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## MOVIES THAT MATTER

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Article by Michelle Vartan for Bodhi Tree

Ever walked out of the movie theater feeling like the world looks different than before you bought your ticket? Many of the best movies work on levels we're not even conscious of. "A good film not only makes us take distance from the mundane, but also explores the big questions of life," says Maria Elena de las Carreras, a film critic and lecturer at the University of California, Los Angeles.

A favorite film can even take on new meaning when it inspires a new perspective. "For me, a film is spiritual when it asks—but doesn't answer—the big questions of who we are and why we're here, and makes us feel better about being human," says Stephen Simon, founder of Spiritual Cinema Circle and producer of soul-enriching classics like *What Dreams May Come* and *Somewhere in Time*. He adds that such films help us "remember that we can and are a beautiful species as well."

Here's our curated list of films that you can watch (or rewatch) and perhaps feel a new spark with each viewing.

1. ***The Shawshank Redemption*** (1994): Dig deeper behind the prison-break plot of this buddy flick to uncover a hidden message of hope versus despair. It's grounded in the optimism of human nature "by showing that change and connection can happen when we set our minds and hearts to do it," says de las Carreras.
2. ***It's a Wonderful Life*** (1946): This holiday classic reminds us that we don't fully understand—and often underestimate—the impact we have on other people in our lives. "So many of us beat up on ourselves for the things we should have done or should not have done," Simon says. "But George Baily is given the opportunity to see what would have happened to [the people in his life] without him."
3. ***Groundhog Day*** (1993): The next time you watch this cult comedy, consider the story as a metaphor for rebirth and reincarnation. Bill Murray's character wakes up repeatedly to the exact same day—and eventually learns to make the most of each relived opportunity. His transformation reminds us of the soul's potential for evolution.
4. ***Field of Dreams*** (1989): The message here is to follow your beliefs and have faith that you will become the person you were meant to be—and miracles may even happen along the way. "If you build it, he will come," is repeated throughout this movie, seemingly about baseball, which can be translated to "If you imagine it, you will manifest it," according to Simon.
5. ***The Wizard of Oz*** (1939): This classic film is full of secret symbolism. If you view the yellow brick road as a labyrinth or path to enlightenment, Dorothy's trek to the Emerald City takes on a whole new meaning, full of temptations, trials and teachings that help her find her way "home," also known as gratitude and acceptance of self.
6. ***Spirited Away*** (2001): This Hayao Miyazaki animated film explores how we care for human nature, a common message in all his movies. The imaginative tale touches on judgment, good versus evil, and even has subliminal messages if you can read between the lines of Japanese (the kanji characters for "freedom" and "truth" are disguised in Miyazaki's drawings).
7. ***The Matrix*** (1999): Look beyond the slick special effects because this action film is layered with so much religious symbolism, it has inspired books analyzing all the spiritual messages. Keanu Reeves' character is named Neo (which means "new"), whose mission is to reveal the truth behind everyday reality. The Matrix represents a controlling higher power. Chosen as "The One," Neo's destiny is debated as he sacrifices his life for others and rises from the dead, like a sci-fi Jesus.
8. ***Wall•E*** (2008): Pixar's animated story projects how materialism and technology can distract people into immobile states of passive, detached living. The movie explores the meaning of being alive and our innate desire for human connection, as reflected in the robotic eyes of Wall•E, who experiences emotions and a yearning for love after watching old movies, while the humans in this futuristic world are experiencing a facsimile existence through the filter of their omnipresent home screens.
9. ***Tree of Life*** (2011): Directed by Terrence Malick, this movie highlights the deep and unexplainable love for our parents, as imperfect they can be, and the complicated bond between a parent and child. If you consider Adam's tumultuous relationship with God in the Old Testament, you'll see just how universal the feelings Malick portrays are. "More than anything else, it's about the responsibility of parenthood," says Simon.
10. ***Defending Your Life*** (1991): What if you had to justify every action and choice you made during your life? Set in Judgment City (Albert Brooks' take on purgatory), this rom-com explores the concept of reincarnation, what gives a life value and how to live with purpose and intention, while teaching the importance of living without fear.
11. ***Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*** (2004): While posing the age-old question—Is it better to have loved and lost than

never to have loved at all?—this Charlie Kaufman story exposes the memory bank as a self-serving tool and debates the value of bittersweet, life-altering experiences. On a subconscious level, everyone edits memories to create the versions we desire. And in Kaufman's world, the memory can be wiped clean, but that doesn't mean that destiny can be dodged. The question becomes: Are we the sum of our memories, or is there more to us than our past experiences?

Photo courtesy of Castle Rock Entertainment

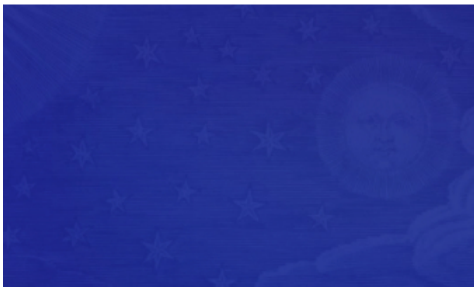
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