Hindu Concepts in the Movies
Category : July/August/September 2004
Published by Anonymous on Jul. 01, 2004

Hindu Concepts in the Movies

Hindu Concepts in the Movies

Join our film festival as we explore Hollywood movies based around some decidedly Hindu concepts

Mark Hawthorne, California

Namaste, movie lovers! Grab your popcorn bucket and super-sized soft drink and join our film festival host, Mark Hawthorne, as he takes us through movie history. First Mark showcases movies that draw directly on a Hindu belief, most commonly reincarnation, for their central plot. In Part Two he unveils spiritualist movies, those that present the interaction of this world and the next, but do not go into reincarnation. Finally he highlights the "spiritual cinema, " films with decidedly Hindu themes--like the "Force " of Star Wars and the maya-like world of The Matrix--along with heavy doses of other theologies. Now, on with the show...

Imagine a major motion picture in which a man travels to India, lives in an ashram and studies with a guru, a film lacking any insightful dialogue on Hindu concepts. As strange as it sounds, such was the case in 1946, when the first screen adaptation of The Razor's Edge appeared in American movie theaters. Although W. Somerset Maugham's best-selling novel is virtually a primer on Advaita Vedanta, the film's producers no doubt felt Western filmgoers in the Forties--however eager they were to forget the war and embrace messages of peace and spirituality--were not quite ready for mainstream films emphasizing Hindu principles like karma and reincarnation. Indeed, these would have been alien concepts to many people. Fast forward to last year's The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen, an action-adventure film starring Sean Connery. Here we have a main character, played by Indian actor

Naseeruddin Shah, wearing Hindu clothing and worshiping the Goddess Kali. Again, hardly a word is spoken about the character's spirituality, but now there is no need; filmgoers in the West have learned a lot about Hinduism in the ensuing six decades. Today we have not only entire films featuring reincarnation but movie stars like Shirley MacLaine and Billy Bob Thornton boldly discussing their previous lives. Actor Steven Seagal has even been recognized by Tibetan Buddhists as a tulku: a reincarnated Buddhist master.

Plays and storytellers have entertained humans from our beginning, revealing in their tales much about ourselves, our culture, our beliefs, our personal interests. Today's best storytellers are making movies, and the movies they are making are no longer just about cowboys and cops, teenage angst and tragic happenings. More and more movies are telling us about life's meaning, about the interconnectedness of the gross and subtle worlds, about the subjectivity of the universe, about the soul and its nonfatal encounters with death and what lies beyond. Movies have moved from High Noon in 1952 to A Beautiful Mind in 2001. And now they are on the verge of exploring a nearly Upanishadic vision of the cosmos, inner and outer. Indeed, movies are the philosophical texts of today's youth. Fortunately, many of them are rich in meaning. And just as the Western world is suddenly enamored of Indian food and fashion, it is slowly drawing toward deeper Hindu philosophical understandings in, of all places, the movies.

While the movies of the 1940s might not have explicitly presented Hindu philosophy, there was much going on behind the scenes in Los Angeles. British authors like Maugham, Christopher Isherwood and Aldous Huxley spent the war years in the US, penning novels and screenplays that turned to Hinduism for their inspiration. Maugham wrote The Razor's Edge after visiting Bhagavan Sri Ramana Maharshi in India, for example, while Isherwood lived at the Vedanta Society in Hollywood, writing film scripts and helping Swami Prabhavananda with translations of the Upanishads and Bhagavad Gita. Now mainstream films incorporating the spiritual concepts found in Hinduism are commonplace--particularly the ideals of karma, maya and reincarnation--and virtually no explanation is necessary. Filmmaker Stephen Simon develops movies that explore human beliefs and values, including What Dreams May Come. He observes, "Today you can start a movie with the assumption that people accept and understand reincarnation."

Audrey Rose: One of the earliest mainstream Hollywood treatments of reincarnation was Audrey Rose. This 1977 film stars Anthony Hopkins as Elliot Hoover, a man who believes his daughter has reincarnated as another girl, Ivy, born only minutes after the violent death of his child, Audrey Rose. His belief comes in part from a visit to

India, during which he discovers the Hindu principle of samsara. "They believe this life is not the end, " he explains to Ivy's incredulous parents. "This is one act in a vast cosmic drama." The screenplay for Audrey Rose and the novel upon which the film is based were written by Frank De Felitta, who investigated reincarnation after witnessing his six-year-old son play ragtime tunes on the piano--an instrument his son had never learned. Indeed, the movie and the novel present a compelling case for reincarnation, with scenes depicting the very concept adjudicated in a New York courtroom! Those defending reincarnation bring in a Hindu holy man to explain the concept and why hundreds of millions of Indians believe in it. During this testimony, we see scenes of a Hindu funeral procession in India, which ends at a cremation ghat. Because of their belief in reincarnation, the maharishi, as he is identified, tells the court, Hindus are able to live each life in a spiritually productive manner. One could nitpick some of the movie's philosophical details, but Hindus will be amazed at the forthright presentation.

"I don't think we're going to prove reincarnation in this picture, but I'm very open to the whole possibility of the supernatural, the paranormal, the possibility of dimensions out there, " said director Robert Wise during filming in 1976. Though a bit dated, the movie is entertaining, informative and respectful of Hindu ideals.

Not surprisingly, Audrey Rose (rated PG for some intense moments) was marketed as a horror film. The 1970s saw a tremendous amount of spiritual material in the media, but this was also the decade that gave audiences The Exorcist, The Omen and Carrie (all very scary movies involving young people and the supernatural), and Hollywood was eager to ride these paranormal coattails to the bank. Audrey Rose does not seem to know if it wants to be a spooky melodrama or a commentary on reincarnation. While the scenes of Ivy "re-experiencing " the death of Audrey Rose are played up for effect, the message of the story is really the principle of reincarnation and how one life leads to and impacts another; hence, the tragic conclusion of Audrey Rose belies a message of hope. The movie ends with a quote from the Bhagavad Gita: "There is no end. For the soul there is never birth nor death. Nor, having once been, It is unborn, eternal, ever-existing, undying and primeval."

Brother Bear: Last season's account of reincarnation is found in Disney's Brother Bear, a spiritually ambitious animated feature aimed at young audiences in which the transmigration of souls takes center stage in a story aimed to teach tolerance of those who are different. Set along the northwest coast of prehistoric North America, the story involves three brothers: brave older brother Sitka, spirited middle brother Denahi and the troublesome younger brother Kenai. Each wears a small, carved

representation of the animal spirit that has chosen him. Sitka wears an eagle, Denahi a wolf, and Kenai a bear, for, as the tribe's wise woman tells him, the bear represents love. But Kenai doesn't like bears, and he doesn't think love is a manly quality, so we're not surprised when he impulsively picks a fight with a bear who tries to steal the brothers' fishing catch. When Sitka steps in to protect Kenai, the older brother is killed and--through the power of the aurora borealis, inhabited by the spirits of the tribe's ancestors--is transformed into an eagle. The wise woman counsels Kenai to accept this outcome as the will of the universe, but he determines to kill the bear, arguing that's what a man should do--and even though it was his own carelessness that allowed the bear to steal the fish at all.

He succeeds, but older brother Sitka, now a spirit, transforms Kenai himself into a bear. This "instant karma " ensures Kenai will see the world with a decidedly ursine perspective. Kenai's rebirth as an animal, a concept common to both the Hindu and Native American traditions, is artistically emphasized: the film literally opens up when Kenai enters the animal world, shifting from the standard 1:85:1 aspect ratio to the widescreen 2:35:1 while the color palette becomes highly saturated. Not only is Kenai a bear, but he is shortly befriended by a frightened cub, that of the bear he killed. Denahi, finding only Kenai's clothes and this new bear nearby, misinterprets the tableau and begins hunting the bear, thinking it killed Kenai. It is a lesson in karma, Kenai killing the bear in one life and then being hunted by humans in the next. As well, with the cub he orphaned now in tow, Kenai faces the consequences of his action.

The spirituality in Brother Bear will be familiar to Hindus. A fundamental message of the film is that we are all connected, just as the Vedas teach that through atman we are all part of the universal soul of Brahman. Also, through mitigating past karma, forgoing retaliation and accepting responsibility, Kenai-as-bear is managing his karma. A character even further along the spiritual path may be Rutt, a moose who practices yoga. Although the asanas are named, they are not identified as yoga--another indication of how much audiences have come to accept Hindu concepts. (Be sure to watch the closing credits, featuring a humorous scene with Rutt giving yoga instruction.) Brother Bear (rated G, though there is some violence) received mixed reviews when it was released in 2003. Movie critics generally praised its spiritual elements and hand-drawn animation, while ranking it as one of Disney's lesser efforts, and moviegoers made it a marginal success with just over us$85 million in U.S. ticket sales. In the surprise ending, Kenai elects to remain a bear, care for the cub and live in peace with humans--all useful points of discussion for parents who watch this with their children.

Dead Again: Bringing us back to modern times is the psychological thriller Dead Again, in which reincarnation plays a key role in telling parallel stories in different time frames that meet at a dramatic crossroads in the third act. The film opens in black and white, recounting the tragic romance of German composer Roman Strauss and his pianist wife Margaret, played by Kenneth Branagh and Emma Thompson. Roman and Margaret live a lavish life in post-World-War-II Hollywood filled with grand parties, music and intrigue. When Margaret is found murdered, suspicion falls on the jealous husband, who is found guilty and executed. The story then shifts to color and moves ahead forty years. Branagh, who also directed, now plays Mike Church, a Los Angeles private investigator looking into the case of a woman who has lost her memory, played by Thompson. For convenience, Mike refers to the amnesiac woman as "Grace, " and, in trying to learn her identity they meet a hypnotist, who brings to light the story of Roman and Margaret, all displayed in the pages of Life magazine. Yes, Mike and Grace look a lot like Roman and Margaret, they all agree. But the detective is cynical.

As the story unfolds, we see there is clearly more of a connection than physical resemblance. Like the character of Ivy in Audrey Rose, Grace is plagued by nightmares of an untimely death. Oblique clues of an afterlife are layered on as the film bounces back and forth between the noir 1940s and the blossoming romance of Mike and Grace: Dining with Roman one evening, Margaret spills a glass of wine; Roman tells her she has "more beauty than grace." Mike also seeks advice from Dr. Carlisle (Robin Williams), a former psychiatrist whose main role in the movie is to speculate how karma and reincarnation work, though he reduces them to mere sound bites. "It's the karmic credit plan, " he glibly tells Mike and Grace. "Buy now, pay forever." To further emphasize reincarnation, Branagh uses secondary players in dual roles, appearing as one character in the Forties and then another in the Nineties. The film is a well-made thriller in the tradition of Hitchcock and surprisingly astute, even profound, philosophically. It portrays the interlocked karmas of Roman and Margaret, now reincarnated, and the people from the 40s, now much older, originally responsible for Margaret's murder. Despite generally enthusiastic reviews from critics like Roger Ebert of the Chicago Sun-Times, who gave it four stars, Dead Again (rated R for profanity and violence) received only a tepid reception at the box office in 1991.

On a Clear Day: Giving reincarnation the genuine show biz treatment is On a Clear Day You Can See Forever, starring Barbra Streisand. Making its debut on the Broadway stage in 1965, this musical from playwright and lyricist Alan Jay Lerner was adapted for the screen five years later. Streisand plays Daisy Gamble, a modern New Yorker who believes hypnosis can cure her smoking habit, so she seeks the help of Dr. Chabot (Yves Montand), a professor of psychiatry who lectures on hypnosis at a local medical school. During their hypnotherapy sessions, Daisy

speaks of a previous life as a nineteenth-century English woman named Melinda Tentrees. This provokes Chabot, a man of Western science, to seek the advice of his colleagues, who are quick to laugh at the suggestion of reincarnation. But research into Melinda Tentrees proves Daisy is telling the truth, thus supporting the case for rebirth.

The plot was likely inspired by the case of Virginia Tighe, a Colorado housewife who underwent hypnosis in 1952 to cure her allergies and revealed detailed accounts of life as a nineteenth-century Irish woman named Bridey Murphy. Her hypnotherapist, Morey Bernstein, wrote a best-selling book on the case, The Search for Bridey Murphy, which was the basis for a film of the same title, launched a reincarnation debate in America and led to the formation of the Association for Past-Life Research and Therapies (now the International Association for Regression Research & Therapies Inc.). On a Clear Day You Can See Forever (rated G) failed at the box office, perhaps a casualty of the change in American moviegoers, who by 1970 were favoring gritty, realistic dramas. It also suffers from a dearth of memorable music, which is surprising considering the creative forces behind it. Critics have noted that director Vincente Minnelli's big-screen version features badly truncated songs that have been shifted to different characters or simply deleted. Not having seen the stage version, I cannot compare the two, but I wasn't particularly fond of the film. Still, it is about reincarnation and the complexities knowledge of past lives introduces into the present one--a recurring theme in many of these movies.

Little Buddha: A rare Western film dwelling almost entirely on samsara is director Bernardo Bertolucci's Little Buddha. In a monastery in Bhutan, Lama Norbu (Ying Ruocheng), a Tibetan monk, is delighted to learn that his teacher, Lama Dorje, who died nine years earlier, may now be in a boy living in Seattle, where the monks have long had a dharma center. The boy's parents, Dean and Lisa Conrad (Chris Isaak and Bridget Fonda), are not religious people and neither believes in reincarnation, so when monks appear at their door saying their son Jesse (Alex Wiesendanger) may be the reincarnation of a venerated Buddhist master, they are understandably skeptical. They are taken aback when Lama Norbu suggests that Jesse should perhaps be raised as a Buddhist monk in Bhutan.

The movie actually weaves two narratives: while the story of Jesse and his eventual journey to present-day Bhutan is told, we also learn the tale of Prince Siddhartha, the Hindu prince who grew up to become the Buddha 2,500 years ago. These sequences are cleverly told to Jesse using a book Lama Norbu gives him about the enlightenment of Siddhartha (Keanu Reeves). In an important scene in the film, Lama Norbu explains reincarnation to Dean. "In Tibet we think of the mind and the

body as the content and the container, " he says, holding a cup of tea, which he then breaks. "Like the mind after death, the tea moves from one container to the next, but it is still tea." The emphasis on reincarnation stresses continuity and interdependence. Once in Bhutan, Jesse and his father discover there are now two other children being considered as possible reincarnations of Lama Dorje: a poor boy from the streets of Kathmandu and a rich Indian girl. By the end of the film, Jesse and his two new friends have learned the true meaning of the cycle of life, death and rebirth. Faring only slightly better among critics than it did with audiences, Little Buddha (rated PG for mature themes) was panned for not going deep enough with the material and was a bona fide bomb at the box office in 1993. Still, the Washington Post called it "botched but beautiful, " while Spirituality & Health magazine commended the film's "straight-ahead focus on death." I was one of the few who saw this in its theatrical release, and while I found some of the acting wooden, including Keanu Reeves as the Buddha, I enjoyed it enough to have seen it three times now. Children will likely find it interesting, too.

Orlando: A less direct treatment of reincarnation can be found in Orlando, an impressive screen adaptation of Virginia Woolf's 1928 novel. The story spans four centuries, beginning in England in 1600 with Orlando (played by actress Tilda Swinton) as a young nobleman who has found favor with Queen Elizabeth I. In the twilight of her reign, the monarch gives Orlando the deed to her ancestral home with some strings attached: "Do not fade, do not wither, do not grow old "--words the ambitious aristocrat takes to heart. Since we see Orlando pass through each century without aging, like a Victorian Babaji (the never-aging saint of the Himalayas) we are not surprised when the narrative takes another twist and he awakens one morning in the seventeenth century--reincarnated as a woman. "Same person, no difference at all, " she announces to the audience. "Just a different sex." This reincarnation occurs after Orlando refuses to kill in battle, leading us to wonder if his display of ahimsa led to his/her transformation. Whatever the cause, no one seems surprised that Orlando is now a female, although it does mean she will lose her property, since a woman in England cannot legally inherit land. While the English courts decide whether Orlando is dead or a woman, one lawyer comments that they amount to the same thing. In directing Orlando, Sally Potter has created both a visual feast and a wry, stylish examination of the role of both genders through the eyes of the same soul, making it an intriguing interpretation of reincarnation. Orlando (rated PG-13 for sexual situations) was the darling of film critics when it was released in 1992, receiving accolades for its direction, acting, screenplay, film score and cinematography. But it is an "art film, " and generally played in art house theaters, barely recouping its $5 million budget in the U.S.

Vanilla Sky: The clue to the reality of Vanilla Sky, a surreal Tom Cruise thriller, can

be found in the words spoken at the very beginning and the end of the film: "Open your eyes." Cruise stars as David Aames, a 33-year-old tycoon who inherited a publishing empire when his parents were killed in a car crash. David, with his surplus of good fortune and unquenchable high spirits, would rather indulge his libido than spend time in the office. Just as he meets and falls in love with Sofia (Penelope Cruz), David's world is shattered when Julianna (Cameron Diaz), a jealous lover, drives them both off a bridge and smashes into a brick wall. Julianna dies; David's face is hideously disfigured and his optimistic demeanor is shattered. He promptly alienates his friends, including Sofia, and seems destined to spiral into misery. Juxtaposed against this portion of the narrative are scenes of David in police custody for murder, wearing a mask and trying to convince a sympathetic psychotherapist (Kurt Russell) that his partners have set him up to take away his business. David muses that perhaps he's gone crazy, to which the therapist replies: "With all the possible respect I can offer a man wearing a latex mask and spouting conspiracy theories, David, believe me, you've crossed that bridge."

At least that's how events in director Cameron Crowe's cinematic roller coaster seem to transpire. In a mind-bending plot that negotiates a fine line between reality and dreams, Vanilla Sky challenges us to decide whether what we're watching is a real-time drama or perhaps bits of David's imagination. It's difficult to discern whether David is actually scarred or just thinks he is (hence the "facial prosthetic "), and so the audience is brought into his world of maya. David's eyes are finally opened when he discovers the world in which he thought he was living is illusion; indeed, it is a 150-year-old dream that began when David, miserable to have lost his looks and his love, arranged to have his body cryogenically suspended until medical science is advanced enough to repair his face. While in this frozen state, David realizes that materialism and vanity obscure the search and need for love and happiness and gives up the illusion of wealth to pursue a more meaningful existence.

Reviewers had their hands full trying to describe this film, which they naturally attempted after a single viewing--some with praise, but most with criticism for its convoluted plot. Yet Vanilla Sky (rated R for sexuality and strong language, definitely not for children) requires a second viewing just to be sure you've got the story straight. It wasn't until I'd seen it twice that I felt I understood the film's twists and turns. You'll be thinking about this one for some time. Audiences, no doubt drawn by the star power of Tom Cruise, made Vanilla Sky one of the most successful films of 2001 with more than $100 million in domestic ticket sales.

Defending Your Life: After the intensity of Vanilla Sky, you may enjoy the comic take

on the afterlife found in Defending Your Life. Life is good for Daniel Miller (Albert Brooks), a divorced advertising executive, until he smashes his new BMW into a bus and is killed. He finds himself in Judgment City, a place between planes of existence that looks a lot like southern California; here the weather is always 74 degrees and you can eat all you want without gaining weight. Daniel is told that he must appear before a tribunal that will determine whether he goes on to a higher existence or is reincarnated back on Earth.

Daniel's defender in this court is genial Bob Diamond (Rip Torn), who tells him that it can take many lifetimes to reach the state where one is ready to move on. This is faithful to the Hindu concept of moksha, the liberation from rebirth a person enjoys only after going through all the experiences in the physical world. In court, scenes from Daniel's life reveal moments of fear and anxiety--scenes that illustrate how important the motive behind an action can be. The theme here, we understand, is resolving karma. Between court proceedings, Daniel meets and falls in love with Julia (Meryl Streep), a joyful woman who seems destined for liberation from samsara. When he sees that Julia's most recent life was filled with love and benevolent actions, such as going back into a burning house to save the family cat, while his life was filled with fear and anxiety, Daniel worries he will be reincarnated and separated from Julia.

When the final ruling comes, it's no surprise that Daniel must be returned to Earth while Julia will not. Julia and the other mature souls who have been liberated depart Judgment City in one tram, while Daniel and those destined for reincarnation leave in another. Seeing Julia moving on, Daniel suddenly overcomes his fears and escapes from his tram to hers, thus apparently bypassing rebirth. It's the standard ending for a romantic comedy, but rather implausible in the Hindu view of reincarnation and what is required for liberation from rebirth.

Brooks, who also wrote and directed the film, creates an afterlife filled not with pearly gates and angels, but in which spiritual reckoning means you must account for your actions on Earth. Although the film does not use the word karma, the product of a person's actions, thoughts and deeds is depicted as being one of two fates: reincarnation or moksha. And Brooks is obviously having fun with the principle of reincarnation. When Daniel and Julia check into separate booths at the Past Lives Pavilion, Shirley MacLaine leads them through the steps to view their previous incarnations. While Julia sees she was once heroic Prince Valiant, Daniel discovers he was an African warrior chased by a lion. "Who are you?" Julia shouts. "Lunch, " says Daniel. After watching Hindu concepts represented so faithfully, we're surprised when the film cheats a little with the final scene.

With Defending Your Life (rated PG), Albert Brooks lived up to his reputation for creating good films that few people see in theaters. A Brooks fan myself, I found this to be one of his best. Although it received very high praise from most critics, the film never found an audience and earned only $16 million in the U.S. in 1991. That's a shame, since this is suitable for family viewing and is a fun look at samsara. But then, that's show business, and Defending Your Life remains just one example of how filmmakers in the West are not only inspired by Hindu philosophy but can now assume we're familiar enough with these concepts to enjoy the story and not be weighed down with definitions.

Mark Hawthorne writes about Asian philosophical and religious traditions.

GHOSTS

And the Non-Living...

Movies of the spiritualist mold

The spiritualist movement--based on the belief that the living and the dead can have meaningful communication--is more than 150 years old, but its popularity seems to be growing. A poll reveals that 52 percent of Americans believe in spiritualism, up from 12 percent in 1976. Skeptics claim that such results show the power of the media; indeed, movies with people talking to ghosts--or ghosts communicating with people--are more popular than ever. Two ghost movies have proved to be especially popular with audiences.

It's no surprise that director M. Night Shyamalan would incorporate messages into The Sixth Sense that resonate with Hindus. Bruce Willis plays Malcolm Crowe, a child psychologist who begins treating a new patient, eight-year-old Cole (Haley Joel Osment). Cole has become a reluctant and helpless channel for ghosts with unresolved issues in their lives on Earth. Only when Malcolm believes Cole is truly interacting with the next world, with two-way communication with astral plane "ghosts, " is he able to help him, and Cole is then able to help the ghosts resolve their issues.

The movie Ghost also involves spirits who have unfinished business on planet Earth, but in this case, the ghost is here to assist the living. Patrick Swayze is Sam, an investment counselor who is killed by a mugger one night, but turns away from the welcoming light of the afterlife to remain on Earth in his spirit form and observe as his girlfriend, Molly (Demi Moore), mourns and attempts to piece her life together. Sam needs to tell her she's in mortal danger from the same people who killed him. Here again the astral world and the physical interconnect dramatically.

Both The Sixth Sense and Ghost assert the Hindu theme of balance, especially with regard to karma and retribution. Cole encounters spirits who appear to have died violently and now exist as ghosts because they are tied to unresolved personal circumstances on the earthly plane; their release from this karma is necessary for reincarnation to proceed. Sensing his paranormal abilities, they solicit Cole's help to resolve their earthly issues. Sam, too, must resolve issues on Earth before he can move on; in the meantime, he is directly involved in the karmic payoff for the two characters responsible for his death.

Shyamalan was surprised to discover Western audiences weren't familiar with the Hindu concept of the afterlife. He says, "It's just an accepted thing in India that there are ghosts or spirits in the house, and so it was something I assumed was common here, but I guess not."

Bruce Joel Rubin, who wrote the screenplay for Ghost, says he was inspired by a trip to India and studying Buddhism in Nepal. "My supposition in the movie, " he says, "is that there is a larger universe that we inhabit--that we exist before we are born, that we exist after we're born and that life is a particular passageway, and how you engage that life is very meaningful."

The Sixth Sense (rated PG-13 for intense thematic material and violent images) is one of those rare films where critical praise matched ticket sales. It was the second-highest grossing movie of 1999, at $293 million.

Ghost (rated PG-13 for violence and strong language) was not as well received by critics, but that didn't stop filmgoers from buying more than $200 million worth of tickets in the US, making it the second-highest grossing film of 1990 (though probably not suitable for children). It is a bit sappy, making it a favorite among

those who love romantic films, but its message makes it worth watching, and Whoopi Goldberg's Oscar-winning performance as the medium who can hear Sam is great fun.

TRENDS

Movies As the Modern Theological Medium

Even Hollywood isn't prepared to accept a Godless, meaningless world

Spiritual cinema " is what producer/director/author Stephen Simon calls a new genre of films examining who we are and why we're here. He explains that individuals and cultures that lose their connection to the unseen divine essence become devoid of love, respect and compassion. Simon, a producer on films such as What Dreams May Come and Somewhere in Time, discusses how movies like The Truman Show, Stars Wars and The Matrix explore the nature of life, love and time in his book The Force Is With You: Mystical Movie Messages That Inspire Our Lives.

He says, "There is a huge void when it comes to movies that make us feel better about being human beings--films that do not have to be made for a lot of money or require movie stars, but that just focus on the story and the empowerment and the beauty of being human. And that's what Spiritual Cinema is." Simon observes that movie studios used to produce films for every audience, a practice that changed when corporations took control of movie studios, cutting traditional movie moguls out of the business. These moguls might have had their faults, but they were visionaries who were willing to take chances, and they loved making movies. "Corporate thinking has replaced entrepreneurial thinking, " says Simon, "and, as we all know, corporate thinking is much more cautious. It's much more conservative. It is much more focused on the bottom line. Because of the corporate takeover of Hollywood, the primary focus of the studio business is to create big, broad-based movies: huge action movies, dumb comedies, sequels, movies that star people from television. They really are focused on hitting homeruns. For that reason, the average cost of making and marketing a major studio film today is $90 million. When you spend that kind of money, they have to go for huge, broad-based movies."

In such an environment, many producers regard movies with spiritual themes as problematic. "Studios don't believe in the subject matter of spiritual movies enough to make them without star power, for instance, Bruce Willis in The Sixth Sense. And I never would have gotten What Dreams May Come made if we hadn't gotten Robin Williams. We were basically told, 'Robin Williams or Tom Hanks, or we're not making the movie.' "

But that wasn't the only obstacle Simon overcame with this film, which is based on the book by Richard Matheson and deals with two soul mates and their afterlives: one mate braves hell in search of the other. The plot is similar to the end of the Mahabharata, in which Yudhishthira's virtue is tested, though this appears to be a coincidence. While the film's strongest message is the power of love, What Dreams May Come features an afterlife in which one's belief creates experience, and being reincarnated is a matter of choice. "When I first read the novel What Dreams May Come, in 1979, the idea of spending almost an entire movie in an afterlife setting was completely crazy to people. I think one of the reasons it took me 20 years to get the movie made is that the world wasn't ready for it." One thing that made the public ready, says Simon, was the 1975 film The Reincarnation of Peter Proud, about a college professor who gradually realizes he is the reincarnation of a murder victim. "To have reincarnation in the title and be about somebody being reincarnated was a big deal, " he says. "The whole movie was about legitimizing the entire reincarnation process. Now people accept the possibility or even the likelihood that there is life after life and that we go from lifetime to lifetime. They certainly accept it in a film setting, and that is a huge change in 30 years."

If the Seventies were a time for reincarnation to be more accepted by mainstream audiences, we seem to be at the beginning of a new era for maya. "The concept of what's real and what's not real is something that is fascinating to people because we're living in an age where we're questioning that, " says Simon. "In 2001 we had a whole group of movies that question reality: Vanilla Sky, Mulholland Drive, Waking Life and Memento. The granddad of these, The Matrix, came out just two years earlier. When that happens, you know we are questioning the world. What is real and what is illusion?" While a lot of Hindus would interpret many of these movies in terms of maya, they may also be derived from the bleak concepts of existentialism. The difference is that in Hinduism all of creation is divine, while in existentialism, it is meaningless, or evil.

Central to the plot of The Truman Show is that life is an illusion; that is, the world Truman Burbank (Jim Carrey) sees is not the real world. In fact, everyone knows it's an illusion except Truman, who goes about his life unaware that he is the star of a

television show watched 24/7 by millions around the world. Truman catches on relatively late in life when the enormous film set he lives in--an entire town, the sky and miles of ocean--and the actors he calls friends begin to let clues slip. In the end, Truman Burbank breaks free of the veil of maya and enters the real world--or, at least, Southern California. But, as Simon points out, The Matrix is where this nascent interest in illusion apparently began. Keanu Reeves is Neo, a computer hacker who learns the true nature of reality and his role in combating those who control it. The protagonists of The Matrix populate an illusory world and discover that only an unplugged/awake world is the real world. It sounds Hindu, but the movie is also loaded with Christian symbolism. Still, the closing credits of the final installment run to the chanting (in Sanskrit) of "Lead me from unreality to reality, lead me from darkness to light, lead me from death to immortality, " from the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad.

Simon believes Star Wars has a powerful spiritual message. The first of six episodes from filmmaker George Lucas, Star Wars is a powerful experience in the genre of Spiritual Cinema, according to Simon, because of "the Force." The Force is described as an energy field created by all living things, binding the universe together, and it's what gives the story's heroes--Jedi knights--their power. Lucas told Time magazine in 1999: "I put the Force into the movie in order to try to awaken a certain kind of spirituality in young people--more a belief in God than a belief in any particular religious system. I wanted to make it so that young people would begin to ask questions about the mystery."

The spirituality in Star Wars is so universal that many world religions, from Adventism to Zoroastrianism, have found their beliefs reflected in the movie. Hindus, for example, will recognize the disciple's search for a guru in Luke Skywalker's search for Jedi master Yoda in The Empire Strikes Back, the second Star Wars installment. Yoda instructs Luke in the use of the Force, which seems to have much in common with Shakti, and teaches him that life is an illusion, filled with "crude matter."

Simon sees good prospects for spirituality in movies and predicts there will continue to be a growth in films focusing on illusion. "I think the questioning of reality is a huge issue, and it's going to become more of an issue as we get into this new century, because we're evolving as a species and we're asking questions that we did not ask before."

What Dreams May Come (rated PG-13 for thematic elements involving death, some disturbing images and language) was not a box-office success, though it was well received by many film critics in 1998, notably Roger Ebert, who called it "a film that even in its imperfect form shows how movies can imagine the unknown, can lead our imaginations into wonderful places." Other critics, though noting the compelling visuals, were unable to see beyond the story's many deaths and could not recommend it.

Bringing in more than $125 million qualifies The Truman Show (rated PG for thematic elements and mild language) as one of 1998's financial hits, and critics almost universally praised it. Among the few dissenting voices was Janet Maslin of The New York Times, who observed that the film's conclusion is too conventional for the plot's inventive set-up. This is a good film for family viewing, leading to a discussion of maya.

The Matrix (rated R for sci-fi violence), on the other hand, is not suitable for children, though it also met with kudos from reviewers and audiences alike, who raved about its state-of-art visuals, meaningful plot and kinetic action. It took in more than $171 million in domestic ticket sales.

Finally, Star Wars (rated PG for sci-fi violence) redefined the word "blockbuster." It's hard to believe there's anyone who hasn't seen this space western. The New York Times critic Vincent Canby warned in his original 1977 review, "The way definitely not to approach Star Wars is to expect a film of cosmic implications or to footnote it with so many references that one anticipates it as if it were a literary duty. It's fun and funny." Indeed it is. But Star Wars has become such a phenomenon, influencing so much of our cultural landscape, how can we not examine its many sources and consider its impact? With $270 million in domestic ticket sales, Star Wars was the number-one film in 1977, and has gone on to earn $798 million around the world, ranking as the twelfth biggest box office draw of all time. The first three Star Wars films--Star Wars, The Empire Strikes Back and Return of the Jedi--will be available on DVD in September, and you'll find in these stories many Hindu principles to appreciate and discuss with younger members of the family.