Religion and Film: Capturing the Imagination

Gordon Matties

Canadian Mennonite University, gmatties@cmu.ca

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Abstract
Most of my students watch more movies than they read books. Some students choose not to register for Tuesday evening courses because Tuesday is "cheap movie night." Movies have captured the imagination, even if M. Darrol Bryant overstates the matter, suggesting that "the act of going to the movies is a participation in a central ritual of this culture's spiritual life." (106) Movies sometimes seem even to do our imagining for us, either fueling or disabling our vigorously imaginative, critical and constructive engagement with religious and theological issues.

In my course, "Religion, Film and Popular Culture", I try to offer a context in which students can think critically about the familiar, can learn to see in fresh and challenging ways, and can begin to explore religious concerns through the lens of their movie-going experiences.
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This is a new approach for me. I was trained to interpret religious texts from historical-critical, as well as canonical-theological perspectives. Until two years ago, when I began to dream about this course, I had been teaching biblical studies for eleven years. For me the new interface between the visual and the text has inspired a new interest in asking how a religious vision is mediated, appropriated, and understood.
The course described here is a second year course that walks through a potpourri of topics in the hope that, through bringing a critical perspective to bear on the intersection of religion and film, students will be inspired to think about how religion and theological perspectives shape the imagination, nurture a worldview, and imagine a future.

Course Description

My course explores the relationship between religion and popular culture in film. In it special attention will be given to how movies reflect and shape worldview, how film embodies the commitments, virtues and values of society, and how a religious vision is expressed through the medium of film.

Course Outline

The sessions are planned for a twelve evening semester. After a short introduction to a movie, students have an opportunity to view the movie (either in a separate viewing session or on their own) prior to the main class section. During the class session clips from the movie can be shown.

This is not a film studies course. Still, I begin by asking questions like What makes movies work? What do they do well or badly? Students are eager to talk about which movies they have enjoyed, or about movies they think are well-
crafted. From the student's own experience of movie going, I try to draw an introductory map of questions under the heading "Every Picture Tells a Story, Don't It?" (with apologies to Rod Steward). Using narrative tools (however unwieldy these may be with some current movies), I introduce basic religious, or worldview questions: Who am I? Who are we? What does it mean to be human? Where are we? What's real? What's the relationship between the human experience and transcendence? What's wrong? What's the remedy? Where are we going? And when the conversation lags, I show clips from Woody Allen's *The Purple Rose of Cairo*, which poses for us the starkly comical fact that movies create an imagined world, they invite us to live inside that world for a short time, they intensify some aspect of human experience, and then they offer us an experience of otherness that either confirms, challenges, or transforms the world of our own construction.

The remaining sessions focus on specific movies. Some of these are recent, others are older, foreign, or classic. Each of the movies becomes the resource for conversation on the religious imagination, either through the theological, mythological, or ideological interpretive lenses. I shall identify all of the movies, but comment on only a few.

*The Seventh Seal: Modernity, the Journey Home, and the Quest for God.* I deal with this movie first, not because it resonates with "popular culture",

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but because it reflects the modern quest for religious certainty in conversation with transcendent mysticism, as though these are the two only available options.

**Babette’s Feast: Piety, Grace and Incarnation.** The incarnational dimension of grace is juxtaposed with the integration of life and art. This is a movie to inspire a rich theological discussion on grace and aesthetics.

**Shane and the tradition of the American Western:** The American Mythology, the Hero, the Savior, and Civil Religion.

**Star Trek and the Star Wars Trilogy: Spirituality and the New Frontier.** These movies reflect the growing eclecticism in the religious perspectives of late modernity.

**Hawaii and The Mission: Mission and Culture Clash in Film.** The class is introduced to a variety of other "mission" movies. See the recent articles by Alan Neely and Titus L. Presler.

**Blade Runner: Postmodernity and the Redefinition of the Self.** This movie has been called, by some, the first postmodern movie (see discussion and references in David Lyon's Postmodernity). The movie is particularly amenable to analysis using the rubrics: social location (playing on the fear of moral decay); relational issues (the body, sexuality, the self, memory and identity); ideological
and moral concerns (individual, community, corporation, nation, race); and theological reflection (e.g., theodicy, epistemology, freedom and determinism, purposefulness of history, the shaping of the self).

*Dead Man Walking: How Does a Film Tell Its Truth?* Although this class session could focus on the issue of capital punishment, far more interesting, I think, is critical reflection on how the movie depicts various expressions of Christianity through characterization and use of Scripture. The movie is transparent to ideological, mythological and theological criticism. Of particular interest is the intersection of redemption and grace.

*The Gospel According to St. Matthew and Jesus of Nazareth: Jesus in Celluloid.* This session introduces Jesus movies. Through selected clips from Jesus movies, I introduce the question of how Jesus can be shown. Particularly interesting is the historical question, What (or Who) crucified Jesus? I show that Pasolini's *The Gospel According to St. Matthew* (1964) portrays Jesus as identified with the poor, and the religious establishment as responsible for Jesus' death. The establishment, of course, may look more like Rome's hierarchy than Judaism's religious leaders. I show that Zeffirelli's *Jesus of Nazareth* (1976) juxtaposes two questions, "Are you the Messiah?" (a religious question, with "Are you king of the Jews?" (a political question) to bring Jesus to the screen. In
particular Zeffirelli depicts both the colonial politics of empire and Jesus' undermining of the patronage system of Rome (see the article by Joel B. Green).

_Jesus of Montreal: Beyond the Jesus of History_. This movie blurs the distinction between life and art, and between story and transformation. Unlike most other Jesus movies one never needs to ask, "How could they depict Jesus that way?" or say "That's not Jesus." Through analogy one sees the story shaping and transforming character through discovering the "historical" Jesus and in living with him from day to day.

_Wise Blood: Coming Home_. With this John Huston version of Flannery O'Connor's novel, and its "journey home," I come full circle to where we began with The Seventh Seal. Now, instead of the quest for certainty, we find the creation of a new home grown religion--typical, perhaps, of a twentieth century America that no longer tells or lives by old stories. We can make up our own.

WORKS CITED


