

The Role of Film in the Process of Conversion to Christianity

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This paper will endeavor to show that films are among the most persuasive of all the media in today's society; that "film is the language of the age" and a highly influential teacher, whether intended to be so or not. This paper will present reasons as to why the medium of motion pictures should possess such powers and examine its place in a given process of conversion to Biblical Christianity.

The young person who learned to focus his eyes on a television screen, who takes the darkened movie theater as his natural habitat, is a new kind of human being. His contact with reality is radically different than that of the radio or book generation. The patterns of his sense perception have changed more than we are prepared to recognize, and the first sign of this change is that he looks to the image, not primarily to the book, for meaning and experience. ⁱ

Today's high school graduate has, on average, spent more than 15,000 hours watching television, nearly 4,000 hours more than in the classroom.ⁱⁱ Exposure to *anything* for this amount of time during a person's developing years is certain to have an impact on his thinking and behavior.

A survey conducted by the Mobil Oil Corporation has determined that we learn 11% by means of hearing and 83% by means of seeing; that we remember 10% of what we read, 20% of what we hear, 30% of what we see, and 50% of what we *hear* and *see*. Films and television are, of course, a medium of sight and sound. On the basis of how we learn, coupled with the time we spend watching films and television, it would seem absurd to maintain that the visual media have no meaningful impact on a person's education. The fact that they do have an impact – and not necessarily a good one – is borne out by statements such as these from experts in the fields of medicine and social science:

If your eight-year-old watches a lot of TV violence, you can predict that you'll shape him into an aggressive child.ⁱⁱⁱ

Television time is sold to sponsors on the conviction that although an Ajax ad will not guarantee that the viewer will buy the product, it raises the probability that he will. Social scientists would simply make the same claim for filmed or televised violence, whether fictitious or real. Viewing the carnage does not guarantee that the viewer will go forth and do likewise but it raises the probability that he will.^{iv}

My conservative estimate, based on extrapolations from the research, would suggest that over a thousand murders each year are the direct result of TV violence. This number could easily be as high as 5,000 or more every year of the 20,000 murders nationwide being directly or indirectly due to TV violence.^v

The point in citing these remarks is not to cry “Shame, shame!” to film and television producers, but to indicate that the media exerts “a continuous, never-stopping educational process.”^{vi}

Nevertheless, many people (most of them in the industry itself) persist in maintaining that motion pictures are nothing more than entertainment. They argue that a film cannot make a real and lasting difference in a person’s life because it is only a representation of reality, which the thinking person in the audience will know, after all, is not to be confused with life itself. Following this argument, motion pictures are viewed as a business and an art form supplying escapist fun and incapable of influencing the public with regard to the formation, or change, of values, beliefs, and behavior. Remarks by Jack Valenti, former president of the Motion Picture Association of America, succinctly express this point of view:

I don’t think that the communications media and particularly TV and motion pictures have been responsible for permissiveness in our society, for drugs and pills, for mindless violence, for departures from moral and ethical precepts. The media does, and should, mirror what a society is at any given time. This is feedback *from* society itself. It is *not* a feed-in from the media to society.^{vii} (emphasis mine)

The unfortunate thing in Mr. Valenti’s remarks is that while denying culpability of the media in the harmful trends within society, he removes the same media – by the

necessity of his argument – from exerting the positive influence and persuasion which many feel Hollywood also provides or is capable of providing.

Consider these words of the poet Carl Sandburg:

I meet people occasionally who think motion pictures, the product Hollywood makes, is merely entertainment, has nothing to do with education. That's one of the darndest fool fallacies that is current... Anything that brings you to tears by way of drama does something to the deepest roots of our personality. All movies, good or bad, are educational and Hollywood is the foremost educational institution on earth. What, Hollywood more important than Harvard? The answer is not as clean as Harvard, but nevertheless farther reaching.^{viii}

Perhaps this helps explain why some people in the film industry are encountering today a younger generation desiring not so much to write the great American novel as to direct the great American film.^{ix} These filmmakers, much as the novelists of, say, Hemingway and Lawrence's day, have something to say that goes "to the deepest roots of our personality". They know, perhaps only intuitively; perhaps as the result of thinking and research; that films are the medium of the day for expressing ideas that will change, or further change, our society.

Noted film critic, Pauline Kael, has called American cinema its "national art" and has observed that filmgoers are increasingly patronizing the cinema in hope of finding answers to the questions most affecting them in their own lives.^x This is borne out by scientific research as well. Harold Mandelsohn, in his book Mass Entertainment, has this to say on the sociological function of the media:

...the peripheral evidence appears to substantiate the fact that indeed large masses of Americans use "mass entertainment" for social emulation purposes ... Movies extend the experiences of the audience vicariously and translate problems which are common to mankind into specific and personal situations with which identification is easy.^{xi}

The supposition follows that if a filmmaker targets a problem area important to an audience, it is logical to expect that the audience will lend credence to the filmmaker's answer(s) to the problem. This, too, is postulated by Mandelsohn:

Results from some preliminary research with audience reactions provide the hypothesis that audiences tend to accept as true that part of a movie experience which is beyond their experience.^{xii}

The implications of this are obvious. If you, as a filmgoer, face the problem of a troubled marriage and are resisting divorce as an option because some of your strongly-held beliefs mitigate against this course; and you see a feature film ("bringing you to tears," as it were "by way of a drama") dealing with the issue of a man and woman struggling with their marriage and considering divorce; you will tend to be strongly affected by – if not adopt as a result of your filmgoing experience – the course of action chosen by the protagonists in the film. The overall experience of story, action and direction will have served as a persuasive teacher on the subject, whose conclusions will provide the viewer with an example to follow. The characters in our film may decide to work toward reconciliation, or they may decide to divorce; whichever course they choose is bound to affect the viewer if, indeed, the cinema (whatever else it may do) serves as a source for social emulation. Drawing a short-list of the ten most pressing problems in society (as viewed by a cross-section of society), and looking at Hollywood's handling of these issues in the feature film or TV-movie category, one can be reasonably certain that the philosophy or conclusion of the filmmaker(s) on the subject is one that is bound to infiltrate the mainstream of public thinking and be more than a non-contributory, mirror image of a previously held public attitude on the subject. People are looking for answers; whereas they once turned to novelists and playwrights to help them "see the light," they

are now turning increasingly to filmmakers and the filmmakers are not disappointing them, though many would disagree with some of the conclusions drawn by their film “textbooks”. Examples from history strengthen the premise that films act as instruments of persuasion – whether they are intended by their producers to do so or not.

In 1934, the film It Happened One Night single-handedly eliminated the use of men’s undershirts in American wear (until re-introduced as the G.I. skive shirt of World War II) when the lead, Clark Gable, appeared in the film without an undershirt, which up until that time had been considered indispensable to a man’s wardrobe. In the year following the release of Bambi, profits among businesses related to the hunting industry dropped 50%. During the year following the release of Jaws, another 50% drop was registered in research files – this time among applicants for lifeguard positions along the Atlantic seaboard. As quaint as these examples might be, there have been more disturbing cases of art influencing life, such as the self-styled “Rambo” teenager who shot and killed his parents and siblings in upstate New York in March, 1989;^{xiii} or the 13-year old who shot another boy in the head with a .22 caliber bullet after watching Clint Eastwood in The Outlaw Josie Wales;^{xiv} or the forty-one young men, all of them under eighteen years of age, who killed themselves – in separate incidents – playing Russian roulette in imitation of a scene in the film The Deerhunter.^{xv}

And shall we consider how many pornographic films have induced rape, marital infidelity and child abuse in society? How many occult and horror films have induced paranoia and other mental illnesses among susceptible viewers? How many action films have aroused aggressive and violent reactions among viewers? And on the positive side, how many thoughtful, honest, and feeling films have given rise to expressions of love and

concern for others in society (one thinks of Rainman, for instance), or have caused us to consider what is really important in life, after all. The writer's intention in mentioning these examples, and raising the question of the extent of the harm done to society as a result of the exhibition of certain motion pictures, is not to issue a call for censorship, but to postulate the telling power of film on an audience. There are reasons for the punch which this medium carries. We turn now to an examination of the psychological state of the film viewer, i.e., those mental and emotional realities which so forcibly accompany the experience of viewing a film.

Part II

Films present an apparent duplicate image of the world while at the same time altering that reality through camera angle; directorial manipulation of actors; scripting; editing; music; etc. so that film, even documentary film, gives the impression of being "real" when it is not. Nevertheless, the impression of objective reality is so strong, the viewer willingly and even, at times, unwillingly suspends disbelief in favor of absorption into the milieu of the filmic experience. This intense orientation toward alternate realities prompts specific and identifiable psychological responses: "The spectator sitting in darkness before the motion picture screen, from the psychological point of view, becomes a slave."^{xvi} These are strong words, but the element of truth they contain is due to the fact that the film viewer's psychological situation is closely related to the "mirror stage" in a child's development (J. Lacan):

where hyperactive perception coincides with a low level of motor activity. Thus a kind of double whammy operates in the cinema; extremely strong visual and

auditory stimuli inundate us at a moment when all other conditions predispose us toward their passive reception. The spectator's solitude, since group affiliations and communications tend to be cut off for the duration of the film, favors narcissistic self-absorption. Then the film, like a dream, tells a story – a story rendered in images.^{xvii}

While the viewer is in this state of “passive receptivity” the clever, or even just serious, filmmaker will seek to grip the viewer's emotions by means of the “visual and auditory stimuli” emanating from the film. When a film is made, objective reality is re-fashioned in the hands of the director, the cameraman and crew, the actors, and editors in such a way as to create an effective, even unforgettable, sensory experience for the viewer. The big close-up, the use of certain lenses, slow motion, flashbacks, dissolves, layered sound effects, are all used to present a seamless production which cannot be real life, yet which impacts the viewer as if it were real life. Herein lies the beauty and great potential of the craft! If the viewer takes intellectual pause to consider the mechanics of the medium, the means by which the film he is watching has been put together, he might be less disposed to be swept along by the powerful current involved in the experience of watching a film, but “film images affect primarily the spectator's senses, engaging him psychologically before he is in a position to respond intellectually”.^{xviii}

Dr. Cohen-Seat has said the following in reference to one's experience while viewing a film:

It is not mainly a more or less marked complacency which makes one renounce the effort to use his mental and superior capacities; rather, even a mind most capable of reflective thought will find out that this thought remains powerless in a turmoil of shock-like emotions.^{xix}

Film does not address, initially, the viewer's intellect, any more than a dream makes an appeal to his reason, yet the experience (in both a vivid dream and the cinema) is tangible and real. Dr. Henri Wallon of the Sorbonne in Paris has said:

If the cinema produces its effect, it does so simply because I identify with its images, because I more or less forget myself in what is being displayed on the screen. I am no longer in my own life, I am in the film projected in front of me.^{xx}

As Siegfried Kracauer has said, “Films ... tend to weaken the spectator’s consciousness...” He goes on later to infer that what filmgoers really seek:

is for once to be released from the grip of consciousness, lose their identity in the dark, and let sink in, with their senses ready to absorb them, the images as they happen to follow each other on the screen.^{xxi}

But, as has been mentioned before, this state of lowered wakefulness – approximating the conditions of dreaming – is a “set-up” for impression by sounds and images more absorbing and intimate than those ordinarily experienced in everyday life:

In the film, which operates in time and space simultaneously, spoken words, written words, compositions, angles, lighting, histrionics, music, background sounds, montages – many content elements wash over the viewer, and the message flows on steadily, out of control of the receiver.^{xxii}

One is not to infer from these remarks that films are somehow anti-intellectual, though that may, indeed, be the bias of any number of filmmakers. Rather, the argument is more that film operates on a level of poetry as opposed to rhetoric:

There is truth in both poetics and rhetoric ... but how differently the truth affects us! We do not leave Oedipus Rex promising ourselves not to kill our father and marry our mother. We do not walk out of Othello swearing to shun jealousy, or Macbeth resolving to temper our ambition. And yet we know that our lives can be profoundly changed by the exalted *intuition* of truth that a work of art can present. (emphasis mine)^{xxiii}

If emotional and sensory responses are connected with our behavioral and decision-making processes, then it follows that films, which elicit these responses in the viewer, will have an important role in shaping our action and views in life. Judging from the most common motivation for acts of murder (namely, the emotional motivation) to our election of public officials (again, usually, not based on deep reasoning) we can

discern that our emotional side is a key element in determining our behavior. Therein lies the extrapolation that films are a key inducement to change and behavior in society – for good or evil.

The implications for this are far-reaching, whatever the visual story. “The cinema is for us the most important of all the arts,” said Vladimir Lenin. Probably a lot of guys on Madison Avenue, or in Beverly Hills, would agree.

As recent events in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union teach us, however, the medium of film is no magic wand for maintaining a rigid ideology and rhetoric. The medium can still be violated and one who considers it his craft would do well to consider pitfalls that should be avoided. As one might imagine, these potential pitfalls deal with the necessity of understanding the audience and their psychological situation. We will discuss two here: “audience sovereignty” and the “activation of audience needs”.^{xxiv}

Audience sovereignty, or the viewer’s prerogative to simply say, “No, I am not going to watch this,” is usually activated when the content and intellectual conclusions of the film run counter to strongly-held beliefs *and* when the emotions and sensory perceptions of the viewer are never fully engaged in the first place. The latter is virtually guaranteed to occur when the film is an unemotional, unimaginative and predictable presentation.

In the area of activation of need, one’s very real needs may, indeed, be addressed in the film, but if the filmmaker’s approach is purely didactic, or seen as insincere and manipulative; if the filmmaker calls attention to himself instead of addressing the psychological situation of the viewer; then the “right” message will probably fall on universally deaf ears and blind eyes.

The Russian filmmaker Pudovkin was right when he said: “The film is the greatest teacher because it teaches not only through the brain but through the whole body.”^{xxv} Nothing would seem to be quite so dreadful as a heavy-handed “teaching” film that fails to take into account the means by which film works; but which, rather, drones on in blind allegiance to the importance of the message “for the sake of the message.” Leni Riefenstahl’s Olympiad would be an example of the converse. This propaganda film centered around the Berlin Olympics of 1936 and unified the German people through a collective sense of pride in the physical prowess of their athletes – a message communicated, essentially, non-verbally but with undeniable impact.

In concluding Parts I and II, we have seen – by way of review – that films are not mere entertainment, but powerful agents of influence and change in society. We have seen that films are the art form of the present age, the medium most looked to for societal emulation and the presentation of thoughts and ideas which will help us understand who we are and what we may become. We have observed that the primary zone of reception to film energy lies in the viewer’s emotions and sensory perceptions. We have observed that films do operate on the basis of intellectual reasoning proceeding from one’s aroused emotions, and that the deeper the emotional impact on a person the more telling the film will be in all areas of a person’s life.

Many people use, and have used, the cinema. There are many failures in the field for lack of understanding of the means by which the medium communicates. Among those who have been successful in the medium, a few have sought to induce change in society. Many more have sought to “make a buck” by capitalizing on one of several means of audience arousal – violence, horror, or sex (or any combination thereof) – and

have inadvertently influenced society. Some others have made it their chief (if as yet unfulfilled) aim of producing films consciously dedicated to the glory of God – in keeping, perhaps, with the spirit of J.S. Bach, who signed his compositions thus. By examining the characteristics and goals of this latter group, we enter a far narrower field than heretofore explored, but it is this writer’s hope to reveal through this “narrow field” a vista of grandeur and beauty, a place where God conveys his heart to men and women and where men and women express that heart to the world.

Part III

There is a certain type of film – called the “Christian film” – that enters into our line of inquiry at this point. In defining the term, we do not refer to a film *about* Christians; rather, we refer to a film *by* Christians who have the understood intention of evangelizing (proclaiming the gospel) through the story and visual elements of the film. We would here supply several definitions:

1. *Evangelical Christian* – One who has commitment to a personal faith in Jesus Christ and an emphasis on personal conversion or new birth. Such a one recognizes the Bible as inspired by God, and the only basis for faith and Christian living.
2. *Decision* – Refers (in the evangelical context) to the act of personal commitment of faith in Jesus Christ, marked by outward confession of Jesus as Lord, and inward repentance from a life of sin.

3. *Conversion* – That process, gradual or sudden, by which a person turns from one direction in life to another, marked in evangelical Christianity by the “second birth,” or the passage from spiritual death to spiritual life.
4. *Revival* – A time of renewed strength in the Church marked by unity between Christians, active evangelism, and conversions among non-Christians.
5. *Evangelism* – The sharing with others of the gospel (“good news”) of Jesus Christ, i.e., that Christ has died on the cross and rose again so that all who believe in him “shall not perish but receive eternal life.”^{xxvi}

Charles G. Finney, America’s foremost evangelist from the period of 1825-1865, said “It is of little use trying to convert a man who has not first been awakened to his need for conversion.” Commercial advertising realizes the same principle. If you want an individual to buy your food (or beverage, clothes, car, etc.) you need to arouse his appetite, to awaken him. From all that we have said in Parts I and II, one can readily surmise that arousal of appetite in a viewer, and awakening to a need in one’s life, are among the made-to-order functions of the media.

Dr. James Engel, a communications expert, has said this about the role of mass media in decision-making:

The basic role of the mass media is to change existing beliefs and attitudes, thus moving a person closer to a decision. The actual decision, however, usually is stimulated through face-to-face conversation.^{xxvii}

We will speak more later on the interrelatedness of the mass media and personal witness (by the latter we refer to one person sharing with another the tenets of the gospel). For now, let us further pinpoint the role of film in Christian witness and

conversion. Dr. Engel, and some of his former students, have developed a model of the spiritual decision process which we reprint below:

| God's role | Communicator's role | Human Response |
|----------------|---------------------|---------------------------|
| Sanctification | Cultivation | +5 Full committed |
| | | +4 Reproduction |
| | Follow up | +3 Growth |
| | | +2 Church membership |
| | | +1 Initial Discipleship |
| REGENERATION | | NEW CREATION |
| Conviction | Persuasion | -1 Repentance and Faith |
| | | -2 DECISION TO ACT |
| | | -3 Personal problems seen |
| | | -4 Positive to the Gospel |
| | | -5 Consider the Gospel |
| | | -6 Understand the Gospel |
| | General revelation | Proclamation |
| | | -8 Awareness of God |

Generally speaking, the most effective evangelistic use of the film medium is going to be in motivating individuals who are at -8 to -4 on the chart to take a step closer to becoming a Christian. Some Christian films, through the agency of the Holy Spirit, could take an individual from -8 to -2 in one viewing. This would seem to be the case most often in areas of the world where there is no knowledge whatsoever of the gospel – where people have never heard of Christ or a Supreme Being. In settings such as these, single viewings of some Christian films have taken people all the way from -8 (animism) to regeneration in Christ.

The value of a Christian film moving an individual even one step closer toward making a decision for Christ cannot be underestimated. For the psychological, physiological, and sociological reasons mentioned in earlier pages, we have learned that

film (and other mass media) are designed to do some things that a person preaching simply cannot do. The converse is also true in that a preacher can address himself to the audience in a way that the medium of motion pictures would never sustain. The preacher can make a reasoned appeal with spoken words; he can apply himself to rhetoric. How greatly he will have been helped in his appeal if an appropriate and superbly crafted motion picture has preceded him – softening the hearts and minds of his listeners and making them receptive to the spoken word.

The two working together, of course, is usually the goal in “film evangelism” but the dynamic partnership of the poetic (film) and the rhetorical (the preacher) often fails to materialize. There are two major reasons for this. First, the myopic vision of some of the church:

Many individual churches, and sometimes entire denominations, have written into the by-laws and constitutions of the church that “The Film” is evil and may not be exhibited on the church premises. Some do not go that far, but certainly will not allow a motion picture to be exhibited in “the sanctuary”.^{xxviii}

This attitude – and the closely held belief of many in the church that film is not relevant to the work of evangelism – sheds light on the fact that while more young people than ever are socially and spiritually adrift in countries of the developed world, the church is virtually ignored as a mooring for the soul.

The second reason for the lack of greater success in film evangelism has to do, lamentably, with the quality of the product called “Christian films”. There are rare exceptions, but most Christian films never pass muster in just the technical arena – let alone the intricate workings of script and direction.

Before this writer had his own experience with Christianity, he was working in the film industry in New York. He had never heard of a Christian film. When he finally saw

one – after he had become a Christian – he understood why. A “Christian film” it turned out (with some exceptions) was a thirty to sixty-minute affair, generally shot on 16 mm at a low budget, with poor production values and usually ghastly sound; projected in a church or, perhaps, a rented hall, where people were invited for an “evangelistic film showing”. But the greatest problem by far, from what this writer has seen, is that Christian films are so caught up in their rhetoric and the avoidance of taboos, they fail to speak to any audience outside the audience of the local church. Christian films have never engaged the masses as have other films in our society:

We have all experienced the unreal spectacle of some saints’ lives. I recall a [film] of St. Francis in which the idea was to show the wild youth he led before his conversion. The “orgy” came and was no wilder than a Scout picnic. The impression was given that he hadn’t really made a choice or given up any real pleasure. His decision was pretty much like entering religious life as a renunciation of cocktail parties!^{xxix}

While the film in question may not have been a Christian film according to our definition, it serves as an illustration of the reason for the widespread failure of Christian films to be the powerhouse in evangelism that they should be. Films that do not depict life as it is will make the gospel appear irrelevant and inadequate. While the Christian filmmaker is neatly packaging the right answers in the mouths of his characters and putting the “right” ending on his film (regardless of where the plot is leading) he is turning away – unintentionally, one is sure – the people whom Christ had intended to speak to in the first place. In his insistence on being theologically correct, he is failing to realize that films do not, usually, present all the answers to life’s problems as much as they raise the important questions and/or point the way. Herein lies the greatest obstacle to the success of Christian films:

The artist is consecrated to telling us the truth about ourselves ... If the artist must show men gripped by sin and immorality, these must be shown as they are – enticing to the characters, if not to the audience. The tragedy of man’s fate rests on choice, and if so, if man chooses evil over good, it must be because the evil draws him with greater force. If we portray sin completely without lure, then we are not being moral, but immoral, in the sense of the unrealistic.^{xxx}

How ironic that films often dedicated to God’s glory would be “immoral, in the sense of being unrealistic.”

If we were to practice the Lordship of Christ over culture we would be producing naturally a flow of plays, films, novels, poems, and songs, all dealing with universal human questions, treating modern issues and raising a thousand questions on every side. These would have no integrity and *little appeal* if evangelism were their only motivation (the trouble with so much “Christian art” already) but as one side of their total purpose their value to evangelists would be enormous ... Nothing speaks to modern man so tellingly as the searching novels, plays, and films of sensitive men. For many people, it was this warning from “their own side” which forced them to begin the search which led to faith in Christ.^{xxxi}

By bondage to a format (i.e., all Christian films must end with the protagonist praying to receive Christ); by dilution of emotional scenes that would raise eyebrows in the church because of frankness in language and/or action; the Christian filmmaker is alienating himself from the very ones he wants to attract – the non-Christians who (without malice, really) have no appetite for the “white bread” of most Christian films. The Christian filmmaker is no doubt *trying* to fulfill the Lord’s last command of “going into all the world and preaching the gospel” but he is somehow missing the point that people won’t listen, usually, if he “preaches at them” in a film. The man preaching on a platform, and the Christian film being shown on a screen on the same platform, are two different media both of which can be greatly successful in Christian witness when their role and function is properly understood.

And so, we come to the question of what kinds of films should be made to make the gospel attractive and relevant to the viewer – as Christ intended that it should be. After prayer and thinking (much of the latter stimulated by the process of writing this thesis) this writer has reached these conclusions:

The most effective films will begin with creators who make no compromise, who are serious and fixed in their intention to create films that will be more than images on celluloid, or money in the bank, or “feel-good” fairy tales. These films will constitute experiences which the viewer will never forget. The only aim and purpose of these films will be to declare the glory of God and demonstrate his saving grace in the lives of humankind.

These filmmakers will strive to faithfully capture “life as it is,” pulling no punches with regard to the story, and above all, not letting themselves off the hook when dealing with issues that could make them enemies even among the Church (meaning they will face persecution as did Christ when he “ate and drank with sinners,” or spoke with the Samaritan woman by the well). They will be consumed by a love for God and a love for their fellow man which will imbue every camera shot with gravity and intensity. They will seek to bond with the viewer by placing themselves in the role of servant and not of lord.

There will be no taboo themes or subjects in these films for the very reason there are no “taboo” people with God; indeed Christ Jesus has “come into the world to save sinners – of whom I am chief.”^{xxxii}

These films will take into account the psychological mechanisms of the film-going experience and not violate the workings of that medium.

These films will be “bathed” in prayer that the Holy Spirit will bring conviction to the viewer’s heart – revealing to him his need to find rest and peace in the heart of God. There will be a Christian subtext in these films, a Christian perspective, which must of necessity shine “as a light in a dark place.”^{xxxiii} While these films may not always be perceived as “evangelistic” (in the sense they do not adhere religiously to the formulae of most “Christian films”) they will be expressive of the nature and character of God. How?

Most of us can think of one person (perhaps more than one) who has made a difference in our life. Perhaps it was a stranger who stopped on a busy highway to help us change a tire and who departed again without leaving a name or phone number so we could thank him. Why was he so kind?

Perhaps it was the unconditional love of a grandparent who was gentle and understanding when our parents were too rushed to be patient. Perhaps it was, funny as it may sound, an animal, such as a dog or horse – who was loyal and true in a time of crisis. If there has been someone who has expressed (even if only for a moment) love to another person – unconditional love – then a redemptive act has been performed on our stage of human suffering; an act akin to the redemptive love and grace of God.

If a motion picture does nothing more than present one character who embodies God’s unconditional love for mankind, then that film serves to communicate the message of salvation in a way that will – possibly – be a key factor in that person’s decision to come to Christ.

One thinks of the scene in the film Ben Hur, directed by William Wyler and featuring Charlton Heston in the role of Judah Ben Hur. Ben Hur had been chained to a group of men marching across the blistering desert to be made slaves in the galleys of

Roman war ships. All of them were thought of as condemned men because survival of the desert experience meant death later on in the galleys. It appeared that Ben Hur would be among those fatalities of the desert march because the man who had become his enemy – the new Roman consul in Jerusalem who had arrested him – had also given orders that Ben Hur was to receive no water during the forced march.

When the party reached a town named Nazareth, they stopped for water. After the Romans and their horses had their fill, the prisoners were allowed to drink. But water was denied Ben Hur. In an agony of thirst, he fell to the ground and cried, “God, help me.”

A man in his late twenties had seen all this. He lived in the village. He was a carpenter. Because he was also God, he acted directly in response to Ben Hur’s prayer. He touched Hur’s face, giving him water to drink and cool his fever. He then stood and confronted the Roman centurion. The centurion demanded that he withdraw from Ben Hur. Yet, it was the centurion who ultimately backed away. Ben Hur stood, drank more water, and with renewed strength (spiritual as well as physical) resumed his march across the desert to the sea.

Ben Hur had been touched for a moment in time by someone who loved him more than he could ever know. This memory would never leave him. Indeed, the rougher and crueller that life became aboard the Roman galleys, the more deadly and impossible, the more clearly etched in his memory was “a man who helped me once ... I don’t know why.” Ben Hur was a strong man who – at that moment in the desert – would have been vulnerable to an attack from a child with a stick. Instead, he was touched by a man who sought to do him good.

Jesus of Nazareth changes lives. If those of us who are Christians, and who make films, follow his example of Spirit-led compassion, we will inevitably make films intersecting the lives of chained-together souls walking through the desert without hope of redemption. We cannot expect people who see a film made by Christians to accept the One whom that Christian adores. But one should believe that a faithful and passionate presentation of those virtues embodied and taught by Christ – placed in the setting of a story or a drama involving real people – will leave a profound memory on the viewer, a memory of love and forgiveness demonstrated in a world consumed too often by suspicion and hate. Each of our lives is really an opportunity to touch others with the grace of God. The ministry of filmmaking is a way of doing that.

By way of conclusion, I will consider, briefly, strategies of film financing, distribution, and how exhibition of Christian films should interface with personal witness.

If a particular “Christian film” is done well enough, one might reasonably hope for the kind of distribution that major studios have given to films such as Chariots of Fire. And if one fails to attract the interest of major distributors, a second option might be the ownership and operation of a cable network that would include regularly scheduled film showings (not necessarily films made by Christians, but which lead to constructive dialogue over spiritual concerns). Such a show would begin with a host, or moderator, in a theater where the film is about to be shown. After the film showing ends, the audience watching the film “live,” and TV watchers who call in, would interface with the moderator and/or panel in a discussion on the film – how it affected them, what issues were raised, what a certain scene may have meant, etc.

In addition to a cable station, presently abandoned (or marginally operational) movie theaters could be purchased, re-vamped, and turned into a chain of theaters across the country. And if these theaters happened to be situated (for the most part) in what is called “inner city” areas, even particular kinds of films could be targeted for production which would be calculated to have a specific impact.

Also, one would not neglect the tried-and-true approach of a Christian speaker addressing the audience on what they have just seen, and making an appeal to that audience to take those personal steps of faith toward reconciliation with God.

Financing of these films and projects could be provided through the traditional means of loans and/or a limited partnership arrangement with wealthy investors, or they could be capitalized through the tax-deductible gifts channeled through a non-profit corporation. One word here: it won't be cheap!

Finally, the filmmaker should not measure the success of his films by a head-count of conversions to Christianity. His success will lie in whether or not he touches even one person in the desert – as Jesus touched Ben Hur. Jesus did not yearn for the headlines. He sought to please the Father who had sent him. And “as the Father has sent me, I also send you.”^{xxxiv}

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- ^{iv} Schwantes, Dave. Taming Your TV and Other Media (Southern Publishing Assoc.) pp. 80-81
- ^v Quote from Thomas Radecki, MD, appearing in NCTV News, 1980
- ^{vi} Boyd, Malcolm. Christ and Celebrity Gods (Seabury Press, 1958) p. 119.
- ^{vii} Reported in Daily Variety, “36th Anniversary Edition”, p. 8
- ^{viii} Quote from Sandburg taken from Robert Konzelman, Marquee Ministry (Harper & Row, 1972) p. 13
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- ^x Kael, Pauline. Deeper into Movies. (Little, Brown and Company, 1973) pp. 3-5.
- ^{xi} Mendelsohn, Harold. Mass Entertainment. (New Haven: College and University Press, 1966) pp. 67-68
- ^{xii} Mendelsohn, p. 63
- ^{xiii} New York Times, March 23, 1989.
- ^{xiv} NCTV News, Vol. 4, No. 5-6, Sep.-Oct. 1983, p. 6
- ^{xv} NCTV News, Vol. 2, No. 4, Jul.-Aug. 1981, p. 3
- ^{xvi} Koenigil, Mark. Movies in Society. (1962) p. 5
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- ^{xxi} Kracauer, p. 159.
- ^{xxii} Whitaker, Rod. The Language of Film. (Prentice Hall, 1970) pp. 6-7.
- ^{xxiii} Schillaci, p. 26
- ^{xxiv} Ibid., pp. 36-37
- ^{xxv} From “Two Conversations with Pudovkin” in Kracauer, Theory of Film, p. 160
- ^{xxvi} Jesus Christ in The Gospel of John, Chapter 3, verse 16
- ^{xxvii} Engel, p. 133.
- ^{xxviii} Church, Peter. “Films and Evangelism” in J.D. Douglas, Let the Earth Hear His Voice, pp. 567.
- ^{xxix} Schillaci, p. 38
- ^{xxx} Ibid., pp. 36-37.
- ^{xxxi} Guinness, Os. “Evangelism among Thinking People” in J.D. Douglas, Let the Earth Hear His Voice, pp. 721-722
- ^{xxxii} The Apostle Paul in his First Letter to Timothy, chapter 1, verse 15
- ^{xxxiii} The Apostle Peter in his Second Epistle, chapter 1, verse 19.
- ^{xxxiv} Jesus Christ in The Gospel of John, chapter 20, verse 21