Notes Toward A Christian Approach To Film

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Dr. Peter Fraser

Film is the dominant art form of the twentieth century; yet, it is the art form that receives the least attention in Christian schools and from the pulpit. Few Christian schools offer separate film courses, and none, to my knowledge, have a film program. Few ministers quote from films or criticize them in Sunday messages, and fewer churches have a film video library alongside their book library.

I propose this paper as a challenge to the Christian community. I would like to outline a distinctive Christian approach, an ethical approach, to what many consider to be the influence that has chiefly molded popular American culture—film. Because of the limits of time, I can now only sketch briefly how Christians have typically responded to film and how we might respond instead. I hope to build on these ideas in time, but my primary interest for the moment is to spark an enthusiasm in other Christians who enjoy film, that we might speak out together and challenge both the dominance of secular film criticism and the dominance of film on the mindset of our children.

Film criticism can be a dangerous business in the present age. Because film is a commodity, sold at great profit at the marketplace, production companies are very leery of Christians who speak out regarding film. A Christian response to film is always aligned with a doctrine of censorship. Hollywood suffered the devastating financial effects of censorship under the Production Code which bound the hands of the film moguls for over thirty years after 1930. When the Code was overthrown in the 1960s, the film industry began the financial upswing that led to the position of incredible prosperity enjoyed by film's corporate owners today. Similarly, the larger academic community is not eager to allow a Christian voice to infiltrate the supposedly "free discourse" of film studies, because censorship undercuts the very foundation of modern academics. Christians tend to speak in moral absolutes, which are entirely out of vogue and, therefore, not practical in "free discourse." If the Christian moral absolute does not dismiss certain film productions currently promoted as original and important, then it will perhaps condemn the behavior of large and powerful factions within the academic community.

There is evidence that film can and does contribute to some of the negative forces in today's society, but censorship has become a forbidden concept and is openly attacked from all sides. The Christian community deserves praise where it has stood alone against certain tendencies in modern film art. However, the effects of censorship lobbies have been minimal over the past three decades. Perhaps one reason for this lack of influence has been the failure of the Christian community to go beyond the creation of a censorship lobby or an outright film boycott. There has been little positive aesthetic reply to controversial films from Christians, and so the Church has appeared either anti-art or, at best, old-fashioned. When Martin Scorsese's <u>The Last Temptation of Christ</u> was released in Chicago in 1988, scores of "Christian" picketers filled the streets outside the Biograph theater on Chicago's Lincoln Avenue in an attempt to discourage, and, in some cases, humiliate, people who showed up to see the film. There were several reports of groups of picketers shouting the Lord's Prayer at ticket purchasers. A local Christian television station, Channel 38, encouraged viewers to stay away from the film; the station showed a Campus Crusade for Christ film entitled <u>Jesus</u>, based on the Gospel of Luke, as an alternative for those who might be tempted.

When Christians have not been shouting censorship in response to new releases, they have typically been practicing it as the most important step in private film selections. Again, there is little in the way of a positive theory of film that determines our private viewing practices. How do most student activity committees determine their film selections for Friday night student gatherings? After determining which films the students will like, the list is filtered by the criteria of what is appropriate: i.e., which enjoyable films contain a minimum of sex and violence.

The Christian community needs to decide on a larger and more positive approach to film interpretation and evaluation. Certainly censorship plays a role in a Christian policy statement, but its role should be considered only that of one tool toward the application of a larger theory. A decidedly positive Christian approach to film, which seeks to promote film art, the proper kind, will find a good audience both within and without the Church, for it will be new.

The Christian must recognize the art of film as a gift from God. As with all of God's gifts, it is intended to be used to praise God and bless men. To promote only a negative stance toward film is an ugly, legalist approach to creation, which, like all legalisms, will bear the fruits of hypocrisy, self-righteousness, and hatred in time, if it has not done so already. Revivals in the Church have always come when the Church has attacked with the truth of the Gospel, not when Christians have beaten a hasty retreat.

It would be inaccurate for me to assert at this point that Christians have never appreciated film nor attempted to speak positively about it. There are a significant number of Christians who love film and discuss it openly. I would like to suggest, however, that few Christians could explain clearly why they love the kinds of films they enjoy and what kinds of films ought to be universally appreciated. Similarly, most would have a difficult time defining what a Christian film is.

Before launching into my own suggestion for the basis of a Christian approach to film, let me briefly describe and comment upon the three approaches that Christians have from time to time used to define what Christian film should be. The three constitute stances or methods of selection more than they do theories, but I will explain them as if they were theories for the sake of clarity. The first is the idea that a Christian film is a film by a Christian. The second is the related idea that a Christian film will primarily detail Christian subjects. The third is the idea that a Christian film is one which contains Christian symbols and types. The first two approaches indicate typical popular conceptions regarding the kinds of films that Christians should support. The third is what I consider to be the primary academic fallacy of Christians who approach film.

Focus on films made by Christians. Over the past twenty years an increasing number of films have been produced by evangelical and fundamentalist Christian groups. Some of the more successful are The Hiding Place (1975), The Cross and the Switchblade (1972), and Jesus of Nazareth (1975). These films are generally low-budget productions of moderate or poor artistic quality, cost working against the overall aesthetic conception. They tend to be sermonic, with many ending outright with a gospel message.

These "Christian" films are created for limited circulation among specialized audiences—the church or youth group gathering. They are not intended for wholesale distribution, and, indeed, they would never succeed in a large, competitive market.

Nonetheless, for many fundamentalist Christians, these films **are** the only legitimate kind of Christian film. The assumption is that because they have been conceived and produced by Christians, they honor God. According to the same logic, mainstream films, which are purely commercial enterprises, are necessarily profane. For many other evangelical Christians, although these films are not the only acceptable kinds of film, they are the models. Art which speaks to the Church emanates from the Church.

I do not want to criticize Christians who uphold these beliefs, for the Church should promote film production. In time, great films will come from the Church. The three films I singled out above are moderately successful films. Throughout history, the Church has been a leading patron of the arts.

However, to prioritize films made by Christians creates problems. Which branches of the Church will be allowed to have the label "Christian?" Will evangelicals allow Catholics to be included? If so, an enormous number of films will suddenly fall under the aegis of Christian film, including Francis Ford Coppola's The Godfather and Apocalypse Now, Brian De Palma's Carrie and Dressed to Kill, Alfred Hitchcock's Psycho, and even Martin Scorsese's The Last Temptation of Christ. If Catholic productions are excluded, there are two new problems. First, what do you do with manifestly brilliant films by Catholics, such as Frank Borzage's thorough Christianization of the Hemingway story A Farewell to Arms or the French director Robert Bresson's pious devotional films on Christian topics? To dismiss such films would dismiss indisputable works of genius, landmarks in the evolution of film style, and, more importantly, works that are laced with large Christian

intentions. The second problem of a policy of sectarian exclusion is that it must lead to even greater confusion than already exists in the definition of a Christian approach to art. As soon as we begin to favor one Christian expression over another—Lutheran versus Catholic, Anglican,Presbyterian, Baptist—we open the door for an odd variety of artistic favoritism. The Church has already felt the effects of a house divided.

It is obvious from this that a Christian approach to film must step beyond this reductivist method of selecting only films by Christians as the epitome of filmmaking. Most Christian scholars have recognized the flaws in such an approach, but the Christian filmviewing public has not. The Christian public still tends to prioritize films with some sort of overt Christian label.

Focus on Films about Christian subjects. The Biblical spectacular film has been one of Hollywood's most successful film genres. Six of the top ten money-making films in the 1950s were Biblical spectaculars, and although the genre has faded in the last few decades, the Biblical film remains a favorite during holiday seasons. Ben Hur (1959), King of Kings (1961),and The Greatest Story Ever Told (1965) are three of the most frequently seen films of all time. Biblical films and religious epics in general are also frequently remade; the epic, Quo Vadis (1951), for example, has been filmed five times. But it is not only the purely Biblical story that has maintained enormous popularity in America. Films about religious people and religious events have had similar success. The Bells of St. Mary's (1945), Going My Way (1944), The Song of Bernadette (1943), Boys' Town (1938), It's a Wonderful Life (1946), and, most recently, Chariots of Fire (1984) have all become cult films for many American Christians.

The unique success of films about religious subjects must be explained beyond the inherent quality of these films or their inherent piety. Only one or two of these productions, perhaps Ben Hur and It's a Wonderful Life, are commonly recognized as examples of great filmmaking. Some Biblical epics have been ranked among the worst films ever made—The Bible (1966) and The Greatest Story Ever Told are two well-known examples. Similarly, the religious sentiments of the majority of these films are highly suspect. Many of the Jesus films demolish the integrity of the Lord's words. Almost all of the Biblical films introduce fictional characters and plot devices in an attempt to add continuity and relevance to the Biblical accounts. In King of Kings, Barabbas is given a complete history which is used as a foil to the life of Christ. In The Ten Commandments, an Egyptian maid in Pharaoh's court, who loves Moses, pleads with him not to defy Pharaoh, saying, "Oh Moses, you big impetuous fool." In the non-Biblical religious films, like It's a Wonderful Life and Chariots of Fire, Christian principles are linked with patriotic and nationalistic sentiments; the success of the Christian equals the virtue of the political myth.

The popularity of these "Christian" films is not a function of quality or religious integrity so much as it is a suggestion of the power of the popular belief that films about religious figures and events are by definition superior to films about secular subjects. The mere reference to Biblical materials is considered a virtue, regardless of how this reference is developed. This is an unfortunate misconception.

Christians should not have a cheap and uninformed attitude toward a film's overall message. Because a film company gestures toward the Christian community, we should not all bow down in thanksgiving. The Church has been commanded to be the preserving salt for the world. What a gross distortion it is to have the secular filmmaking industry throwing offerings toward the Church to, as it were, help her to deliver her message. A poor film about gospel truth is much more dangerous than a film which openly espouses the death of God. Christians may watch religious films and glean out blessings from them as they are reminded of what the Scriptures actually record, but religious films are not a better kind of film just because they quote religious material.

Focus on religious symbols and motifs. The majority of scholarly articles about film written by Christians in the academy have applied structural methods to certain films in an attempt to extract Biblical themes and symbols. The George Lucas Star Wars series and Stephen Speilberg's E.T. have been frequently discussed in journals as Christian allegories. In Star Wars (1977), Luke Skywalker has been said to resemble either David or Christ preparing for his position as king. The force is the power of the Holy Spirit. Darth Vader is the fallen angel, Lucifer. The battles are for the souls of mankind. In E.T. (1980), the extraterrestrial is Christ,

come down to earth to teach mankind a higher law. He hides in a shed, a manger, is discovered and cared for by children—the disciples, persecuted by adult authorities, killed, and then raised from the dead. His ascension is witnessed by a newly-formed community of believers.

The approach taken with these films is not new. The famous 1952 Western, Fred Zinnemann's High Noon has received similar treatment as have a host of other films that contain Biblical motifs and symbols. The fact is that a large number of films are saturated with Christian allusions. The simplest explanation for this is cultural: the mainstream American public has retained the outer structures of Christianity. Another explanation is that a striking number of important Hollywood filmmakers were brought up in religious families, most often Catholic: Leo McCarey, Fritz Lang, Frank Borzage, John Ford, Alfred Hitchcock, Francis Ford Coppola, Paul Schrader, Martin Scorsese, etc. Christian scholars have no difficulty tracing traditional Christian motifs in Hollywood films, and, I might suggest, the project is a safe one- satisfying to the scholar and harmless to the film industry.

The flaw in this structural approach toward film criticism is that it often skirts the more significant questions regarding what an individual film is saying. In other words, the Christian symbols found in films are rarely interpreted in the light of their specific context. It is thought to be enough to merely point them out. The significant question for the Christian should be, "What does the symbol, the cross, for example, mean here?" Instead of asking that, scholars merely praise the appearance of the cross, as if its meaning is inviolate.

It has never been more crucial to ask what Christian symbols mean in given films than it is now. In the past ten or fifteen years, the integrity of the Christian message has been openly challenged in the popular arts, and no longer is the challenge coming only from the secular educational elite. Several films in the last decade and a half have openly lampooned Christianity or corrupted the gospel message; e.g., Monty Python's The Life of Brian (1982), Godard's Hail Mary (1985), and Scorsese's Last Temptation (1988) are the most recognized examples. But other films have attacked Christianity in much more subtle ways. A subgenre of films in the 80s recontextualized Christian themes in secular settings. I call these the "Shepherd to King" films that followed the wave of success of the film Rocky (1976). In these films, an underdog learns that by simply "going for it," taking a kind of Kierkegaardian leap of faith, he can achieve the fulfillment of his dreams. Among these films are The Karate Kid and Flashdance, both huge box office successes. Another subgenre, the epic fantasy film, places Christian-type heros in mythic settings and allows them success there. Some of these films are Excalibur (1981), Willow (1988), The Princess Bride (1987), and Ladyhawk (1987); again, all have been profitable films. Both types of film undermine the Christian message; the first, "Shepherd to King" films, suggest that the impulse of the gospel is the desire to fulfill your personal potential) the second, epic fantasy films, suggest that the proper place for religious thinking is within the literary vehicle of myth.

A structural approach to film would tend to praise these new additions to film genre since they play on Christian ideas. If not praise, Christian scholars will at least be attempted, due to interpretive habit, to pay more attention to them than to other kinds of film. However, the above-mentioned films are less significant in terms of the symbols they employ than in how they employ them. In each of these films the Christian symbols are secularized; it is wishful thinking to assume that the presence of Christians symbols casts the films in large redemptive terms. Films which recast the gospel to suit materialistic goals are anti-Christian, no matter how many crosses appear in the course of the production.

Law and Gospel. These, then, are the three ways in which Christians have tried to approach film and glean out a distinctive methodology. What characterizes all three is reductivism. Whether you say we should pay attention to films made by Christians, films about Christians, or films heavy in traditional Christian symbols, you are ultimately saying that a Christian film is defined by a superficial characteristic. It is like saying all Christians have short hair and glasses, all true churches are liturgical, or all good speech should quote Scripture.

Such methodologies suggest one other thing; namely, that the evaluation of a particular film on aesthetic and moral grounds is a secondary issue for the Christian. If we can simply slap a label on a film based on its

most obvious characteristics, we do not need to take the time to understand the uniqueness of a film and examine its particular strengths and weaknesses. The appalling shallowness of such an approach is obvious.

A Christian approach to film must be more thoughtful and bold. It must tackle both the important issues of film quality and the issues of film meaning and significance. It also must have enough meat and bones to stand up beside the powerful interpretive strategies that are now current in the university.

I would like to suggest two criteria for the interpretation and evaluation of films by Christians. Both need development and practical application; yet, they are a start toward a much broader thoughtful Christian approach to film. The first criterion is cinematic and dramatic excellence. Regardless of the message of an individual film, Christians ought to be the first to recognize and praise a film's artistry. All beauty reflects God's beauty, whether it is understood to be from the Creator or not. Shoddiness and the mass production, which homogenizes so much of popular art should be exposed and dismissed by Christians. To blindly soak in mediocrity is to promote mediocrity. The Scriptures teach that human endeavor should replicate God's own endeavors and praise him. Film is a human endeavor.

For Christians to be able to evaluate cinematic and dramatic excellence, they should attempt to become knowledgeable about the art of film. This implies two things. First, the Christian ought to discriminate in the films he views, and not merely follow the popular trends. With the availability of films on videocassettes, there is a new opportunity for Christians to select and view a wide variety of films from many generations and many countries. Second, the Christian ought to promote formal film education at the high school and college level. Christian colleges need film programs. Unfortunately, there are few candidates available to head up such programs within the Church, so young people should be encouraged to pursue film as a discipline and channeled into colleges and universities which do offer the appropriate courses. Finally, Christians ought to make use of the library to obtain some basic books about film art if they are immersing themselves in it. There are several excellent introductory texts available for anyone with a rudimentary interest in film.

The second criterion for the interpretation and evaluation of films by the Christian should be integrity. By this I mean the resonance of a film—a film's ability to capture truths and convey them. This is a slippery category as it sounds like I am creating it out of a bias to war realistic films or didactic films. There need be no such bias. Film integrity is as much an evaluative approach to fantasy or animated film as it is to drama. It refers to the filmmaker statements about the world, not the language chosen to clothe those statements.

Films, as is true of all art forms, should create or reflect a world that is fallen and in need of grace, a world in which the only hope for resolution and individual salvation is the gospel.

A film can be comic or satirical and still make a direct statement about man and the world. Similarly and more directly to the point, a film does not need to be overtly Christian or heavily symbolic to have a resonance for the Christian. What it needs is truth. Characters must be representatives of fallen humanity and events must be as they are in experience, marred and groaning as the earth groans for salvation. A director of any faith can make such a film about any subject using any dramatic strategy, for any man can testify to the experience of the whole of suffering, fallen humanity.

Films are made by people, individuals working together, and they need to be evaluated as the collective speech of a group of people. Is it truth or does it lie? Here is the ultimate interpretive question. If the Christian is to evaluate a film, he must have an answer to that question. He must then be able to praise the glimmers of light that are even present in some lies and explain how those glimmers are manifestations of that great light of truth which is the revelation of Christ, the Son of God, to the world. It is the responsibility of every Christian to discern between truth and falsehood. To participate in falsehood, even in the passive capacity of a spectator in a dark movie house, is to fail in the mandate which tells us to spread the truth. So let us pull aside the veil of our own indifference and ignorance and take advantage of the opportunity to use the tremendously powerful medium of film as a tool in advancing the kingdom of Christ.