




# Movies on a Mission

“★★★★★”  
 Spiritual cinema. Inspirational films. Cinema for the soul. New Age movies. Movies that matter. Call it what you will, the landscape of film is being transformed by mission-driven artists who hope to change you and the world you live in.

MATTHEW GILBERT

**A** GROUP OF IDEALISTS RISK THEIR LIVES to protect an ancient scroll with clues to our evolutionary destiny. An old wizard guides his young student toward deep personal transformation. A young man loses all of his associative memory and must start from scratch to figure out who he is—or was. What do these storylines have in common? And what makes them different from generations of cinematic efforts to educate, inspire, and move us in some way?

In the last several years, an unprecedented number of new movies have aspired to be more than just entertainment. From big-budget features to a growing list of spiritual and issue-driven documentaries, the big screen is filling with provocative choices. Independent film festivals and award competitions are multiplying like movie scripts, and communities of filmmakers are proliferating. It's a clear response to audience demand for storytelling that makes a difference.

## AN EVOLVING GENRE

An early sign of creative ferment in the world of cinema was the emergence in 2004 of the Spiritual Cinema Circle (SCC). An idea conceived by filmmaker Stephen Simon and author Gay Hendricks and his wife Kathlyn, SCC tapped into a sizeable group of people willing to pay for a monthly mix of inspirational movies of varying length and quality. It now has more than 20,000 members in 70 countries and boasts 200 film clubs throughout the United States.

Another watershed event in the evolution of filmmaking was the release of *What the Bleep Do We Know!?* and its imaginative attempt to explain the emerging science of quantum physics. A word-of-mouth success, it has grossed more than \$12 million, played in 17 countries, sold more than one million DVDs, and in August 2006 returned as an 11-hour, 3-DVD Quantum Edition.

And then there have been the ballyhooed releases—at least among Cultural Creatives—of *The Celestine Prophecy* and *Peaceful Warrior*, opening this year to mixed reviews. Both marked the phenomenon with big-screen launches, recognizable actors, significant financial backing, and serious spiritual messaging.

These are not the only stories, of course, only the most visible ones (see the sidebar below for a partial list of other titles). And yet many will argue that Hollywood is no stranger to making movies that have challenged our notions of reality or tugged at our hearts and souls with messages of transformation. *The Matrix*, *Groundhog Day*, *I ♥ Huckabees*, *The Truman Show*, *Mindwalk*, even *It's a Wonderful Life*, among many others, come to mind. Everyone you ask will have their favorites.

But if you ask those in the industry who are creating and supporting spiritual and mission-driven movies, they believe there's a tangible difference in the pattern of films that are now showing up in theaters and video stores.

"Now more than ever, people are waking up to the notion that 'I want something different,'" says Eric DelaBarre, a television writer (*Law and Order*) who penned the script for the soon-to-be-released *Conversations with God*. "They are getting tired of these mindless action films. There is no soul to some of these movies, and people are beginning to realize that."

"I think the phenomenon we are seeing today has more to do with creating films that reflect our evolution as a culture and our maturation into a more global consciousness, one that transcends religions and organized spirituality," says Kate McCallum, a 25-year veteran of the arts and entertainment industry and cofounder of the Center for Conscious Creativity. "As we evolve, so does our art."

That evolution has largely taken place outside of the Hollywood entertainment machine, which doesn't know what to make of this phenomenon and whose efforts to mimic it often reflect the industry's mercenary character.

"Hollywood doesn't take this 'deep stuff' too seriously," says Amanda Robinson, founder of the Institute for Spiritual Entertainment in Los Angeles (ISELA), part of a network of thirty artistic communities throughout the United States that are loosely affiliated with SCC. She cites the 1998 Academy Award-winning *What Dreams May Come* (for Best Visual Effects), with Robin Williams and Cuba Gooding Jr. in a philosophical tale about enduring love and the afterlife, as "the first movie to offer some deep truths behind the metaphysical message. When you strike a chord and someone actually learns something . . . that comes from authenticity."

What also differentiates these movies is their explicit intent to either affirm a positive vision of ourselves or the world, or to actually change people, to challenge personal or cultural conditioning and beliefs. Examples of the latter are most clearly obvious in many of the recent issue-driven titles such as *An Inconvenient Truth*, *The Corporation*, *Why We Fight*, and *Who Killed the Electric Car?* *What the Bleep* fired a broadside at traditional notions of physical and even spiritual reality, while the unsettling documentary *Unknown White Male* asks viewers, "Who would you be now if you weren't your memories?" *Celestine Prophecy* and *Peaceful Warrior* play like self-help workshops. And when was the last time you heard a reference to the Akashic Records (*Illusion*) someplace other than at a psychic fair?

## CULTIVATING THE NICHE

In the same way that personal spirituality bypasses much of conventional religious dogma, mission-driven movies are sidestepping traditional Hollywood models of marketing and distribution. No longer is there hand-wringing over whether a national distributor will pick up a film or how much money can be squeezed out for advertising. Today's independent and spiritual filmmakers are taking their products directly to those most likely to view them. ➔

### Other Notable Films

*Children of Heaven*  
*A Day in the Light*  
*Enlightenment Guaranteed*  
*I Know I'm Not Alone*  
*Into Great Silence*  
*Living Luminaries*  
*One . . . The Movie*  
*Peace One Day*  
*Rain in a Dry Land*  
*Road to Guantanamo*  
*Shortcut to Nirvana*  
*Spring, Summer, Fall, Winter . . .*  
*Water*  
*Winter in Baghdad*

“The most interesting aspect of the phenomenon has been the development of an alternative circuit for showing films with a spiritual message,” says John Raatz, a principal in Awakened Media and founder of The Visioneering Group, a public relations firm in Los Angeles that markets *What the Bleep* and other independent films. “It consists primarily of the various networks of New Thought churches around the United States—Religious Science, Unity, Unitarian Universalist, and so on.” These groups will charge up to \$10 per ticket and split the revenue with the filmmakers, who gain valuable exposure for their movies.

*Conversations with God*, an adaptation of Neale Donald Walsch’s first book, is a good example of the new model. It opens in Portland, Oregon, this October but will be available only through Spiritual Cinema Circle for the first month after it premieres. Then, in a classic case of “convergent distribution,” DVDs will be distributed not just to churches but also to a variety of bookstores and nonprofits at the same time the movie is released in theaters. A vigorous email and Internet promotional campaign is also part of the strategy.

This approach was first field-tested for the fictional *Indigo*, and the movie grossed nearly \$1.4 million on its debut weekend in January 2005. “We turned 600 churches into theaters,” says writer and executive producer James Twyman. The better-made documentary version, *The Indigo Evolution*, premiered in January 2006 to a smaller but enthusiastic audience before going to DVD.

As for *Celestine Prophecy* and *Peaceful Warrior*, both are “going through the theatrical process carefully,” says Andy Fogelson, a former Polygram executive and now distribution consultant. “Unlike most films, both of these are self-sustaining brands that don’t need theatrical to promote them for home entertainment.” Both movies will be available on DVD by Christmas.



**Top:** On the set of *Living Luminaries—Special Edition: The Serious Business of Happiness*, a series of films by Gotham Metro Studios (2006); photo by Ellie Partovi. **Middle:** *Unknown White Male, Spectre Broadcast* (2005). **Bottom:** *Conversations with God*, CWG Films (2005); photo by Ben Lipsey, courtesy of Spiritual Cinema Circle.

The phenomenally successful, Christian-based apocalyptic book series *Left Behind* has followed a similar cinematic arc, sans the big-screen part. The film was leased to more than 3,200 churches over a single weekend and then went straight to DVD, in the process generating more than \$100 million in revenue.

And then there’s *The Secret*, which turned independent film marketing on its head. For a time the movie was available only via its Web site ([www.thesecond.tv](http://www.thesecond.tv)), either as a \$4.95 download or a \$29.95 DVD, and with essentially no marketing other than a slick trailer recouped much of its \$3 million investment in a matter of months.

“The Internet has become our new Gutenberg Press,” says Kate McCallum.

## FILMMAKERS ON A MISSION

The actual movies and their innovative promotional strategies have overshadowed what may be a more important trend—the way these movies are being made and the spirit of the filmmakers who have been genuinely moved by the subject matter.

John Raatz observes that “more filmmakers than ever before are seeing cinema as a great tool for individual and social transformation. They are dedicating themselves to using the medium to make a difference in people’s lives and in the world.” The birth of the Institute for Spiritual Entertainment is a direct reflection of interest and passion among movie-making artists to develop and use their craft in a more conscious way. “Everything in Hollywood is distorted and superficialized,” says Amanda Robinson. “ISE is about being able to express our true selves. It comes down to making movies from the heart.”

“Mostly we are people who ‘used to work’ in Hollywood,” says Eric DelaBarre, “but are now putting our talents to work with a single mission: to inspire those

around us through filmed entertainment. I will not go back to *Law and Order*, sitting around a table and drumming up new and exciting ways to kill people.”

The potential snag in all this is the question of whether such filmmakers and their films are singing to the choir or reaching a wider audience—and whether it even matters. Angela Russell, whose company KnowWonder Entertainment has several big-budget film projects in development, is aiming high. “When a documentary film delivers concepts in a way that can be understood and embraced, thousands of people are affected. But when a mainstream feature film with global distribution delivers such concepts in the same way, millions can be affected, inspired, and changed from that moment on.”

Robinson is more patient. “There’s an appreciation that such movies are even being made. We must continue to build perceived value to give this genre credibility.”

Regardless of aspirations, everyone agrees that the emphasis must remain on good art and storytelling, and yet there has always been a tension between the creative and the corporate. According to Robinson, who attended this year’s Damah Film Festival (“*damah*” is a Hebrew word meaning “a metaphor that transforms”), a panel of independent filmmakers and studio executives clashed over priorities: “Inside the system, it’s all about the money.”

James Redfield turned down multiple offers to sell the film rights for *Celestine Prophecy* so that he could maintain control over the message, although there are some who feel that a more standard Hollywood treatment would have turned an earnest but self-conscious movie into a true “*Indiana Jones* of the spirit.” And in an attention-deficit world, if the intent is to bring these messages closer to the mainstream, then as DelaBarre puts it, “You have to make it cool to be awake.” Needless to say, it’s a challenge that few have overcome.



**Top:** *The Celestine Prophecy*, Celestine Films, (2006). **Middle:** *Peaceful Warrior*, Lions Gate Entertainment (2006); photo by Chuck Zlotnick. **Bottom:** *The Secret*, Prime Time Productions, (©2006).

## COMING ATTRACTIONS

There is little doubt that mission-driven movies are more than a faddish response to a world besieged by problems. Big-screen productions now in development include *The Power of Now* with Jim Carrey, *The Tipping Point* with Leonardo DiCaprio, and *The Alchemist* with Lawrence Fishburne. Powerful new social consciousness documentaries seem to appear every month; *Fast Food Nation* and *America: Freedom to Fascism* are two of the latest. The Spirit Fund, being created by Awakened Media, the lifestyle company Gaia, and Inferno Films, may have as much as \$125 million to support spiritual filmmaking. Former eBay President Jeff Skoll helped

produce and finance *Syriana* and *An Inconvenient Truth* through his media company Participant Productions.

And movies aren’t the only medium supporting the evolution of consciousness. From new offerings on cable—including Comcast’s Harmony Channel, Al Gore’s Current TV, Link TV (Television Without Borders), and MTV’s “Spiritual Windows”—to recently launched Internet-based Essential TV and Linda Mackenzie’s Positive Radio Network, media is opening up to accommodate uplifting alternatives.

Ideally, “movies on a mission” must meet the same quality criteria—however subjectively applied—as any film hoping to make an impact on its audience. At the same time, most people hate to be preached to. They tend to be more receptive when the heart and mind aren’t pried open but allowed to unclench naturally. And while these movies may not always be embraced by sometimes jaded movie critics, they are signs of an emerging storyline that is using media to explore both new and ancient ways for growing ourselves and healing our world. 🌍

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