Every story is informed by a worldview. And so every movie, being a dramatic story, is also informed by a worldview. There is no such thing as a neutral story in which events and characters are presented objectively apart from interpretation. Every choice an author makes, from what kinds of characters she creates to which events she includes, is determined by the author's worldview. A worldview even defines what a character or event is for the writer—and, therefore, for the audience. And the worldview or philosophy of a film is conveyed much in the same way as stories of old would convey the values and beliefs of ancient societies—through dramatic incarnation of those values. In a sense, movies are the new myths of American culture.

Christopher Vogler, accomplished educator of writers and a student of the famous mythologist Joseph Campbell, explains the nature of myth:

What is a myth? For our purposes a myth is not the untruth or fanciful exaggeration of popular expression. A myth, as Joseph Campbell was fond of saying, is a metaphor for a mystery beyond human comprehension. It is a comparison that helps us understand, by analogy, some aspect of our mysterious selves. A myth, in this way of thinking, is not an untruth but a way of reaching a profound truth. Then what is a story? A story is also a metaphor, a model of some aspect of human behavior.1

In the PBS series The Power of Myth we get the nod from Campbell himself about just what story does for us:

BILL MOYERS: So we tell stories to try to come to terms with the world, to harmonize ourselves with reality?
JOSEPH CAMPBELL: I think so, yes.2

Psychoanalyst Bruno Bettelheim agrees. Writing in The Uses of Enchantment (his classic on the meaning and importance of fairy tales), he says, "Myths and fairy stories both answer the eternal questions: What is the world really like? How am I to live my life in it? How can I truly be myself?"3

Since the beginning of time, humankind has used story to convey the meaning and purpose of life. Within its various forms (myth, fable, parable, allegory), and within its development from oral tradition to codification, storytelling has through the ages been the backbone of civilizations, being maintained through systematized beliefs and taught dogma. In essence, story incarnates the myths and values of a culture with the intent of perpetuating them. Moses' Pentateuch tells the story of the redemption of the Hebrews. The Babylonian Epic of Gilgamesh tells the heroic redemption of its principal character, Gilgamesh. Homer's epic poem The Odyssey is the tale of the redemptive journeys of Odysseus.

We now live in a world permeated with science and technology, but does that make us any less storytellers or any less myth-oriented in our lives? Our culture still thrives on storytelling in many manifestations, in-

---


cluding news, books, music and movies, to name a few. The very nature of moviemaking and movieng itself incarnates the sacred transmission of myth, much as occurred for the ancients. As author Geoffrey Hill proposes in his treatise on the mythic power of film, *Illuminating Shadows*:

As ironic modern worshippers we congregate at the cinematic temple. We pay our votive offerings at the box office. We buy our ritual corn. We hush in reverent anticipation as the lights go down and the celluloid magic begins. Throughout the filmic narrative we identify with the hero. We vilify the antihero. We vicariously exult in the victories of the drama. And we are spiritually inspired by the moral of the story, all while believing we are modern techno-secular people, devoid of religion. Yet the depth and intensity of our participation reveal a religious fervor that is not much different from that of religious zealots.

While the interpretation of all movieng as religious liturgy may be strained, it is certainly a caution to the viewer to avoid an identification with the cultural gluton who, through lack of discernment, often falls prey to such manipulation. Perhaps Hill’s thesis better serves the argument that no story exists neutrally as raw entertainment without reference to cultural beliefs and values. Neglecting the importance of the worldview behind a movie denies as well the influence our stories have on the human psyche, collective and individual.

**COMIC-BOOK SUPERHEROES**

An example of mythological adaptation in our secular society can be found in comic-book heroes. Speaking as long ago as 1963, famous anthropologist Mircea Eliade stated, “The characters of comic strips present the modern version of mythological or folklore Heroes.”5 In *Hancock*, starring Will Smith as a homeless superhero, we hear it from the lips of a superhero herself, “In the past, we were gods and angels. Now, we’re superheroes.”

The proliferation of comic books adapted into movies signals a contemporary hunger for hero worship, the desire for redemption through the salvific acts of deity. In all these comic-book-based stories there is a projection of superpowers onto individuals much in the same way that the gods were projections of pagan hope. Watching *X-Men*, for instance, with all its superheroes and supervillains in our contemporary world, brings to mind the pantheon of Greek gods from Mount Olympus battling it out over mortal human beings. Each god in the pantheon had a special power: Hermes, the messenger of the gods, could run with fleet-winged feet; Hephaestus was the god of fire. Likewise, each of the mutant *X-Men* has a power that enables him or her to battle evil or do evil: Mystique can change her shape to appear to be something else; Storm can call forth the powers of nature; Magneto has powers of magnetism. The spiritual aspect of these abilities has been secularized, reinterpreted through evolutionary myth as the result of genetic mutation, but the metaphor remains the same.6 As Francis Schaeffer has pointed out, the gods of Greece and Rome were actually “amplified humanity, not divinity,” so modern day comic-book heroes are amplified humanity within our secular scientific worldview.

The gods of yore also had amplified weaknesses as well. They would get jealous of another god and wipe out whole populations; they would have sibling rivalry with their divine brothers or sisters; and they would brood, pout and even pull pranks on humans. In like manner, modern-day superheroes have similar struggles. *Hancock*, mentioned earlier, is about a homeless, alcoholic, down-and-out slob of a superhero who is melancholic because he is separated from his true love. *My Super Ex-Girlfriend* is about a guy who falls in love with a woman and finds out she is actually a superhero. Unfortunately, she is also a jealous and paranoid lover with mood swings and super tantrums of Olympic proportions. *The Incredibles* is...

---

Pixar’s animated story about a family of superheroes who bicker and argue and need to learn how to get along. *Mystery Men* shows superhero wannabes struggling to balance their efforts to save the world with their unsatisfying family and work lives.

The story of Superman is a classic American tale that many say embodies a mythical retelling of the life of Christ. Eliade opines of Superman’s preternatural identity hidden behind his Clark Kent humanity, “This humiliating camouflage of a Hero whose powers are literally unlimited revives a well-known mythical theme. In the last analysis, the myth of Superman satisfies the secret longings of modern man who, though he knows that he is a fallen, limited creature, dreams of one day proving himself an ‘exceptional person,’ a ‘Hero.’”

*Superman Returns*, written by Dan Harris and Jerry Siegel, returns to the comic hero’s religious mythology. Superman is likened to deity throughout the film. The recurring thematic phrases “I have sent you my only son” and “The son becomes the father and the father becomes the son” refer to Superman’s metaphorical link with his father, Jor-El (an obvious derivative of a name for God in Hebrew: El). While not exactly orthodox Christian doctrine, this relational incarnation is certainly derived from Jesus’ own words, “For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son” (Jn 3:16), and “He who has seen Me has seen the Father” (Jn 14:9).

A bad gay compares Superman to Prometheus and the gods, and ultimate bad guy Lex Luthor responds jealously, “The gods are selfish beings, who don’t share their powers with mankind,” thus expressing the spiritual hubris similar to the original sin in the Garden. In response to Lois Lane’s claim that “the world doesn’t need a savior and neither do I,” Superman flies her up into the stratosphere, where we hear the prayerlike cacophony of billions of people in need of his saving powers ringing in his ears. Like an omniscient deity, Superman compassionately replies to Lois, “Every day I hear people crying for one.”

*Beowulf*, written by Neil Gaiman and Roger Avery, is a subversion of the hero myth itself. It is an antihero myth. While telling the tale of the great warrior Beowulf seeking to destroy the monster Grendel in an ancient land, it shows how people’s idolization of heroes as mythic in their deeds and character is sheer hogwash. Beowulf’s own glory and honor are haunted in his soul because he knows that they only come to him because he gave in to the temptation of his flesh to adultery (sleeping with a “demon”). So, while everyone speaks of his greatness, he can barely live with himself, because the dragon that taunts his kingdom is a direct result of his own actions (“the sins of the fathers”). Heroes, he sighs, are just as fallible as everyone and undeserving of the worship they receive.

**GRAPHIC NOVELS**

An extension of the superhero comic books that Hollywood has capitalized on bigtime are graphic novels. Graphic novels tend to be gritty, dark, R-rated comic books that will extend to the length of one hundred to four hundred pages. They are often serialized in comics, but are then published as a complete bound novel when completed. In graphic novels the heroes are more antiheroes, in that, unlike traditional superheroes, they are deeply flawed, even to the extent of sometimes being criminals themselves. Whereas traditional superheroes are amplified humanity in virtue or ability, the modern hero is more like amplified humanity of the dark side. Some of them are more modern heroes in that they are often
ordinary people doing extraordinary things rather than extraordinary people doing extraordinary things.

Of the graphic novels turned into movies, some of the antiheroes are a murdered ghost seeking vengeance (The Crow), a mob hit man trying to protect his son's innocence (Road to Perdition), a family man haunted by his criminal-assassin past (A History of Violence), a psychologically tortured clairvoyant detective (From Hell), a demon from hell (Hellboy), a series of criminals and corrupt cops who try to do the right thing for once (Sin City), an alienated cop in the process of a divorce (30 Days of Night), and a psychologically disturbed bipolar (Batman: The Dark Knight). Other graphic novels translated into graphic movies are V for Vendetta and 300.

On the downside, the dark world of these graphic novel movies can feed nihilistic violence in immature youth. On the upside, they portray heroes that are broken and, in that sense, more human like the rest of us. We sympathize with them because their sin haunts them even as they seek to do right. As Paul the apostle writes,

For we know that the Law is spiritual, but I am of flesh, sold into bondage to sin. For what I am doing, I do not understand; for I am not practicing what I would like to do, but I am doing the very thing I hate. But if I do the very thing I do not want to do, I agree with the Law, confessing that the Law is good. (Rom 7:14-16)

The Dark Knight is the most successful movie adaptation of a graphic novel. If Superman represents the goodness of divinity in its purity, then Batman represents the dark side of that divinity as an angst-ridden, deeply flawed hero in a morally confused postmodern world. Christopher Nolan's The Dark Knight also proves that superhero movies are not all light entertainment, but can be among the most soul-searching, thought-provoking metaphysical explorations into the meaning of life and morality. The Batman, a scientific crime fighter, as opposed to a supernatural superhero, seeks to maintain a moral code while fighting the ultimate agent of chaos, the Joker. But in this morally ambiguous universe, that moral task appears impossible, and no one is clean, not even the Batman. He must torture a terrorist in order to save innocent lives, violate his jurisdiction by entering foreign countries to snatch criminals and illegally wire-tap an entire city to catch the Joker—all timely issues of justice that reflect the very ones debated in America's War on Terror (an obvious metaphor of the movie). In a way, The Dark Knight subverts the superhero paradigm by asking the question of whether so much power should be vested in the hands of individual men. It challenges our notions of our moral views of the world and our own goodness. But at the end, in a Christlike substitutionary atonement, the Batman takes the blame for crimes he did not commit in order to protect a positive legacy of law enforcement for the people. The Batman is rejected by the very world he has saved.

One of the strongest examples of the postmodern "anti-superhero" trend is found in Zach Snyder's Watchmen, a cinematic translation of comic-book cynicism. In this dark tale superheroes are psychologically damaged idealists, disillusioned with their goals of truth, justice and the American way—to the point of accepting political lies and the murder of millions of innocent New Yorkers in order to achieve the "higher goal" of utopian peace (doing evil that good may result). The only remaining idealist, who still believes in the power of "truth" and wants to fight evil with uncompromising moral zeal, is Rorschach, who must be killed in order to protect the truth from being discovered. A final scene hints at the reality that the dark side of human nature is never obliterated; the cycle of violence is threatened all over again.

Is this a tragedy or a celebration of despair? Given a lack of theological context, this otherwise biblical revelation of sinful nature can arguably become a nihilistic complaint of hopelessness.

WESTERNS

Another popular source of American mythology is the Western genre. Values like rugged individualism, the pioneer spirit, vigilance justice, outlaws as heroes, restlessness of spirit and love of outdoors run deep in many Americans' hearts and in many American Westerns. A typical Western movie reinforces the image of the lone, righteous man facing a savage world, carving his way through a harsh, rugged terrain, burying outlaws and wild Indians in order for civilization to find its roots. With a six-gun on his hip and a warrior code of honor, the cowboy hands out posse justice to outlaws who endanger the growth of the village. Moral-
ity is a law of the jungle, solved by survival of the fittest.

The anti-Western is an overturning of the mythology of the Western by showing the dark side of the aforesaid values. Movies like *Wyatt Earp*, *Ravenous*, *Unforgiven* and *3:10 to Yuma* are anti-Westerns that show the values of the American West to have been founded on questionable or even immoral premises. In David Webb Peoples’s Oscar-winning *Unforgiven*, the characters struggle with the reality of killing people and the romantic hype that surrounds unrealistic heroes and villains through dime-store fiction novels. It shows that shooting men dead is not as easy and without spiritual consequences as most Westerns would make us believe. Ironically, its star, Clint Eastwood, is himself one of the spaghetti Western icons whom this movie deconstructs. In the end, the “hero” must become villainous himself in order to defeat the villains, blurring the line between the white hats and the black hats, between good guys and bad guys.

*3:10 to Yuma*, written by Halsted Wells, depicts Ben Wade, the proverbial consummate outlaw who lives by no code but the lawless West. He’s slick, he’s romantic, and even heroic in his personality. As Wade is captured and then escorted cross-country to prison by a ragtag group of deputized men, he confronts his doppelganger opposite: a loser rancher family man trying (yet failing) to be a hero to his own son. As Wade is faced with this irony, he discovers the humanity and love he could never have in that simple rancher, a modern man of the new world. Wade sees in him true heroism and courage in facing the impossible with honor. In this story, the civility that tends toward weakness also achieves the grace and love that the untamed Wild West cannot achieve. *3:10 to Yuma* subverts the Western myth.

Mythology is far from dead, even in a modern technological and secularized world. And movies are one of the most effective means of communicating mythology because they are a story-centered medium that captures and reflects our deeply held beliefs.

**MYTHOLOGY, PAGANISM AND CHRISTIANITY**

Joseph Campbell has become a saint to many in Hollywood, thanks to the evangelistic efforts of such apostles as George Lucas and Christopher Vogler. Campbell’s approach to mythology is akin to Jung’s concept of the archetypes residing in the individual and collective unconscious.

Like Carl Jung, Campbell believed that the individual unconscious mind of each person is an extension of the unified “collective unconscious”—an amalgamation of all of humankind’s ancestral experience. Our minds share in the pool of all human psyche throughout the ages, like many individuals sharing in the same dream. His monism concludes, “The essence of oneself and the essence of the world: These two are one.”

According to Campbell, all religions and mythologies are but local manifestations of the single truth of what he calls the “Monomyth” of the hero. The Monomyth, in its most basic form, consists of the hero’s journey from separation to initiation to return (remember the definition of worldview?). It embodies redemption in a way we will discuss in the next chapter on story structure. Campbell attempts to prove his thesis with an eclectic recitation of many of the world’s stories, from creation myths to flood legends and heroes of faith.

Vogler puts it simply: “All stories consist of a few common structural elements found universally in myths, fairy tales, dreams, and movies. They are known collectively as The Hero’s Journey.” It is difficult to deny this common thread among diverse cultures, and the Christian need not fear facing such facts. After all, the meaning of so-called facts is in the interpretation, and the interpretation is in the worldview. So how does the Christian deal with such mythical similarities among cultures?

Christians need not deny a Monomyth that is reinterpreted through different traditions. We need to only understand it in its true nature from God’s own revelation. After all, God is the ultimate Storyteller, and the Scriptures say that he has placed a common knowledge of himself in all people through creation and conscience (Rom 1:18-20; 2:15). This explains the true genesis and nature of the Monomyth. In running from God, heathen humanity distorts that Monomyth of knowledge inside

---

10 Ibid., p. 30.
11 Vogler, *Wyter’s Journey*, p. 3.
12 Campbell’s individual interpretation is founded on relativistic monism, which does not comport with Christianity.
itself. Thus all religions and rituals have the scent of an original truth that has been turned into the stench of a lie:

Even though [human beings] knew God, they did not honor Him as God or give thanks, but they became futile in their speculations, and their foolish heart was darkened. Professing to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the incorruptible God for an image in the form of corruptible man and of birds and four-footed animals and crawling creatures. . . . They exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever. Amen. (Rom 1:21-23, 25)

It should not surprise or scare us that all cultures have creation myths, flood legends and similar ritualistic concepts. We should expect it. And we should not tremble at modern scholarship that sees historical fabrication in mythical origins. Just because there is similarity in myth between Christianity and other religions does not mean that Christianity is on an equal playing field with these religions or subordinate to a more generic Monomyth. Christianity is itself the true incarnation of the Monomyth in history, and other mythologies reflect and distort it like dirty or broken mirrors.

In addition to providing this true underlying mythology of reality, Christianity alone provides the justification for storytelling. Robert W. Jenson, in an article explaining “how the world has lost its story,” points out that the very precondition for the intelligibility of storytelling is itself a “narratable world.” That is, the biblical notion of linear history, with an author, characters and a purposeful goal, was the philosophical foundation of the search for meaning in a narrative of life. Storytelling is meaningless gibberish unless reality itself is narratable. And reality is unnarratable in a universe without a transcendent narrator.

Author Daniel Taylor comments on this legacy of Western culture’s biblical heritage of living in a narratable world. In order to tell a story with plot and characters that are not in utter chaos, one must already believe that reality is explainable, he says, and “that belief depends on a number of supporting beliefs: that reality is at least in part knowable; that there are meaningful connections between events; that actions have consequences; that humans do most things by choice, not by irresistible compulsion; that we are therefore responsible; and so on.”

We are creatures of story, created by a storytelling God, who created the very fabric of our reality in terms of his story. Rather than seeing our existence as a series of unconnected random events without purpose, storytelling brings meaning to our lives through the analogy of a carefully crafted plot that reflects the loving sovereignty of the God of the Bible. As Taylor concludes:

Stories link past, present, and future in a way that tells us where we have been (even before we were born), where we are, and where we could be going. . . . Our stories teach us that there is a place for us, that we fit. They suggest to us that our lives can have a plot. Stories turn mere chronology, one thing after another, into the purposeful action of plot, and thereby into meaning. . . . Stories are the single best way humans have for accounting for our experience.

God is such a creative author that he embodies both myth and history into his own narrative of redemption. As C. S. Lewis put it:

The heart of Christianity is a myth which is also a fact. . . . By becoming fact, it does not cease to be myth. That is the miracle. I suspect that men have sometimes derived more spiritual sustenance from myths they did not believe than from the religion they proclaimed. To be truly Christian we must both assent to the historical fact and also receive the myth (fact though it has become) with the same imaginative embrace which we accord to all myths. The one is hardly more necessary than the other. . . . We must not be ashamed of the mythical radiation resting on our theology. We must not be nervous about “parallels” and “Pagan Christ”s; they ought to be there—it would be a stumbling block if they weren’t. We must not, in false spirituality, withhold our imaginative welcome.

J. R. R. Tolkien was the master storyteller who led C. S. Lewis to Christ with this kind of myth-become-fact reasoning. In Tolkien's famous lecture "On Fairy-Stories" he speaks of approaching the "Christian story" with joy because the nature of fantasy and even happy endings (which he calls "eucatastrophe") gives us a "sudden glimpse of the underlying reality or truth" of the ultimate happy ending: the resurrection of Christ and the believer's sharing in that resurrection.

The Gospels contain a fairy-story, or a story of a larger kind which embraces all the essence of fairy-stories. They contain marvels—peculiarly artistic, beautiful and moving: "Mythical" in their perfect, self-contained significance; and among the marvels is the greatest and most complete conceivable eucatastrophe. But this story has entered History and the primary world: the desire and aspiration of sub-creation has been raised to the fulfillment of Creation. The Birth of Christ is the eucatastrophe of Man's history. The Resurrection is the eucatastrophe of the story of the Incarnation. This story begins and ends in joy. It has pre-eminently the "inner consistency of reality." There is no tale ever told that men would rather find was true, and none which so many sceptical men have accepted as true on its own merits. For the Art of it has the supremely convincing tone of Primary Art, that is, of Creation. To reject it leads either to sadness or to wrath.17

See the chapter "Jesus" for a detailed analysis of Christ myths.

DEMYTHOLOGIZATION
One modern mythology is the naturalistic worldview, with its agenda of demythologization. Since naturalists believe there are no true spiritual realities, only natural phenomena, they assume that there must be a natural explanation behind every myth or religious belief. According to the naturalist, primitive peoples create myths and religious symbols for natural phenomena they do not understand. For instance, if a culture does not understand thunder, it reinterprets thunder to represent a deity in order to make sense of it. The goal of the naturalist, then, is to discover what natural experiences cultures had that drove them to create such mythology.

---

happen because the Blue Fairy is a Disney construct. But this abstract belief compels him onward, with religious fervor, to find the myth as truth.

By finding and deciphering the abstract literary clue left at Dr. Know's vending machine (a Wizard of Oz symbol), David is able to find his maker at "the end of the world, where the lions cry," which is the mythical poetic way of describing the scientific creator's lair in the flooded remains of Manhattan city. So David's ability to find meaning in myth, to symbolize what he does not understand into mythological constructs, to seek after that which cannot be seen, is what makes David "human" to the scientist. Humanity's spiritual quest is unveiled as an immanent symbol-creating enterprise rather than a transcendent symbol-discovering enterprise.

But David is not satisfied. In fact, he is in despair. So he casts himself into the sea in angst-ridden resignation. At the bottom of the ocean he stumbles upon Coney Island, now underwater from the risen seas, and prays to the Blue Fairy statue he finds in Pleasure Island Park to make him a real boy. The statue, by now an obvious icon of the Virgin Mary, does not "answer" his prayers, and he remains in unbroken devout gaze and unsatisfied longing until his batteries run out. This is a visual reference to the filmmaker's perception of humanity's tenacious, yet ultimately vain, religious quest. And that vanity of religion is further emphasized when David finally touches the Blue Fairy, that symbol of divinity, at the end of the movie, and it crumbles into dust. Earlier, David's robotic partner, Gigolo Joe, had explained in the front of a church that sooner or later the women who go there become dissatisfied with their spiritual quest (God's love) and end up in his physical arms for "real" affection and love.

Two thousand years later, when all of humankind has died out and only machines remain, some highly advanced robots, looking very much like the popular conception of alien beings, are able to "resurrect" David (recharge his batteries) and even give him for one day his dream of "resurrecting" his original organic "mother" from her DNA in order to experience her love (more religious concepts naturalized). At the end of the day, when his mother is about to go to sleep and awaken nevermore, she tells David that she loves him and has always loved him. This finally satisfies David, and he is able to lie down and die with her in happiness, knowing that he is now human because he has loved and been loved. This final shot of him closing his eyes and being able to die is very important because early in the movie it was established that David did not close his eyes to sleep because he didn't have to sleep. The fact that he now closes his eyes is the evidence that he has become human and can die in peace as a human, having found his meaning.

Some may find in A.I. an analogy to the Judeo-Christian notion of God creating human beings as creatures whose humanity is defined in being loved by their Creator as well as others. In the first scene of A.I. the scientist speaking to his class of students makes this very comparison of God creating Adam to love and be loved. But with all its religious imagery and references, A.I. is more fittingly a humanistic interpretation of our personal quest for meaning being found in loving and being loved by other people (because there is no transcendent reality), as well as our manufacturing of myth (including God) as a means of explaining what we do not scientifically understand. A.I. is a deconstruction of religious belief into mythical construct,18 and it revisits the evolutionary conclusion that consciousness naturally emerges out of the inherent properties of matter, that humanity can actually be achieved by a highly complex machine.

Other movies try to demythologize religion as the misunderstood worship of aliens who visited Earth in the ancient past. The parallels with Genesis, Eden, the forbidden fruit, and the ascension and return of Christ are obvious in the recent "re-imaging" of Planet of the Apes. Movies such as Stargate, Alien vs. Predator and Indiana Jones and the Kingdom of the Crystal Skull depict the pyramids of ancient Egyptian religion (Stargate) or the ziggurats of South American religion (AvP and Indiana Jones) as a result of "primitive" man being influenced by aliens who visited our planet eons ago in their "chariots of the gods."

18Even in the final scene, in which David does meet the Blue Fairy, she is really an illusion constructed by the advanced robots to meet David's desire in his own terms rather than in terms of "reality."
While there may be some truth to the natural origins of some religious beliefs, demythology, as an absolute interpretation of history, suffers from its own mythological bias. Screenwriter David Franzoni explained when he was writing the screenplay for King Arthur that his script “aims more for history than myth.” And the movie gives the impression that it is a more historically accurate depiction based on new archaeological evidence. What Franzoni does not mention is that there is no certifiable history of King Arthur, and the new evidence is quite ambiguous. All we have are medieval romances, Welsh legends and other academic speculations of his exploits. To say that one will “aim more for history than myth” is really to say that one will aim more for one myth or legend over other myths or legends. The art of demythologizing is itself a mythology that believes there are no preternatural or transcendent mysteries to life, so it interprets what it cannot understand or does not know in terms of its own naturalistic cause-and-effect bias. This is not to say that all myth and history are equal in factual value, but it is a strong challenge to those who neglect to understand that even historical accounts are filtered through the historian’s bias.

MYTH AND MEANING
From the Greek tragedies of Euripides to the bawdy comedies of Shakespeare, both ancient and classical writers suffered no shame in telling a good story with the intention of proving a point or illustrating how they believed we ought to live in this world. Storytelling from its inception was expected to be more than entertainment.

Through their craft, the first storytellers were expected to teach the culture how to live and behave in their world. The rejection of “messages” in movies as “preachy” or “propaganda” is a recent phenomenon that results from the splitting of reality into secular/sacred distinctions, as if a story about human beings relating to one another could exist in a vacuum, without reference to values or meaning. All movies inherently contain messages in the very nature of their storytelling. Characters making choices that result in consequences is a “message” about how the storyteller thinks the way the world works.

Joseph Campbell was worried about the thoughtless irresponsibility of modern movie narrative. He called our storytellers to return to one of the primary functions of myth: its pedagogical nature, teaching how to live a human life under any circumstances. This return to the craft as high priesthood is a recognition of the privilege and responsibility that storytellers have in “making and breaking lives” by the power of their medium and its message.

True, some movies are more obvious or blatant than others in their message, and some are simpler or less focused than others, but all of them communicate values and worldviews nonetheless. This is a matter of degree, not of essence: Often the very movies that people think are not meaningful are actually loaded with powerful messages and worldviews.

Just Friends is a romantic comedy about an obese high schooler, Chris, who grows up, gets hot and successful, comes back home ten years later, and tries to bed the only woman he loved in high school, Jamie, who was only interested in him as friends. This story has all the typical crass jokes of men trying to get women to sleep with them, but the point of it all is to mock such juvenile immaturity in males. Because Chris has become promiscuous and selfish, he tries to catch Jamie for all the wrong reasons. It is not until he sees himself in another selfish, womanizing user, who is trying to bed Jamie as well, that Chris takes responsibility for his immaturity. Chris wins Jamie but never has sex with her. Instead, his return to her involves the desire to marry and have children with her, so there is a rather conservative moral to the story. A promiscuous man learns that true love is possible only by repenting from the irresponsible pursuit of using women. Like Proverbs 7 explained earlier, Just Friends mocks the immoral lifestyle by showing the dead end of it all.

99Quoted in John Soriano, “WGA.org's Exclusive Interview with David Franzoni,” WGA <http://www.sos.su.edu/sie/dl/Movie%20Project%20Team%20Folder/Movie%20Project%20Team%20Folder/Writers/David%20Franzoni%20Gloriador.pdf>. The interview has been removed from WGA.org since publication of the first edition of this book.

99Campbell, Hero, p. 31.

99Ibid., p. 8.
Rather than spurning mythology as something that only so-called primitive societies have, we ought to recognize that the heart of movie storytelling (modern mythology) is the communication and reinforcement of worldviews and values. And so we ought to judge movies in this light, even getting involved ourselves in creating and telling stories that express redemption for a lost world.

WATCH AND LEARN

1. With a friend or two, watch the movie Cast Away. Look for and discuss the symbolic references to the development of humankind in the experience of Chuck on the island. Look also for Chuck’s ultimate reconnection with civilization. What do the symbols of the volleyball, time, the angel wings and the whale represent? Discuss the kind of character that Chuck is at the beginning and then how he has changed after his journey. Imagine yourself in his shoes, and discuss what aspects of your life you would change if you had the same experience. Discuss what you think the movie was saying about what is really valuable in life.

2. Watch the movie Spitfire Grill with some friends, and discuss the elements of the Christ story that you see in the movie.

3. Consider a comedy movie that you never thought was meaningful beyond a bunch of jokes and gags. Now rewatch that movie, and discuss the journey of the main character. What was he or she like at the beginning of the movie? What did this person learn or not learn? How did the character change, or how did the character change others, by the end of the movie? If you were to see the movie as a parable, what would be its main message?