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Engaging with cinema

by John Coffey

Summary

The relationship between church and cinema has often been one of mutual suspicion. Hollywood has flouted Christian values; Christians have responded with condemnation and censorship. Yet from the earliest days of motion pictures, filmmakers have been attracted to religious subjects and spiritual themes. Christians today have much to gain from critical engagement with cinema. At their best, films are works of art that provoke ethical reflection and provide a vital point of contact between believers and unbelievers.

The church and the cinema

In the century since its birth, film has established itself as the most popular art form of our age. Each week, millions around the globe flock to their local cinemas or watch films on television and video. Yet the power and popularity of film has caused uneasiness among Christians who have worried that it promotes sexual immorality, violence, and impiety.

Throughout 'the golden age' of Hollywood, from the 30s to the 60s, the Catholic church in the United States policed the movies through its Legion of Decency.¹ Its success was remarkable. Few Hollywood films in this period were released without the Legion's approval, and many were severely cut or rewritten as a result of its censorship. Eventually, however, its campaigns provoked a powerful backlash. By the 1960s, the film industry had become increasingly resentful of the church's interference; the Legion was forced to liberalise its classification system and eventually the production code was abandoned.

Yet as films have become more violent and explicit, concerns about their influence have revived. These concerns are forcefully articulated by the Jewish film critic Michael Medved in *Hollywood versus America* (1992). While opposed to censorship, he is scathing in his critique, declaring that 'the dream factory has become the poison factory'. Countless films feature explicit sex, gratuitous violence, obscene behaviour and foul language. Hollywood is guilty of promoting promiscuity, maligning marriage, glorifying violence, trashing heroes, bashing America and attacking religion. In Medved's eyes, the release of Martin Scorsese's controversial film, *The Last Temptation of Christ* (1988), was nothing less than Hollywood's 'declaration of war' on Christians.²

Medved's judgements are harsh and polemical, but many share comparable misgivings. Films like *Natural Born Killers* (1994) have been linked to copycat murders, and there is now a vigorous debate over the connection between screen violence and real-life killings.³ The respected British director, David Puttnam, expresses a widespread feeling: 'Movies now have an underlying nastiness in them. The thing I loathe more than anything has become fashionable – cynicism'.

The irony is that as cinema has become more violent and sexually explicit, Christians have become more relaxed. Evangelicals today will happily watch films that would have shocked an earlier generation. As one scholar puts it, contemporary evangelicals are 'comfortable in the world' and 'take for granted many of the cultural norms of middle-class life'.⁴ Cinema is lapped up as a form of entertainment, and there is often a lack of critical engagement with the medium or the message. If the danger in the past was cultural separatism, the danger today may be cultural assimilation.

1 See F. Walsh, *Sin and Censorship: The Catholic Church and the Motion Picture Industry*, Yale UP, 1996; G. Black, *The Catholic Crusade against the Movies*, CUP, 1998.

2 For a helpful discussion of the film and evangelicals' reaction see D. Hilborn, *Picking up the Pieces: Can Evangelicals Adapt to Contemporary Culture*, Hodder, 1997, pp237–45.

3 See K. French, ed., *Screen Violence*, Bloomsbury, 1996.

4 See M. Shibley, 'Contemporary evangelicals: born-again and world affirming', *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, July 1998, pp67–87.

The need for distinctive engagement

To avoid these extremes, Christians need to cultivate a genuinely biblical attitude towards culture. God calls us to be a holy people radically distinct from the world around us. The Old Testament word *qodesh* (translated 'holiness') literally means 'separation' or 'setting apart'. The New Testament contains numerous injunctions to holiness. Jesus taught his followers to be ruthless in maintaining their purity: 'If your right eye causes you to sin', he said, 'gouge it out and throw it away' (Matthew 5:27–30). One text, in particular, has weighed heavily in Christian thinking about cinema – Philippians 4:8: 'Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable – if anything is excellent or praiseworthy – think about such things'. Since cinema portrays many things that are false, ignoble, impure, ugly and despicable, many believers have simply avoided it.

However, a passion for holiness needs to be balanced by a commitment to the world around us. Christian lives should be marked by 'holy worldliness'.⁵ Christians should live as aliens and strangers, but also as conscientious citizens (1 Peter 2:11–17); as salt amidst the corruption and light in the darkness (Matthew 5:13–16). Salt and light are effective because they are at odds with their environment *and* present within it. In the same way, we must be involved in a fallen world, resisting the twin temptations to assimilate to it or insulate ourselves from it. Christ's prayer is not that his disciples are taken 'out of the world', but that they are protected from the evil one and sanctified by God's word (John 17:13–19).

The Bible gives outstanding examples of this distinctive engagement: Joseph, Esther, Daniel, Paul and Christ himself. Paul was distressed by the Athenians' idolatry and preached against it, but he also engaged with their culture and religion. Fear of contamination did not overwhelm his desire to communicate. He studied their idols, talked with their philosophers, read their poets. When he preached to them, he did not simply denounce; he looked for common ground (Acts 17:16–34). Yet it was Jesus who embodied holy worldliness most daringly. The Pharisees were appalled by Christ's readiness to mix with worldly people in worldly settings. But Jesus taught that evil thoughts, sexual immorality, murder, and lewdness came 'from within, out of men's hearts'; isolation from the world did not guarantee holiness (Mark 7:20–23). He broke Jewish taboos with abandon, and mixed freely with 'sinners' (Matthew 9:10–13, Luke 7:36–50). Whilst he called on people to repent, his life was marked by a radical openness to the ungodly (Luke 19:1–10, John 4:4–26, John 8:1–11).

Practising distinctive engagement

Few Christians have managed to emulate this balance. Many have settled for the 'safe' option of condemnation and withdrawal from the world and its culture. Yet this strategy has serious drawbacks. The English Puritans often showed real appreciation of music, poetry, painting and even theatre, but if some had had their way, we could well have missed out on Shakespeare. It is a sad irony that a movement founded on the doctrine of grace became a byword for hard-faced moralism. Puritan hostility to theatres, taverns and Christmas alienated contemporaries and gave the impression that Puritanism was a faith for the self-righteous.

Yet in avoiding moralism we should not support a naïve consumption of worldly culture. The quantity of cheap erotica and horror on display in video stores should be disturbing to the Christian. Those who never watch this material should think carefully about viewing 'serious' films that might lead into temptation. Moreover, the worldview of a film can be more insidious than profanity, nudity or violence. But such problems also arise within politics, business, literature or philosophy; each contains its pitfalls, but it is tragic when Christians shun these areas of life. Individuals differ in their capacity to handle challenges to their faith, but each of us in our own way should endeavour to be both distinctive and culturally engaged.

Francis Schaeffer observed that churches often shelter young Christians from 'the world', and then send them out to face it naked and defenceless. However, there are practical things churches can do to assist cultural engagement. Preachers can watch films or read press reviews and incorporate them into their teaching. Parents can use family guides to select appropriate films for watching with their children. Youth groups or house groups can discuss a film from a Christian perspective. *The Truman Show* (1998), for example, would get people thinking about how the mass media manipulates our vision of reality, but it could also prompt deeper questions about God. 'Truman' has been placed in the 'perfect' town of Seahaven by his 'creator', Christof, but this paradise feels oppressive. Is the film simply an exposé of the false creators in the media? Is it an attack on theism? Or does it represent a popular view of God as a distant control freak unconcerned about our welfare?

Asking such questions is the key to *critical* engagement. The danger is that when we watch films, we switch off our Christian minds and soak them up. As the critic Neil Postman suggests, movies that offer spectacle rather than content are particularly problematic. In an age when images overwhelm words, entertainment can become more appealing than truth. Yet cinema and theatre can counteract the trivialisation produced by television; they still have the capacity to provoke serious reflection.⁶

If we are to get the most out of films, we need to appreciate three significant dimensions of cinema: the aesthetic, the moral and the religious. While cinema can be aesthetically mediocre, morally offensive and religiously confused, many films have much to offer on each of these levels.

1 The aesthetic dimension

Hans Rookmaaker used to say that 'art needs no justification'. He meant that art is valid even when it serves no obvious utilitarian purpose. God has placed us in the midst of a physical creation, and commanded us to fill the earth and subdue it (Genesis 1:28). When the artist takes a material artefact and fashions it into something delightful, he participates in humanity's vocation to cultivate the earth. Christ died not to replace this created order but to redeem it (see Isaiah 11:1–9; 65:17–25; Romans 8:18–21; Revelation 21:24), so Christians should display a full humanity. As Nicholas Wolterstorff rightly says, 'Life is not meant to be grim'.⁷

There is no need, therefore, to apologise for treasuring the dialogue of *Casablanca* (1942), or admiring the structural brilliance of a Tarantino movie. We must avoid the tunnel vision that focuses exclusively on the problematic aspects of film. The operas of Puccini can be sadistically misogynistic, but there is far more to a Puccini opera than a tawdry plot. Human creativity can be twisted and used to make idols (Exodus 32:1–6; Ezekiel 8, Isaiah 44:6–20), but the aesthetic impulse remains an essential part of God's good creation. To watch the great classics of world cinema is to marvel at the artistry of the directors. Kurosawa's *Seven Samurai* (1954) astonishes with its epic sweep, subtle characterisation, gentle humour and cinematic technique. *Citizen Kane* (1941) is just as remarkable, for its 25-year old director, Orson Welles, displayed an awesome command of the medium, introducing a host of innovations like deep-focus photography, low-angled camera shots, and non-linear narrative.

Films can be profoundly rewarding. They can transport us to far corners of the globe and to long-forgotten eras; they can make us laugh and weep and hold our breath; they can introduce us to human cultures in all their colour and diversity, and take us inside the lives of people we have never met. One recalls beautiful films about an Italian postman and a Chilean poet (*Il Postino*, 1995), a simple Chinese peasant woman and her stubborn search for justice (*The Story of Qui Ju*, 1992), and a little Russian boy and his Czech foster father (*Kolya*, 1996). The world of cinema is packed with hidden

6 N. Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, Methuen, 1987.

7 N. Wolterstorff, *Art in Action: Toward a Christian Aesthetic*, Solway, 1997, p83. See also R. Macaulay, 'The Great Commissions', *Cambridge Papers*, Vol. 7, No. 2.

jewels, films of compassion and shrewd observation. These works of art entertain, delight, and enrich our humanity.

2 The moral dimension

Believers will also want to assess films from an ethical perspective. This should involve more than a concentration on sex, swearing, and violence. One American evangelical website devoted to movie reviews relies entirely on these criteria in its assessment of the ethical value of films, and other moral issues are almost lost from view. Steven Spielberg's powerful Holocaust film, *Schindler's List* (1993), was given a 'Christian rating' of 1 out of 5, (placing it in the category: 'very offensive from a Christian perspective'). The US-based Christian Film and Television Commission also placed an extreme caution warning against *Schindler's List* because of the 'extensive nudity in concentration camp scenes...graphic sex scenes between unmarried individuals...[and] 19 obscenities, 8 profanities and several vulgarities'. Faced with one of the great moral evils of our century, these reviewers could do little more than tot up the number of swear words.

By worrying so much about the corrupting influence of cinema, Christians often fail to appreciate its capacity to generate ethical reflection. In our fixation with judging films, we prevent them judging us. Yet many movies have the power to expose our own moral shortcomings. Few works of art dramatise the tension between self-fulfilment and duty more persuasively than Frank Capra's *It's a Wonderful Life* (1946). Recent 'feelgood' films like *Forrest Gump* (1994) and *The Shawshank Redemption* (1995) depict central characters that keep their principles in a demoralised world. The point is not that these films get everything right, but that they put us on the spot, provoking us to think about our own character.

Movies can also deal thoughtfully with specific moral issues. *Platoon* (1986) and *Apocalypse Now* (1979) stand as important contributions to the debate over the Vietnam War. Dark and violent, they remind us of human fallenness in much the same way as the book of Judges. Other films tackle issues like mental illness (*Shine*, 1996), race (*Jungle Fever*, 1991), capitalist speculation (*Wall Street*, 1987), alcoholism (*Leaving Las Vegas*, 1995), and capital punishment (*Dead Man Walking*, 1995). In his ten short films on the *Decalogue* (1988), the Polish director, Krzysztof Kieslowski focuses on the painful moral dilemmas faced by different people living in the same apartment block in Warsaw. At critical junctures, Kieslowski introduces a 'mystery man' who stares intently at the protagonists, as if to imply that God is always watching us and searching our hearts.

3 The religious dimension

Ours may be a 'secular age', but the twentieth century's archetypal art form is shot through with the theological. The obvious religious movies are biblical epics and Christ films, like *The Ten Commandments* (1956), *Ben Hur* (1959), *King of Kings* (1961), and *Prince of Egypt* (1998). Yet the religious dimension of cinema goes far beyond this.

The past decade, in particular, has seen dramatic growth in movies with spiritual themes, though their spirituality is usually highly eclectic. The trend perhaps began with *Star Wars* (1977), and has been reinforced by the fashion for Eastern religion and New Age mysticism. Although 93% of the Hollywood establishment attend no religious services of any kind,⁸ the popularity of Buddhism and Scientology is evident in recent films. *Kundun* (1997) and *Seven Years in Tibet* (1997) present a reverential picture of Buddhism, whilst *Phenomenon* (1996) showcases the Scientologist beliefs of its star, John Travolta. The immense popularity of *Ghost* (1990) has inspired a stream of movies featuring angels, reincarnation, the after-life and other supernatural themes, the latest being *What Dreams May Come* (1998). The New Age spirituality of these movies is deeply problematic, but they provide powerful evidence that, for all its proud boasts, secularism has failed to satisfy twentieth-century people.

Moreover, Christian theology itself continues to be a powerful force in cinema. There is, of course, evidence of secularisation; in recent British films, religion plays little or no part in the lives of most of the characters, and in *Four Weddings and a Funeral* (1994) the church is personified by Rowan Atkinson's ludicrously inept young priest. Yet important films continue to provide sympathetic portrayals of Christian believers and theological ideas. *Babette's Feast* (1988), is a minor masterpiece set in an austere Pietist community in nineteenth-century Denmark, and offers a beautiful exploration of the biblical themes of grace, feasting, and reconciliation. One thinks too of *Chariots of Fire* (1981), *The Mission* (1986), and of Robert Duvall's extraordinary evocation of Pentecostal culture in the rural American South in *The Apostle* (1998).

Even films that do not feature believers often draw on the Passion narratives and the Apocalypse. The director of *Robocop* (1987), Paul Verhoeven – who once had a brief encounter with Pentecostalism but is now a member of the sceptical Jesus Seminar – has described his film as a 'Christian fairytale'.⁹ Another science fiction classic, *The Terminator* (1984), centres on a woman of humble status who is chosen to give birth to a deliverer, John Conner (note the initials). The Terminator, like King Herod, sets out on a slaughter of innocents in order to destroy this messianic figure, but, in a film heavy with apocalyptic overtones, we know that the woman will give birth and that her child will save humanity from destruction. In many other movies, the hero is a sort of Christ figure; examples include *The Elephant Man* (1980), *E.T.* (1982), and even *Edward Scissorhands* (1990). One of the bleakest thrillers of the 90s, *Seven* (1995), is peppered with references to Aquinas, Dante, Milton's *Paradise Lost* and the seven deadly sins, focusing relentlessly on human corruption and the demand for judgement. Films like this derive their force from the theological discourse they employ. Secular philosophies cannot carry the same weight, for they have little to say about radical evil or the possibility of redemption. When filmmakers grapple with the extremities of human existence, they repeatedly turn to the Christian heritage.

Steve Turner has argued that some of our century's most significant popular music is inspired by the black church, and by the spiritual background and experience of artists like Elvis Presley, Bob Dylan, Marvin Gaye, and U2's Bono.¹⁰ Something similar can be said of film directors like Alfred Hitchcock, whose work bears the mark of his Jesuit education;¹¹ Ingmar Bergman, a Lutheran pastor's son who grappled with 'the silence of God' in films like *The Seventh Seal* (1957);¹² Woody Allen, who has never stopped arguing with Judaism, above all in *Crimes and Misdemeanours* (1989); and Quentin Tarantino, who was an enthusiastic Christian in his early teens, and who claims that *Pulp Fiction* (1994), with its climactic conversion scene, is a movie about redemption.¹³

Religious themes are also of central importance to Paul Schrader and Martin Scorsese, the partnership responsible for *Taxi Driver* (1976), *Raging Bull* (1980) and *The Last Temptation of Christ*. Scorsese once planned to become a Catholic priest, whilst Schrader was educated at Calvin College under Nicholas Wolterstorff. Although he abandoned the faith, his films develop many Calvinist themes, and feature lonely souls in search of secular redemption.¹⁴ *Raging Bull* takes us through the career of the boxer, Jake La Motta, and is a tale of redemption through suffering. La Motta battles through violence and punishment, but emerges a kinder man. As the film ends we see the words of John 9:24–26 projected onto the screen: '...I was blind and now I can see'. By echoing biblical narrative, filmmakers hope to invest secular concepts of redemption with the depth and passion of Christian salvation. For all its faults, their work testifies to the continuing power of the Christian gospel in

9 R. van Scheers, *Paul Verhoeven*, Faber and Faber, 1998.

10 S. Turner, *Hungry for Heaven: Rock'n Roll and the Search for Redemption*, Hodder, 1995.

11 See N. P. Hurley, *Soul in Suspense: Hitchcock's Fright and Delight*, Scarecrow Press, 1993, vii.

12 See M. Bragg, *The Seventh Seal*, British Film Institute, 1993, pp9–10.

13 See W. Clarkson, *Quentin Tarantino*, Piatkus, 1995, pp40–41.

14 K. Jackson, *Schrader on Schrader*, Faber and Faber, 1990. Recently, Schrader has become a regular attendee at an Episcopal church.

modern culture, and to the contemporary hunger for transcendence.¹⁵

Conclusion

Films provide us with a vital point of contact with the world. For preachers and apologists cinema offers a window onto contemporary culture and a source of powerful and accessible illustrations. In the 60s Francis Schaeffer used the films of Fellini and Antonioni to engage with existentialism; in the 90s David Lyon begins his book *Postmodernity* (1994) with several pages on *Bladerunner* (1982), the classic sci-fi film set in a dismal Los Angeles in AD 2019, where modernity is in ruins, multiculturalism is not working, and reality has been thrown into question. Films are a remarkable resource for anyone who wants to communicate the gospel. Besides having a far greater audience than most books, their vivid images can remain embedded in our memory for years. Filmmakers are the storytellers and mythmakers of our culture, and films reflect the contemporary quest for meaning and truth. If we are serious about presenting the Christian gospel in a culturally relevant way, we need to pay attention to these modern-day parables.

Christians still have some way to go to critical engagement. In *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind* (1994), Mark Noll emphasised how intellectually marginal the American evangelical community has become, despite its size. The scandal of the evangelical *imagination* is just as worrying. It is relatively easy to find distinguished evangelical academics in the fields of philosophy, science, theology and history. But where are the evangelical artists, novelists, actors, playwrights, composers, critics and film directors? Thankfully, there are some, but our churches need to do much more to encourage a vision for the arts. If we are to act as salt and light in contemporary society, we cannot afford to bypass the darkened theatre and the silver screen.

¹⁵ For more on this theme, see J. Coffey, 'Life after the Death of God: Michel Foucault and Postmodern Atheism', *Cambridge Papers*, Vol. 5, No. 4.

Books on religion and cinema

R. Jewett, *Saint Paul at the Movies* (John Knox Press, 1993); *ibid*, *Saint Paul Returns to the Movies* (Eerdmans, 1998); L. Kreitzer, *The New Testament in Fiction and Film* (JSOT Press, 1993); *ibid*, *The Old Testament in Fiction and Film* (JSOT Press, 1994); I. Maher, *Reel Issues: Engaging Film and Faith* (Bible Society, 1998); C. Marsh and G. Ortiz, eds, *Explorations in Theology and Film* (Blackwell, 1997); J. Martin and C. Ostwalt (eds) *Screening the Sacred: Religion, Myth and Ideology in Popular American Film* (Westview, 1995); M. Miles, *Seeing and Believing: Religion and Values in the Movies* (Beacon Press, 1996); B.B. Scott, *Hollywood Dreams and Biblical Stories* (Fortress Press, 1994).

Internet sites

www.hollywoodjesus.com/ One of the largest Christian web sites devoted to cinema. Avoids censorious moralism and focuses on the religious dimension of movies. Provides links to other Christian review sites.

www.damaris.org.uk/ A British organisation committed to helping Christians assess contemporary culture. Contains a growing number of excellent film study guides, ideal for group discussion.

www.unomaha.edu/~wwwjrf/ An on-line journal containing academic articles on religion and film from a wide variety of theological positions.

John Coffey read History at Cambridge and is now a British Academy Postdoctoral Fellow at University College, London. He is the author of *Politics, Religion and the British Revolutions: The Mind of Samuel Rutherford* (CUP, 1997) and is currently writing a book entitled *Persecution and Tolerance in Protestant England, 1558-1689*.

Next issue: Can science explain everything?