

FILM



Bryce Dallas Howard and Matt Damon in *Hereafter*

Eastwood's chick flick

Hereafter – Heaven is more than human love. (Rated M)

Clint Eastwood's latest offering is not one of his best, though given the theme, it is certainly one of the most interesting. Many of his films in the last two decades have vividly explored the themes of death, including his masterpiece *Unforgiven*, but this one takes us to the question of what happens after death.

The opening scene sets the tone and is as dramatic an opening as one could find in recent films, resonating with a contemporary audience who often ask the question – why was that not me? Interestingly the film was removed from many cinemas in the wake of the recent disasters in Japan.

We live in a time where spiritual mediums have become superstars who command large amounts of money and have their own television shows. I am not inclined to mention their names for fear of giving them even more recognition. Due to the experiences of one survivor, the film explores the world of the hereafter and the often documented 'near-death' experiences of people and the searching that people undertake because they want to communicate with their lost loved ones.

The main character, George (played by Matt Damon) has the 'gift', but also the 'curse'. He can relay messages to the living from their loved ones simply by touching their hands. It had become so burdensome that he gave up his 'business' and took a labouring job. Circumstances though draw him and the other leading characters together and offer a picture about how Eastwood and the writer

Peter Morgan view life, death and the afterlife. One would have to say they have a cynical view about the afterlife. Eastwood himself is a non-believer. One scene shows one of the other characters at a spiritual meeting where the woman is clearly exposed as a charlatan to the film audience. Many forms of spiritual searching are shown and each is found wanting. It is worth commenting that a young boy's first foray into exploring a spiritual connection is via the World Wide Web. Web-searching he comes across a Christian preacher who gives a simple message of who to trust at these times of loss – Jesus Christ. The look on the boy's face makes it plain that he sees this person as someone who is no help at all.

While the film's theme is the Hereafter, the actual meaning is revealed at the end. It is basically a love story and is about finding a 'soul-mate'. For Eastwood and Morgan, spiritual connections are primarily human affairs, meaning you need to make the most of the present world. I could not help but be reminded of the ruin and ultimate death that searching after false spiritual connections can bring. What you involve yourself with does not have a neutral quality. "Do not turn to mediums or seek out spiritists, for you will be defiled by them. I am the LORD your God." (Leviticus 19:3 NIV)

From the Past a Movie to explore:
Crimes and Misdemeanours
(1989 – Rated M)

Woody Allen, a somewhat controversial, but long-standing film director has often struggled with questions

about faith (or lack of faith), with dialogue that revolves around Jewish beliefs and practices. He even penned a one-act play entitled *God*. In this moral fable, the two main characters in the large extended Jewish family we are introduced to, have very different outlooks on life. Martin Landau plays Judah Rosenthal, a well-know ophthalmologist, who is a seemingly loving and moral man and yet what we see outwardly is not the truth. Woody Allen plays Cliff Stern; a documentary film-maker who is quite hopeless in terms of the success the world highlights and struggles with living a good life. There are many telling conversations about God and faith, and interactions with rabbis, befitting those brought up in this religious life. One line that has always stayed with me is Judah remembering that his father had told him "The eyes of God are on us always", but Judah finds this hard to believe as he has simply got away with murder. This movie has been well-used in Christian film circles to stimulate discussion about marriage, faithfulness and the existence of evil in the world of God. Watching this movie is like reading parts of the Old Testament.

Ushpizin (2004 – Rated PG) – Jewish Connections

Some films are helpful in providing understanding of Jewish customs and practices. One which provides a very good contemporary depiction of the Jewish festival of Sukkoth (see Nehemiah 8, Leviticus 23:24), is *Ushpizin* (Aramaic for 'guests'). The film provides an excellent way of delving into the festival in the very orthodox areas of Jerusalem where communities ritually set up for the festival. The film's story revolves around a couple (Moshe and Mail) praying to God for a child, and facing some marital difficulties and tensions during the festival, especially associated with the arrival of two men from the husband's wayward past. The film also explores themes of hospitality and forgiveness, reminding me of the hospitality of Jesus who welcomed and ate with the sinners in society. It is worth noting that its connection with the contemporary orthodox Jewish community meant that the director had to agree to a real-life husband and wife playing the central characters.

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