

EVERY STORY IN LIGHT OF THE BIGGER PICTURE:
FOUR STEPS TOWARD A CHRISTIAN EVALUATION OF FILM

Film Is Theology The Church Should Watch

Watching a movie is like living life through another man's viewfinder – it invites us into the worldview and perspective of an artist in order to experience life through his eyes. In recent decades scholars have come to understand the importance of the act of story-telling for shaping human experience in the world. Stories do not simply entertain and preoccupy – they shape imagination, conscience, and belief. In short, stories provide a context for truth because they interpret our world. In this respect, the objectives of film and theology are very similar – to inform and shape our world of experience. But if film is theology, then it has the biggest churches of the twenty-first century, with theologians like Scorsese and Cameron shaping imaginations, consciences and beliefs by the millions.

The trouble is that the theology of our culture and the theology of Scripture tell competing stories. While the Scripture teaches that the universe is, as Calvin said, a "theatre of God's glory", one would not know it by listening to the stories of the culture. Indeed, when the believer looks through the culture's viewfinder he sees a land almost entirely foreign to him, where God is largely absent and the glory of God appears faint, blurred and distorted – all but completely obscured. Scripture itself attributes this to the affects of sin, by which the world is "struck blind in such a dazzling theatre", incapable and unwilling to behold the glory of God.¹ As Paul described it, "the god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God" (2 Cor 4:4). Blinded by sin, the world appears as godless space.

And yet, culture can never finally be "godless" for our world is absolutely suffused with God's grace. Every day, while millions lay sleeping in their beds, God is busy caring for his creatures, supplying them with life and breath (Acts 17:25), causing their work to prosper (Matt 5:45), and filling their days with happiness (Ps 104:28). Though the unbelieving stumble blindly through this world, they cannot escape some knowledge of God's goodness. In fact, however much they might seek to remove it from their memory, they encounter it daily:

The heavens proclaim the glory of God.
The skies display his craftsmanship.
Day after day they continue to speak;
night after night they make him known.
They speak without a sound or word;
their voice is never heard.
Yet their message has gone throughout the earth,
and their words to all the world.
- *Psalm 19:1-4*

¹ *Institutes*, I.v.8

And not only does the knowledge of God confront mankind from without – it resides within! Scripture teaches us that the knowledge of God is inborn, written upon the conscience of every man, woman and child fashioned in the image of God (Rom 2:14-16).

Yet perhaps most fundamentally from a Christian perspective, the universe is not godless space because God has entered our space in the person of Jesus Christ. “The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth” (John 1:14). God became a man and walked among us. He had no unique appearance, but concealing his glory, he taught us of the Father and we forsook him. Turning our backs, he suffered – for us – on the cross – by himself. But three days later, God raised Jesus to life in the sight of the entire world. Bearing the sin of mankind to the cross, Christ demonstrated his love for sinners and, triumphing over death three days later, his power and authority to deliver them from death. The world is not finally godless, because God has claimed it for himself in Jesus Christ.

However much the world might wish itself to be “godless”, it never is. God has not allowed it. And though often received thanklessly by the unbelieving, the goodness and beauty that fills our culture are gifts from God and God makes himself known here. As the hymn writer said, “This is my Father’s world: He shines in all that’s fair.” But for just this reason, God has called the Church to hold out the word of life to this crooked and perverse generation (Phil 2:15-16), and to point to the sparks of his glory that surround us. This calling carries the twin obligations of discerning what pleases the Lord and exposing the works of darkness (Eph 5:10-11). These two obligations correspond with two reasons for why the conscientious Christian should listen carefully to the Hollywood theologians.

First, when guided by God’s Word, film can be a window into beholding the glory of God. All products of human culture – Christian or otherwise – are corrupted by sin. Yet, because humanity was fashioned in God’s image and thus bear within themselves gift after gift of His common grace, the sparks of God’s glory are never finally absent from any product of human imagination. Even the stories that the world tells catch glimpses of the truth which, at its fairest, can lead us to the beauty of our world, the tragedy of our sin, and the hope of redemption. God made all things good to be received with joy and thanksgiving (1 Tim 4:3), and therefore the Christian who enjoys a film without worshipping, watches thanklessly.

Second, film is the scripture of our culture and every good missionary should be a student of culture. Holding out the word of life involves exposing the works of darkness, including dark patterns of thought, belief, and imagination. If film is our culture’s modern pulpit, Christians should be eager to preach the gospel in it. By entering into conversation with film – especially those films that have significantly influenced our culture – Christians can expose the idolatry of unbelieving interpretations of the world by casting a vision of a world that is in full conformity with the gospel. And we have every reason to expect that such a vision will be compelling, because it rests not on empty imagination or the will to “pretend”, but on the power of the Spirit to lift the veil and give them “the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ” (2 Cor 4:6).

How to Evaluate Film Biblically

1. Cultivate a Biblical Imagination.

Film is a product of imagination – authors, directors, producers, and actors all collaborating to bring a common vision into reality – and therefore film always offers the viewer an experience and interpretation of the world, whether James Cameron’s Pandora or planet Earth. But the accuracy of the interpretation of the world offered in film depends, in large degree, upon the sensitivity of the imagination of the artist.

Scripture teaches us that sin is deceitful (Heb 3:13) and that the mind of the natural man is an enemy of God (Col 1:28). One way that sin distorts our experience of the world is by warping our *imagination*, that part of our minds which orders and interprets our experience of the world. An undisciplined imagination will choke faith at its root, undermining the truth of the gospel with every kind of deception; but an imagination that is submissive to Christ is a great ally to faith by its power to devastate the lies of the enemy. Therefore, to properly interpret film, one *must* have an imagination that sees the world in light of the truth of the gospel.

Cultivating an imagination that lives in the reality of the gospel begins with the Bible itself, because through Scripture the Spirit transforms our imagination. In fact, Paul calls Scripture “the Sword of the Spirit” (Eph 6:17) because it is the instrument by which the Spirit trains, rebukes, corrects, instructs us in righteousness, and makes us “wise for salvation” (2 Tim 3:16). In short, the Spirit uses Scripture to renew our minds, and our imaginations (Rom 12:2; 2 Cor 10:5). Calvin sometimes compared Scripture to a pair of reading glasses that dispels the blindness caused by sin, brings the world into focus, and “clearly shows us the true God”.²

Precisely because the Spirit has promised to renew our minds and imaginations through the Word of God, Christian disciplines of reading, meditating upon, memorizing, praying, and living Scripture can never be set aside. They are indispensable because through them, the Spirit removes the veil from our imagination, enabling us to envision the world as it truly is. And it is only as the world around us comes into focus that we are able to see with much greater clarity where the filmmaker has been struck blind by sin and where, perhaps unwittingly, he has caught a glimpse of God’s glory. A healthy Christian imagination enables us to put the stories of our world in the context of the bigger picture – the gospel of Jesus Christ. It is only then can we fulfill our dual responsibilities to discern what pleases the Lord and expose the works of darkness (Eph 5:10-11). Therefore, if we want to watch film as Christians, we must first acquire a Christian imagination.

2. Pick Your Film Wisely.

Every Christian should show discernment when grazing through Blockbuster or Netflix – here is how. *First, don’t just pick any movie.* Not all movies deserve a screening. Whenever you rent a film, you commit yourself and your family to 90 minutes of conversation with a filmmaker. You should know something about what that director plans to do with that time. Do

² *Institutes*, I.vi.1

a little research online first. IMDB or Screenit.com should give you everything you need to know before you spend a dime.

Second, don't pick a movie that feeds a sin habit. No Christian should feel the obligation to select only movies that reflect Christian ideals. However, no Christian should use film as an opportunity to feed existing sinful appetites. If you have a history of struggling with materialism, leave behind *Sex and City* and pick up *Schindler's List*. Obviously, if you are selecting a movie for your family, you'll need to consider them as well.

Third, don't always pick the same kind of movie. Choosing different kinds of movies is helpful because different film genres aim target different aspects of life. Selecting movies from action, romance, thriller, drama and comedy will give you opportunity to consider how the gospel sheds life on heroism, love, fear, tragedy, and happiness.

Fourth, don't pick a pointless movie. Most movies will entertain, but films that explore great themes can help us understand ourselves better by shedding light on the human condition. The benefit you draw from thinking critically about your movies will more or less be proportional to the skill with which they treat their theme, so try to pick movies that are going somewhere. It isn't that you have to watch *Casablanca* every weekend, but it would be pointless to ask what *Dumb and Dumber* means. Rottentomatoes.com is a great resource to use for this.

3. *Be a Good Listener.*

Watching a film is like entering into a conversation with an artist, but unfortunately, good listeners are often hard to find. Some do not listen carefully and so miss something important. Others listen critically, constantly trying to find fault even before they have heard the whole story. A few nod their heads incessantly, like idiots, as if to agree with whatever is said. Worst of all are those who pretend to listen but are, in reality, privately thinking of what they will say next. But a Christian engaging with film should avoid these pitfalls and work hard to be a good listener.

A good listener pays close attention. Directors make choices to tell their story as effectively as possible, so observe *how* the filmmaker is choosing to tell the story. Take note of key phrases, themes, images, and even musical scores that recur throughout the movie. Don't snooze through the dialogue – pay attention to how the characters interact with each other.

A good listener works to be gracious. The point of watching the film is not simply to pass judgment, it is also to see and appreciate the sparks of God's glory present, perhaps even *hidden* in the work itself. Christians who fail to listen with grace will be prone to nit-pick at a storyline, and as a result, they will often miss the point of the film and either allow a valuable lesson to pass unappreciated or a dangerous idea to pass unchallenged. But if watching a film is, as we have said, encountering life through another person's viewfinder, every Christian should follow the golden rule of interpretation – "Do unto *authors* as you would have them do unto you." We fulfill the golden rule when we listen generously, seeking to understand the film on its own terms first.

A good listener tries to get the point. Don't just smile and nod – try to figure out the point of the story. Ask questions that get at what the filmmaker *means*. What is the film about? What is the film saying about its subject matter? What does the film value? Examine your own emotions walking away from the film – what about the film led you to these emotions? Did the director intend for you to feel these emotions? Try to understand the logic of the story and examine its emotional high-points. Ask yourself the simple question – “What is the filmmaker trying to tell me?” If you have more questions than answers, do a little further research online or in the special features, or in the directors other films, but don't move on until you get the point.

4. *Interact Critically.*

One of the most dangerous things you can do at the movies is to turn your brain off. Movies shape the imagination. So turning on the television and turning off your brain is an open invitation to the enemy to build a castle in your mind. Instead, put on the spectacles of Scripture and critically evaluate what you watch. Paul's advise to the Thessalonians seems especially relevant, here: “Test everything. Hold on to the good. Avoid every kind of evil” (1 Thess 5:21-22). But how do you do that?

First, test everything against the gospel. Christ's saving incarnation, crucifixion, and resurrection is both the straight edge that reveals the warp of the world, and the power to straighten it, and therefore the message of every film must be laid alongside *this* message to test its faithfulness. Once the message of the film has been understood we should ask the simple question, “What does Scripture teach about this, and how does it relate to the gospel?” This will take a fair amount of reflection and discussion about both the meaning of the film and the meaning of Scripture. Consider the most important themes in the film (e.g. love, conflict, sex, hope, happiness, etc.). How does the film encourage you to see or think about these themes? Look for these themes in Scripture, paying close attention to how these themes are related to what God has done in Jesus Christ. As you reflect on the meaning of the movie in light of the teaching of Scripture, areas of continuity and discontinuity between the two messages should begin to appear. Where does the message of the film conform to the gospel; where does it diverge?

Second, resist the temptation to settle for surface differences, in order to evaluate the film's fundamental message in light of the gospel. For instance, after viewing *The Shawshank Redemption*, a parent might choose to discuss any number of spiritually relevant themes that arise from the movie: the dangers of drinking alcohol, the evils of abusive language, the benefits of reading, homosexuality, suicide, or the importance of patience and perseverance for successfully pulling off a prison escape. However, while these themes contribute to the movie's storyline, none of these get to the heart of what the movie is about – the transforming power of hope.

Hope's power to transform the present is a message with serious substance, but it could also be dangerously distorted. Scripture consistently encourages us to put our hope in God and not our selves. When a person's hope is anchored to Christ, they have certainty throughout life's

failures and tragedies because God can never fail (Ps 33:17 f.). But when hope is anchored to self, despair lurks just around the corner of the next personal failure (Prov 26:12). A 10-minute discussion about the dangers of drinking alcohol with your teen might prove profitable, but if he goes away from the film with his hope resting fully in himself, have you been successful?

Third, seek to identify as clearly as possible those aspects of the film's message that are pleasing to the Lord and those which must be exposed as the works of darkness (Eph 5:10-11). The gospel will reveal both good and evil in almost every film since every film is the product of a fallen creature made in the image of God. Therefore, part of the work of evaluating the culture involves being as precise as possible about the places where the filmmaker has truly caught a glimpse of God's glory, and those places he has been blinded to it. A healthy Christian imagination can be enormously helpful at those points where the filmmaker has missed the mark in order to re-think the storyline in the light of the gospel. Returning to the *Shawshank Redemption*, imagine what might have happened if the guard had caught Andy as he was first making his escape? What would have kept Andy's hope alive after 20 years of failed tunneling? With his hope crushed, would he become cynical like Red or would he even commit suicide like Brooks? How would the gospel have made a difference?

Conclusion

To see films as a medium in which God's glory is hidden and as an opportunity for preaching the gospel does not take a professor in Theology or Philosophy. It takes a conscientious Christian who is intent on considering how the gospel relates to all of the stories of our world. I hope these thoughts will help you on your way to seeing every story in light of the bigger picture – the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Additional Reading

David Dark. *Everyday Apocalypse: The Sacred Revealed in Radiohead, The Simpsons, and Other Pop Culture Icons*. Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2002.

If you are interested in thinking more critically about culture from a Christian perspective, but aren't sure about what that would look like, this is the book for you. In only 155 pages, Dark has managed a book that is both fascinating and insightful. And, for my money, Dark's book is one of the most interesting and faithful examples of Christian engagement with Pop Culture. Highly recommended.

Robert K. Johnston, *Reel Spirituality: Theology and Film in Dialogue, 2nd Edition*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006.

At over 300 pages, Johnston's book is lengthy, but it is a valuable resource for beginners seeking to lay a strong foundation in understanding film and its relation to theology. Johnston takes readers by the hand, equipping them with practical tools for watching and understanding film, and then submitting it to scrutiny under the gospel.

Kevin J. Vanhoozer, Charles A. Anderson, and Michael J. Sleasman, Editors. *Everyday Theology: How To Read Cultural Texts and Interpret Trends*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007.

Even those who have some experience in the Christian faith will find they learn something new here. The first chapter, written by Dr. Kevin Vanhoozer, seeks explain “How and Why Christians Should Read Culture” and is worth the price of the book. Subsequent chapters are illustrations of Dr. Vanhoozer’s proposed method written by his students on topics ranging from film to funerals.

Richard J. Mouw. *He Shines In All That’s Fair: Culture and Common Grace*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001.

This little book is ideal for someone interested in exploring the theological foundations of culture. In fewer than 100 pages, theologian Richard Mouw explores the biblical, theological, and historical roots of the doctrine of common grace, seeking to understand how God relates to our culture.