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### **The Relationship of Film and Theology in the Context of Theological Education in Asia: An Adventist Perspective**

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#### **Abstract**

Film is becoming an important art form. Studies on the relationship between film and theology have become a growing discipline. Film and its religious significance need to be further recognized as a valid means to understand and interpret society's particular concerns and beliefs. Clearly enough, theology needs to address these same possibilities. There is of course, a need to further examine the force of film in the light of its potential to serve as an avenue for religious experience and insights. This essay stressed the value of exploring the relationship between film and theology as a means of understanding and interpreting religious experiences and in contextualizing theological education in Asia.

This essay argues that film can become an important source for doing theology as a people continue to search for fresher perception and articulation of their understanding of God as processed through the text of filmic expression. In three ways, this argument is developed: (1) Film can be a repository of religious contents, beliefs and understanding of given culture or society; (2) Film affects our religiosity as a people in that its narrative schema contains elements that are religious in nature. Art reflects the deeper structures with the human heart; and (3) Film in itself becomes the avenue for religious experience and divulges a religious dimension.

#### **I. INTRODUCTION**

**F**ilm is probably the reigning art form of the twenty-first century. Not only is it accessible, but it embodies a collaborative creation, and ends up being the result of a diverse community coming together in the attempt to create something beautiful. Our desire to tell stories comes from being made in God's image, and movies inevitably express truths related to the One True Narrative. Whether it's the nature of God, the consequences of sin, or a multitude

of other issues; filmmakers, either directly or indirectly, often touch on these themes." (Redemption Hill Church, 2011, para. 2)

The Church's cultural relevance in reference to engaging film, however, must not sacrifice biblical truth. In other words, while the Christian worldview should adapt to the influence of film and its penetration in our cultural milieu, it should not sacrifice essential

Christian doctrine and ideas when seeking meaningful and engaging ways of interacting with individuals. In addition, while there are times for direct critical analysis that

thoughtfully responds to erroneous ideas in films, we also need to learn to be far more tactful in our assessment of films. Like Paul in Athens (Acts 17:16-34), it's possible to intelligently engage cultural ideas in a manner that is both forceful when necessary, and yet cordial and even complimentary at times of the positive aspects of non-Christian culture. (Redemption Hill Church, 2011)

Asians value the importance of stories in movies. Many of them see movies as an important medium where one's stories and identity as a people are portrayed and told. Asian film-makers have captured the world's imagination as they have portrayed in powerful imagery and visual storytelling the essence of being Asians. There is something deeply moving as one see one's own identity as Asian portrayed in these films and more so, the spirituality as a people.

In stating the possibility of film as a resource for doing and teaching theology in an Asian context, this article is an attempt in an Adventist perspective to create a healthy dialogue between film and theology as an alternative approach to the study of Christian theology. It tried to delve into the various grounds for the relationship and stance for dialogue between these two important disciplines and art.

## II. THE POWER OF FILM

The Center for Advanced Religious and Theological Studies declares that "we live at a time when the arts are shaping culture in extraordinary ways." (Center for Advanced Religious and Theological Studies, 2000) Little attention, however, is given to the field of arts in relation to theology. Art often represents Christianity a dilemma as Frank Gaebeli (1985) observes, "The art poses an uncomfortable problem for many Evangelicals. These are those who question the relevance of the arts to the Christian life and witness in these days of world upheaval." (p. 52) This is true among Adventists. There is suspicion and doubt among church members and even in the rank of the pastors to use film and movies as a methodology in presenting the gospel and in teaching theological truths. This resistance is anchored on the Adventist position on Christian standards and behavior.

The urgency of addressing the arts has never been dire. In the words of John Newport, "Art

gives a peculiarly direct access to the distinctive tone, concerns and feelings of a given culture. The reason why religion or theology must be involved in the arts is that art belongs to human life. Art represents an exciting opportunity to explore new paths in applying biblical truths to their cultural milieu." (Newport, 1971, p. 5)

Film as art communicates such values. Film, as a dynamic art form, is especially significant in that it provides insights into the current social and cultural context. Film, as Beinvenido Lumbea (1984) writes, is "not just merely an interplay of light and shadow... it is about something and this something is rooted in the realities of the society which produced the films." (p. 188) It can be a powerful vehicle for communication of religious stories, meanings and values to a mass audience and it offers a window by which to see the deeper meanings and spirituality of a people. Films not only reflect worldviews but it also shapes them. They embody the commitments, virtues, and values of a society and serves as an expression of religious vision.

"Film shows us ourselves," observes David Brown (1997), "and is a mirror of both of our achievements and our strivings; we make meaning in all we do, whether this is done in order to illuminate our path or to search for the infinite. In learning to read a film, we become fluent in interpreting the language of life." (p. 214)

The power of film and film-watching is something that Christians may have to consider in understanding the issues and the effects film brings. The experience of watching film may be considered powerful as one confronts the extraordinary sensory encounters that somehow affect the viewers. Film possesses the ability to reach viewers through a unique combination of story, sound, and visual energy to provide a total experience that is above the normal commonplace happenings. (Macdonald, 1992)

Images on the screen are bigger than life and often stay with the viewer long after a movie is over. They imply religious significance and could lead to religious insights, portray religious truth, or move the viewer to a religious response. (Spencer, & Spencer, 1998) Thus, critical thinking is necessary when watching films because of the implications seen, heard and received in the films viewed.

Robert Johnston (2000), professor of theology and culture at Fuller Theological Seminary, claims that there is a need for theological conversation between a Christian moviegoer and the film. Only a few, however, have developed the skills of movie watching, let alone on film criticism, so that legitimate interchange from a Christian perspective may be initiated. Thus, the challenge for Adventist Christians is to be selective and discriminating in matters of choosing the films to be used in presenting biblical truths. Robert MacAfee

Brown asks, "How is it possible to see the hand of God in the work of non-Christians?" (Brown, 1972, p. 96) He asserts that Christians may have to recognize that the seemingly secular world may have something to offer. Brown claims that God is able to use all things for His purposes, truth and untruth, and can fulfill His divine purposes. (Brown, 1992)

### III. FILM AND RELIGION

There is an unmistakable relation between film and religion. In many instances, film bears religious content, which guarantees its religious effect on the viewing public. There are also religious and theological implications in watching films.

#### The Religious Content of Film

Art historians, critics, and theologians recognize that the arts, especially arts of visual modality, do not just reflect aesthetic values and tastes but also function as an avenue for theological, philosophical and cultural reflection. (Adams, & Cappadona, 1993; Newport, 1971; Cooper, & Skrade, 1970) Works of art as a mode of human expression could pave the way for theological interpretation and reflection. They offer clues to humanity's cultural and theological milieu. (Adams, & Cappadona, 1993) Critics see art as important because it is chiefly the indicators or barometer of the faith or ultimate concern of a generation or culture. (Tillich, 1965) Film may also become an elaboration on or the questioning of a religious tradition, text, or theme."(Martin, & Ostwalt, 1995, p. 14)

The relationship between film, religion, and spirituality is an emerging field of study in contemporary society. Film, along with other cultural forms, has the potential to reinforce,

to challenge, to overturn or crystallize religious perspectives, ideological assumptions and fundamental values. (Martin, & Ostwalt, 1995) These influences require examination because religion plays an important part of humanity. Popular films are powerful vehicles for communicating religious meanings, mythic stories, and bedrock ideological values. (Martin, & Ostwalt, 1995) Film does not just reveal religious issues, but serves a means to grapple with religious issues.

Henk Hoekstra (1997) cites two main reasons relative to the question of spirituality and film. He maintains that the phenomena of spirituality, spiritual life and spiritual values play a central role in the lives of people today. Through film, a new call for spirituality is evident. The reason for this is that people are living in an increasingly fragmented, incoherent and secular culture. Because of this culture milieu, spirituality becomes a necessity in order to survive. The increasing influence of the audiovisual language in expressing and experiencing spirituality also gives the impetus to study the relationship of film and spirituality. Likewise, Ambros Eichenberger (1997) argues for a more religious approach to film. He observes that film represents universal human values, of the truths of human experience, and insights that will help in understanding the complexity of human life and human society. There is a growing awareness of both fields, although functioning differently, have a lot to learn from one another. Many films, past and present, can provide a stimulus and a challenge to theological disciplines and to theologians.

The classic films *Les Misérables* and the *Count of Monte Cristo* are classic movies with biblical themes relevant for Systematic Theology classes. Comparison have been made on how both films portray basic theological themes such as sin, forgiveness, guilt, revenge, transformation and many others. Both have a main protagonist (Jean Valjean/Edmond Dantes) who is unjustly sent to prison, and after spending a significant amount of time serving their sentence (Valjean 19 years/Dantes 14 years), regains

their liberty. Both protagonists later acquire a huge fortune and use it to help others in need. Both protagonists are haunted by their past. Both protagonists end up accidentally falling into the sea (well Dantes is thrown in) but rather than drown they see it as an opportunity to escape from the authorities. Both stories have a happy, but bittersweet ending that is at odds with the tragic endings of the authors other works. After the films were viewed, the students can be given the opportunity to critique the movies and write their own reflections on basic themes of Christian theology.

### The Religious Effect of Film

Another facet in the relationship between art and religion is how the latter affect the former. Art, religion, and their relationship, may point something to more ontological in nature. This point to the religious value of the work of art itself as it becomes a precursor to a religious experience or religious ground. In its manifold forms, art allows one to gain religious insights and experience. (Steiner, 1989)

On a deeper level, the elements of narrative appear religious in nature. (Kort, 1975) The very nature of narrative is religious. Inherent within narrative is a structure that presents to the reader that which is transcendent and beyond everyday occurrences. There are four basic elements of narrative as follows: atmosphere, character, plot and tone. These lend any particular narrative a religious quality by mediating an encounter with "otherness," i.e., that which is beyond the known world of experience. There is also an atmosphere that accounts for the limits of life within an imagined world. Atmosphere accounts for the range of possibilities and borders of human influence. It points to that which is beyond human control, that which is other. Character in narratives provides an image of human possibilities or a paradigm of human potential. Plot orders time and processes. Plot makes processes meaningful, giving meaning to the passage of time, which is clearly beyond human control. In this case

film lends itself so easily to the characteristics of narrative. After all, films are stories and they share characteristics with fiction. (Martin, & Ostwalt, 1995) The novelist and priest Andrew Greeley argues that God's self-disclosure happens through objects, events and people. There is, he suggests, "a sacramentality of ordinary folk, their hopes, their fears, their lives, and their aspiration." (Greeley, 1988, p. 17) Movies, then, can capture and create such sacramentality. Thus, sensitivity to the sacramentality of film is needed in order to draw from its power and meaning. (Greeley, 1988)

### The Religious Experience in Film

There are religious and theological in the act of film watching. The ability of film to create a mood called "virtual presence" is its vivid example. It is this particular sense of immediacy that is believed to give film, as an art form, a unique place among the arts as a religious gesture. Film provides an existential experience, that is, to make it possible for viewers to enter the personal, religious experience of the actor and the events. (Trotter, 2000) Here film becomes the avenue for which religious experience maybe mediated.

The religious dimension of film involves the message or the content as well as the experience of film itself. Film allows the audience an experience of order and harmony that stands in counterpoint to one's existence of the everyday world. (Bryant, 1082) Interestingly, the experience of film-watching has also been suggested as a hierophany, a manifestation of the sacred in the midst of life as culture reflects the transcendent. (Brids, 1982) Film, thus, express the sense of mystery and of the sacred to the modern world. It also awakens what Joseph Marty terms as the *homo religiosus*. The sense of religiousness makes film-watching an experience that could lead to encountering something transcendent. Marty argues that film allows humanity to capture once more the "first religious steps," something that

recognizes the religious expression of mankind and humanity's primary encounter with the divine. (Marty, 1997)

#### Film in Dialogue with Theology: Arguments and Reasons

Dialogue takes place between film and theology on the pretext that movies speak on their own terms. John Charles Cooper and Carl Skrade propose that this dialogue must not be seen as a relationship where a theology is given a more superior stance. Film may not necessarily be subservient to theology. For many scholars, film becomes a target for theological scrutiny. It becomes an avenue for illustrating biblical or theological points, but not necessarily bringing the agenda and the questions of film into theology. Evidently viewers experience the function of movies best when they speak of life's *on-goingness*. This is not to say that theology is secondary. As a matter of fact, theologizing need to precede the aesthetic experience. Notwithstanding the final authority of theology for life, there is an advantage in espousing dialogue between theology and film if the movie's vision of life is examined with maximum openness before it is brought to the bar of judgment. (Copper, & Skrade, 1970)

Robert Johnston outlines the possible courses of action from which theology and film can interact. He claims that a linear timeline illustrating the different approach to film and theology could be traced from the earliest to more recent times. At the farthest end of theology is what he calls "avoidance," where Christians are advised to steer clear of film.

John May echoes Johnston's approach by calling it religious discrimination or heteronomy. (May, 1997) The next step that Johnston proposes is "caution," where film is not avoided, but must be approached with caution. Here films will be interpreted or judged according to prevailing moral and theological standards. (Neibuhr, 1951)

The middle approach is termed "dialogue" where film and theology start out on equal footing based on the assumption that both have something to say to each other. (Neibuhr, 1951) Movie viewing receives epistemological priority" in the dialogue between film and theology. (May, 1997) The

objectives are to look at a movie on its own terms and let the image suggest meaning and direction to the viewers. This approach however does not make theology of secondary importance. (Johnston, 2000)

Dialogue results in two more approaches to film and theology.

"Appropriation" is an approach for the interaction of film and theology, which eventually expands the theologian's understanding. It allows movies to offer insight to the Christian viewer about human nature, i.e., there is something that the movie offers to the Christian. (Johnston, 2000)

The more recent approach to film and theology recognizes that film may have at time, a sacramental capacity to provide the viewer an experience of transcendence. This approach is aptly called, "Divine Encounter" John May (1997) calls this approach "religious aesthetics, or autonomy." (p. 28) This emphasizes not just the message of the film, but the film itself becomes a medium from where the basic notion of oneself is impacted as it relates to one's religious sense reality and ultimate Being.

#### Consequence in Interacting Film and Theology

Ostwalt and Martin (1995) claim that film "participates in the construction of an overarching religious sensibility and perspective on ultimate matters," with obvious implications. (p. 13) First, using film could be a means for Christian theology to gauge what to say in the contemporary climate about any of theology's major themes. Attention to film, Clive Marsh argues, enables Christian theology assure that its content relate to the context of the church. (Marsh, 2007) There is value in using a medium like film in the critical analysis of theological idea. Film could not be used in challenging the received wisdom of religious traditions. (Marsh, & Ortiz, 1997) It may function as a subversive story that rethinks the religious tradition. It offers alternative religious narratives that interpret reality in a new way. This allows film to shake religious

views by challenging rather than reaffirming them, thereby making a positive contribution to theology. In this case, theology could say something new and remains interesting, and relevant. (Marsh, & Ortiz, 1997)

Second, using film in theology brings into focus the importance of the public dimension of any Christian theology. (Marsh, 2007) Film deals with the question of how the church and the world interrelate. The question is, How do materials of theological significance from outside the Christian church find ties with Christian theology?

Third, film reminds Christian theology of its function to address the emotional and aesthetic aspects of human life as it deals with life's issues. (Marsh, 2007) Film appeals foremost to emotions. So, when theology considers film, such emotional response is given its due recognition in the task of doing theology.

Fourth, films are vulgar in the sense of being "of/for the people." (May, 1997, p. 29) Film represents one of the most popular forms of mass media from which theology might raise its own questions. It allows theology to reach far more into the culture than what the church can do. Also, films allows theology to gain access to a far more attainable means to the masses in order to question, affirm, mediate or educate certain theological themes of and for the people.

Furthermore, theology is similar to journalism in its urgency. Theology that takes film seriously reckons itself of its own ephemeral character. (Marsh, 2007) This calls for theology to continually strive for relevance, not in a sense of seeking validity for all times, but rather to keep on recreating itself as time passes. A "planned obsolescence" is necessary for theology to have relevance for any but the cultural context in which and for which it was constructed. (Clayton, 1980) Film reminds theology that all attempts at Christian theology need to plan their own obsolescence if they are to continue to be useful. (Graham, 1997)

## and Doing Theology

In his book *Theology Goes to the Movies: An Introduction to Critical Christian Thinking*, Clive Marsh (2007) points out basic methods or guidelines that Adventist theologian or Bible worker can consider in using film as a theological tool in presenting biblical truths. With the understanding that some, if not most of our church members, are suspicious in utilizing movies as vehicles in transmitting dynamic truth, there is a need to do the following:

First, make a list of films that have already been seen and reviewed by some Christian audiences.

Second, jot down notes about the films in the list with the following inquiries:

1. What was it about?
2. What themes or scenes have caught your attention?
3. Did you enjoy it? Why/Why not?
4. Which characters stand out?
5. Did you identify with anyone? Why? In what way?
6. What is the moral of the story?

Third, discover some biblical themes that are vividly related to the Christian concepts such as God, sin, salvation, forgiveness, church life, conversion and other focus of Christianity.

Fourth, consult other Christians who have seen the movies of their reaction and biases. There are film reviews being released from time to time.

Finally, always remember the "fact that every act of film-watching in complex, occurring in a context of multiple, sometimes competing worldviews. It recognizes that all viewers watch films whilst inhabiting particular thought-worlds (cognitive framework, schemas) and whilst relating to particular communities of practice (families, friendships, political groups, religious groups). Without respect for this fact, film-watching remains entertaining, but what films are sometimes actually doing to people is left insufficiently examined." (Marsh, 2007, p. 3)

## CONCLUSION

Film has become an important art form. Studies on the relationship between film and theology have become a growing discipline. Film and its religious significance need to be further recognized as a valid means to understand and interpret society's particular concerns and beliefs. There is, of course, a need to further examine the force of film in light of its potential to serve as an avenue for religious experience and insights. Clearly enough, theology needs to address these same possibilities. This essay stressed the value of exploring the relationship between film and theology as a means of understanding and interpreting religious experience, which the viewer's personally identify with in their everyday life.

Key words: art, context, images, film movies, narrative, theology, context, religion, theology, values, secular, spirituality

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