the weatherman, like Jerry the Food World assistant manager, and Ray the corn Farmer is frustrated, confused and angry, at a reality that isn't obeying its own rules. He tries everything to get out of his own little hell and finally does, but not by outfoxing the aliens or deciphering the time machinery.

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