

## ANXIOUSLY ENGAGED . . .

SEEK YE OUT OF THE BEST FLICKS:  
R-RATED MOVIES THAT HAVE HELPED ME  
THINK ABOUT THE GOSPEL

By Jana Riess

**A** WHILE BACK in fast and testimony meeting, I surprised myself by speaking about the spiritual lessons I had learned from an R-rated film, *The Talented Mr. Ripley*. In doing so, I completely spoiled the plot, just as I'm about to spoil it for you. (Feel free to stop reading if you intend to see the movie.) The film is about assumed identity: Matt Damon plays a character, Tom Ripley, who kills a wealthy and handsome young man, Dickie Greenleaf, in order to steal his identity. The film looked to be a straightforward story about a villain who gets away with murder.

But it isn't quite that simple.

Tom begins as a rather sympathetic character, a youth who feels his poverty acutely and desperately wants the ease of life that he sees the privileged class enjoying. When he is mistaken for a Princeton alumnus because he has borrowed a Princeton blazer, he doesn't correct the error, allowing himself a moment to bask in the advantages of perceived affluence. For Tom, that small moral omission is the beginning of a long and increasingly bloody trail of lies and secrets. It grants him access to Dickie's rarefied world and facilitates a close relationship with Dickie, with whom Tom becomes obsessed. When the murder happens, the big surprise for the audience is that it's nearly defensible: it is partly an accident, and partly self-defense. We almost feel sorry for Tom and anguish for his loss. But the accident/murder sends him into a spiral of theft and more lies, as he assumes Dickie's name and generous allowance. To conceal his real identity, Tom commits another murder, and another, ultimately killing a character who has been nothing but kind to him. Throughout, Tom rather perceptively

reflects that each crime sends him further into a "basement" of loneliness and despair. The film shows him to be wildly successful in his deceptions but always alone and filled with self-loathing.

There are many ways to read this movie, but the lesson I spoke about in sacrament meeting had to do with the enormous moral value of seemingly small choices. Sometimes, moral choices are quite complex, and we don't have a strong sense of their ultimate consequences. We simply don't live in a world where good and evil come neatly wrapped up in clearly labeled boxes. Our choices, however, will always create other choices, and thus it is crucial from the outset to set our course for good. What is so fascinating—and pernicious—about Tom's degeneration is that it begins with relatively small deceptions that lead inexorably to terrible crimes. In the film, no transgression is trivial. Tom slowly becomes a monster and thus a cautionary tale: we are, all of us, capable of profound moral decay.

For me, this sharp, intelligent, R-rated film functioned as a particularly riveting sermon, as well as a thing of artistic enjoyment. I found myself thinking about it for days afterward. I felt that viewing it had changed me for the better, and it had caused me to be more scrupulous about the tiniest moral decisions. Yet some Latter-day Saints feel there is a kind of moral decay in the very fact that I am gleaning moral exhortation from an R-rated film. While I certainly don't feel that R-rated movies are for everyone—the restriction exists for a reason—I do believe that well-crafted films can prod us to explore important moral and theological topics.

**I** DO not doubt that our Church leaders are correct in asserting that we need to be very, very careful about what we watch. They understand that viewing a film is an active experience, all the more so if it is a *good* film; we should, and likely will, be changed by it. While some people who frequent violent or sexually explicit films argue that they are unaffected by them, I counter that film is a profoundly affecting medium, and that we should be very cautious about how we use it. (Interestingly, many who claim to be undamaged by the moral content of the movies they watch often concede that "other" people might be injured by such content. Media scholars even have a term for this—the "third person effect."<sup>1</sup> We are always happy to perpetuate the fantasy that we, the chosen or prescient few, can emerge from a media barrage unscathed.)

Films are potentially transformative, and so we are ardent about them. I agree with John Lyden, who argues in his book *Film as Religion* that "some people can argue about the interpretation of a film with more vehemence than they may argue about anything else." People aren't this passionate about movies because movies are merely fun or entertaining or frivolous. As Lyden explains, they are cultural products that function, in a postmodern society, as quasi-religious texts.<sup>2</sup> Through film, we confront our collective fears, requite our heroes, and vilify (and punish) our bogeymen. Film is the new mythology, as well as our cultural unifier. Indeed, quite a lot is at stake.

R-rated films, as John Hatch evenhandedly elucidated in the March 2003 issue of *SUNSTONE*, have occasionally been singled out by LDS leaders as movies to be avoided. More often, however, leaders counsel us to avoid "inappropriate" materials. Obviously, the definition of what is inappropriate is going to vary somewhat from person to person. I believe there is a place for intelligent movies that receive an R rating; sometimes, as we read in 2 Nephi, we are prone to see the good more clearly when we are presented with its alternative.

Hatch's article inspired me to think more seriously about R-rated films that have prompted me to ponder ethical or theological topics. I also polled various friends about their picks, which resulted in some helpful discussions. So, in addition to the film mentioned above, here in no particular order are seven other R-rated movies that have in some way bolstered my testimony,

*Saving Private Ryan*. I am surprised to find that I keep coming back to this film and re-



JANA RIESS is the Gospel Doctrine teacher in the Winchester, Kentucky, ward. She has a Ph.D. in American religious history from Columbia University and is the Religion Book Review Editor for Publishers Weekly. She is the author of *The Spiritual Traveler: Boston and New England* and is currently at work on a book about the spiritual themes in the television show, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*.

adding it to my list, because on one level, it is so obvious a movie. But it is also gripping and profound: *What is the value of one life? Is it more moral to protect the Many or redeem the One?* Jesus spoke of how the shepherd can leave the ninety-nine to rescue the one lost sheep; this film invites us to imagine the potential costs of such an action. While some viewers have objected to its graphic depiction of war, they are missing the point: this is supposed to *be* war. War is not pleasant or pretty or glorious. War is hell. We should be far more suspicious of films that perpetuate comely fallacies about war than of films that dare to remind us of the truth.

*Schindler's List*. Also in the WWII category, this is another film about individual worth. Director Steven Spielberg's decision to shoot the movie in black and white with only one instance of color—the unforgettable girl in the red coat—is a stroke of artistic genius. Just as Schindler is struck by the knowledge that this girl is a unique individual, a precious life, we too are jolted into remembering that each of the six million victims of the Holocaust was a priceless, distinct soul. The girl in the red coat represents all of the victims and shames us into remembering their worth.

Like a reverse echo of *The Talented Mr. Ripley*, *Schindler's List* is also about the power of one individual's moral choices. When Ben Kingsley's character quotes the Talmud to inform Oskar Schindler that "whoever saves one life saves the world entire," he declares that Schindler has performed an "absolute good." One of the film's lessons is that this womanizing, drunken, self-serving, very flawed man is in fact capable of performing an "absolute" good—and, by extension, so are we. But would we?

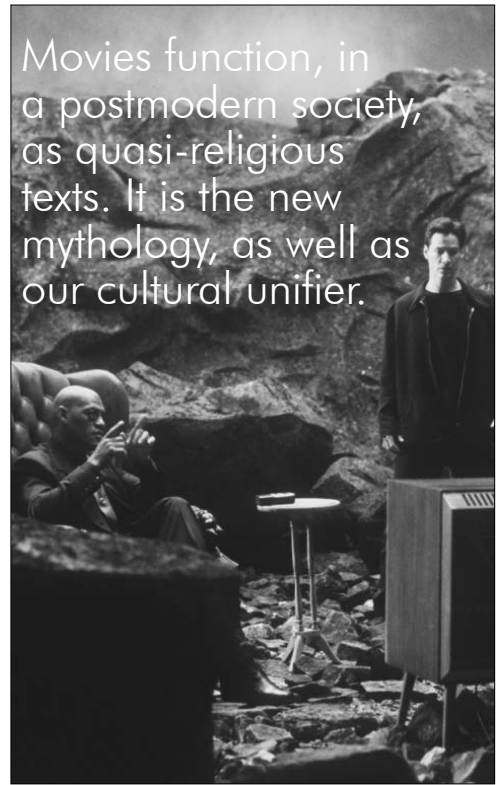
*The End of the Affair*. I promise this is the last WWII movie (and the only other one with Ralph Fiennes in it!), but I had to include this film. When I first rented it, I did not know that it would be so profoundly theological. When I realized that it was based on a novel by Graham Greene, I knew I was in for something much deeper than a simple love story. This is a film about belief and skepticism, about miracles and their agonizing cost. As the film progresses, the themes of possession and ardor become transferred from an adulterous wartime love affair between a man and a woman to both individuals' relationships with God. God in this film becomes a suitor, a jealous lover, who seeks an exclusive and passionate relationship with human beings. It's complicated, fascinating, and discomfiting.

*Monsoon Wedding*. I am astonished that this marvelous movie from India is rated R; apart from a suggestive scene at the beginning, when we hear a fully-clothed, middle-aged woman dubbing the hot-and-heavy "dialogue" of a pornographic movie, the movie has a very PG-13 feel. (It contains quite a lot of swearing, but very little of it is in English.) The film eschews the camp of Bollywood and the cloying sentimentality of Hollywood in favor of something wonderful and refreshing: a poignant, colorful, funny, and warm story about what it means to be a family. As a well-to-do Punjabi clan undergoes the usual crises and heartaches that come with hosting a major wedding, the father of the bride discovers a horrid incident that has been buried in the family's past. He has to make a decision about whether to preserve peace in the family or expose a person who has meant the world to him. In the midst of the dilemma, he makes a comment that is the best encapsulation of family values I have ever heard in a film: "Ria, if you go," he tells his weeping niece, "everything will break." The fabric of their family is so delicate and priceless that her estrangement would ruin everything—a realization that leads him to a courageous decision. (If you rent the DVD of this film, be sure to watch it a second time with the director's commentary turned on. It is perfectly amazing to hear the stories of how producer/director Mira Nair shepherded this low-budget film through production.)

*Amélie*. The Paris of this French film is not exactly *cinema verité*; this movie is not about gritty realism so much as the truth that can be seen only through fantasy. It's also about happiness—specifically, how individuals make themselves happy by spreading joy to others. Amélie engages with life for the first time by carrying out anonymous deeds of grace for others, resulting in some hilarious and poignant scenes. Doing good gives her "a strange feeling of absolute harmony" and leads her to notice the many people around her who are in pain. It also opens her heart to the possibility of love.

*The Matrix*. Too much ink has been spilled about this film already, and it certainly seems that people have overemphasized its spiritual value. In the *Gospel Reloaded: Exploring Spirituality and Faith in the Matrix*, Chris Seay and Greg Garrett note that like any postmodern text, the film opens itself up for multiple interpretations. It can just as easily be

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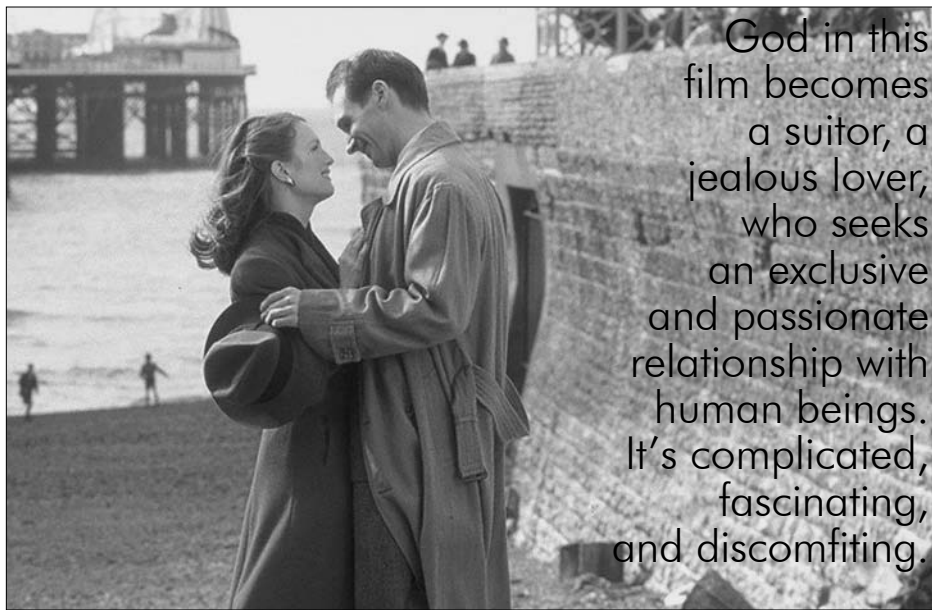


Laurence Fishburn and Keanu Reeves in *The Matrix*

read as a Buddhist tale of enlightenment, with Neo as a Mahayana *bodhisattva*, than a Christian story of salvation.<sup>3</sup>

But here's a Mormon reading: Neo is a hidden Christ, a Gnostic redeemer who courageously chooses knowledge (the red pill) over Edenic innocence and blissful ignorance of the real state of the world. His literal "Fall" down the rabbit's hole makes the salvation of humanity possible. (2 Ne. 2, anyone?) Neo is an evolving deity, who *becomes* The One because he chooses to be so. The film also offers viewers the chance to ponder the nature of reality and the reliability of personal experience.

*The Shawshank Redemption*. When I was about ten years old, I had an illustrated children's version of *The Count of Monte Cristo*, and I used to love its tale of lost treasure and ultimate vengeance. This cinematic retelling casts the story in a deeply Christian light, where the theme is more about the hero's personal redemption than the retributive justice he exacts from his enemy. It's a powerful tale of transformation. It also reveals the way human beings too easily attach themselves to what is comfortable and safe. In the film, jailbirds despise Shawshank, but the prison is home; many of the inmates are secretly terrified of freedom. It's a strong metaphor for the way many people construct prisons for their



Julianne Moore and Ralph Fiennes in *The End of the Affair*

spirits. Life may be richer outside those prisons, but it would not be predictable and safe, which is why many people choose to remain inside the walls of their own making.

This is by no means an exhaustive list, and my interpretations of these films may be very different from yours.<sup>4</sup> But I hope it will spark discussion and critical thinking.

A NUMBER of years ago, there was a helpful Relief Society lesson called “Choosing Well” that spoke to the importance of navigating the world with gospel principles intact. I think its message of informed choice is instructive here. Rather than assuming an all-or-nothing manner of thinking, rejecting all R-rated movies outright merely because the Motion Picture Association of America has decided they are best viewed by an adult audience, adults should adopt a mature and informed middle ground by “choosing well” where films are concerned. Obviously, most of the films I’ve mentioned above aren’t suitable for young people (although I’d have no hesitation showing *Monsoon Wedding* to kids as young as junior high age). Grown-ups have the intellectual and emotional capacity to make responsible choices. Why surrender that moral agency to the MPAA?

•*Read reviews.* In our Internet age, there’s really no excuse for not being educated about what we watch or plan to watch. Nowadays, we can learn in advance why an R-rating was given and decide for ourselves whether we wish to see the film. I never saw *Pulp Fiction*, for example. After reading numerous reviews

and talking to others who had seen it, I decided it sounded like great, original filmmaking, but it seemed to offer a story that was morally unsupportable for me. (Because I have not seen the movie, of course, I am very open to being wrong about this.) There are numerous websites with specific information about “objectionable” content in films, including the parent-to-parent site <[www.screenit.com](http://www.screenit.com)>. Many sites detail which profanities are used, describe nude scenes, alert parents to the depiction of drug or alcohol use in a film, and explain the nature of any violent content. The *Christian Science Monitor* also offers some of this information with its print film reviews.

•*Don’t be afraid to walk away.* Sometimes, even after reading reviews and educating myself in advance about an R-rated film, I get to the theater and discover that I was wrong. *Fargo* was one such movie, and I walked out. (We were at home for this one, so I just left the room, but I have occasionally walked out of the theater for movies that I found morally questionable or artistically awful. And here’s a tip: if you do this, and explain politely at the ticket booth, some theater owners will actually refund your money.) I liked *Fargo* tremendously for its innovation and amazing performances but was deeply disturbed by what our court system might call its “depraved indifference to human life.”

•*Watch it together.* One friend of mine had an unusual policy when her daughters were growing up: no (or at least very few) PG-13 movies. This was because PG-13 movies were ones the girls could potentially see themselves or with their friends,

whereas R-rated films were ones that they couldn’t watch unless they were with their parents. The point of her rule was that for any movie rated above PG, she and her husband wanted to foster family discussion and teach their girls how to think seriously about films and morality. The policy also highlighted the irony that sometimes PG-13 movies are far more morally questionable than R films.

•*Think for yourself, and do not judge others.* Know yourself and what you can and cannot see. In Romans 14, Paul discusses the thorny issue of whether Christians should eat meat that has been offered to Roman idols. This was a very serious matter in the mid-first century; at its heart, this was a question about a Christian’s involvement with the host culture as much as it was a debate about ritual purity. Some people, said Paul, could eat such meat “in honor of the Lord,” while others felt defiled by it. “I know and am persuaded,” Paul wrote, “that nothing is unclean in itself; but it is unclean for anyone who thinks it is unclean” (Rom. 14:14, NRSV). In other words, the meat was fine for those who felt it was not an issue, but unclean for those who believed it was dangerous. Our contemporary debate about what constitutes “appropriate” material for Latter-day Saints is really no different. Many members of the Church would feel defiled by the films I’ve discussed here, and Paul says they should avoid whatever makes them feel that way. Others will experience the same films differently. Paul’s key point is that people should refrain from judging one another in such matters and not cause each other to stumble. “Let us then pursue what makes for peace and for mutual upbuilding,” Paul admonishes (Rom. 14:19, NRSV). ☞

#### NOTES

1. See Lynn Schofield Clark, *From Angels to Aliens: Teenagers, the Media, and the Supernatural* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 257, n. 86.

2. John C. Lyden, *Film as Religion: Myths, Morals, and Rituals* (New York: nyu Press, 2003), 6.

3. Chris Seay and Greg Garrett, *The Gospel Reloaded: Exploring Spirituality and Faith in The Matrix* (Colorado Springs: Piñon Press, 2003).

4. My thanks to Chris Bigelow, Joe Durepos, Tona Hagen, John Hatch, Mike Leach, Tania Rands Lyon, LaVonne Neff, Phil Smith, and Dan Wotherspoon for suggestions on interesting and morally reflective R-rated films. Among the R-rated movies they have mentioned as spiritually instructive to them, but which I didn’t have time to view before deadline: *Raging Bull*, *Midnight Cowboy*, *The Ice Storm*, *Leaving Las Vegas*, *The Rapture*, *Jesus of Montreal*, *Dogma*, and *American History X*.