



## A Christian's Approach to Hollywood Movies

**T**hroughout history, people have gathered informally to shoot the breeze. Whether at the water cooler or over coffee, two common topics of conversation are sports and entertainment. In the first century, these probably focused on gladiators and Greek plays. Today, it is football and films, even *Gladiator*. As followers of Jesus what do we do with movies? Most “Christian movies” are preachy pulp that is wholesome but boring, if not worse. What about Hollywood movies, the good, the bad and the ugly?

Robert Johnston, in his book *Reel Spirituality*, gives three reasons why Christians should engage with Hollywood films. First, they help us grow in our experience of life. As we watch movies, we can vicariously picture ourselves in places and situations we would never encounter, and they help us think through our response, shaping our lives. Second, they help us grow in experience of culture. Movies are a mirror of the culture. Watching them, we gain a greater understanding of the values and anxieties of society in a particular place and time. Finally, they help us grow in our experience of theology. As a cultural mirror, movies allow us to see what society is searching for spiritually, where people are looking for meaning and significance. It is critical that today's Christ-followers maintain a connection with the culture and its people. It is an important touch-point that may enable deeper spiritual conversations.

As we move towards mainline movies, there is a spectrum of methods to approach theological and ethical interactions. At one end, some within the church advocate avoiding secular films, arguing that they are morally objectionable and non-redemptive. When the “Harry Potter” series of books, and then movies, first came out many Christians openly opposed them, citing witchcraft and evil as topics we should shield our children from. But, there are very few films that are

totally devoid of redemptive or transcendent qualities. Instead, as we dialogue with the movie, balancing the aesthetic aspects of the film as art with the ethical aspects of the film as message, we can treat the film as an equal partner. This is the spectrum's mid-point, and a more common approach within the church. Rather than being put off by the imagery of sorcerers and magic wands, we watch the film as story and then compare it to the grid of biblical theology. At the far end of the spectrum, some believers, recognizing that God is the creator of culture, accept that he can use everything, even movies, to teach or speak. As God once spoke through a donkey's mouth to Balaam, so he could speak through a director's movie to us. Conversation becomes communion.

So, accepting that a divine encounter is a possibility, how do we interact and respond to movies? First, we should look at the story. Stories are a common and well understood form of communicating truth. Chip and Dan Heath, in their business book *Made to Stick*, point out that a memorable idea is built around a story that engages the emotions. Two millennia earlier, Jesus used stories in his preaching. Matthew 13 is filled with parables that are unforgettable yet crafted to convey a point.

Every film has a premise. The director carefully combines the filmic trinity of sight, sound and story

to compose a holistic statement. Whether it is an award-winning work of art, like *Life is Beautiful*, or a trashy remake, such as *The Heartbreak Kid*, the film communicates a societal commentary. There are ways to get to the heart of the message (see sidebar on books and blogs). A quick way is to look at the tag-lines presented in the movie posters. They often summarize the core message of the movie. For the recent box-office smash, *The Dark Knight*, one of the tag-lines is “Welcome to a world without rules.” From this, we might predict chaos and anarchy are central to the message.

Whether we watch the movie in a dark theater or in our home theater, the emotional experience is primary and paramount. We must approach the movie on its terms, as we would a piece of art in the Louvre or a novel from the library. We must appreciate it before we can seriously appraise it. To come to the movie with pre-conceived ideas is to be prejudiced, either for or against it. Instead, we must try to set our biases aside.

Once we have seen the film and grasped its message, it is not enough to simply walk away. To do so is to allow the director’s message to work its way through your cortex like a virus in your laptop. Rather, it is helpful to think through the ethical and theological implications of the film, and consider how you can and should respond. Indeed, if God has spoken to your heart through the experience, you cannot ignore this.

Ethics addresses the rules or standards of right conduct, how we live. We can ask some questions of the movie itself. What does it say in regards to ethics? What are the issues that are raised within the story? How are they resolved? Do we agree with the resolution? What does the bible have to say? If the issue is not addressed directly in the bible, what can we extrapolate from our current understanding of the

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Scriptures? This discerning process involves dialogue with the movie and with the bible. Recent movies *Juno* and *Bella* both addressed the ethical issue of unplanned pregnancy. To glean the most from the movie experience, above and beyond entertainment, we must explore such questions that address good and bad, right and wrong, freedom and obligation.

Finally, theology deals with the study of God and his works. In reflecting on a movie, Johnston argues that we should seek and even expect to experience transcendence. There are different definitions for “transcendent”. Two stand out. One focuses on lying beyond the range of ordinary perception. The other focuses on being above and independent of the material universe.

Similarly, Johnston offers two types of transcendence. The first is Transcendence, an ascent to God. Movies can be a medium for God to speak to us. In



watching a film, we can emerge with a deep conviction that comes from the heart of God himself. Though rare, it is the fullest sense of theological interaction with a film. So, we reflectively ask, did we hear a word from God through this movie? Did we encounter the divine? If we think we did, we must check its validity against Scripture, our divine yardstick.

More common is transcendence. This is a descent into our own world, our own humanity. We can, through film, often see ourselves from a different perspective. Any movie that portrays the human experience truthfully has the potential to broaden and deepen our understanding of who we are and what life is about. As an example, *Lars and the Real Girl* offers a keen perspective on acceptance, by a community and even a church. What does acceptance look like? How far would we go personally to accept the unlovely?

Movies, like life itself, demand to be experienced. Reflection comes later. But without reflection we miss the conscious opportunity to be informed, even transformed. As Gordon Lynch said, in *Reframing Theology and Film*, “It is perhaps as we learn to think about cinemagoing as itself a spiritual practice that we will really discover how to nurture personal, transformative theological encounters with film.”

#### Books for Further Reflection:

- *Reel Spirituality*, Robert K. Johnston, Baker, 2006 (2d edition)
- *Hollywood Worldviews*, Brian Godawa, IVP, 2002
- *The Moral Premise*, Stanley Williams, Michael Wiese Productions, 2006
- *Through a Screen Darkly*, Jeffrey Overstreet, Regal, 2007.
- *Reframing Theology and Film*, edited Robert K. Johnston, Baker, 2007.

#### Blogs for Further Reflection:

- Mosaic Movie Connect Group:  
<http://mosaicmovieconnectgroup.blogspot.com/>
- Looking Closer:  
<http://lookingcloser.wordpress.com/>
- Mars Hill Movies:  
<http://voxpoppnetwork.com/cinematogue/>
- Christianity Today Movies:  
<http://www.christianitytoday.com/movies>

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