

SILVER SCREEN - GOLDEN OPPORTUNITY: THE VALUE OF FILM IN PASTORAL
MINISTRY

BY

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Abstract

The American movie industry is perhaps the premier entertainment industry in the world today. The films that are released every year dominate popular culture in the United States and have a profound impact on meaning-making in individuals and groups. Movies reflect, shape, influence, and are influenced by the societies in which they are created and viewed. As such, they provide a valuable look into the values, beliefs, and struggles of the everyday American – including the ones sitting in WELS pews and standing behind WELS pulpits. With movies being such an important influence in the lives of people, how can the Lutheran pastor view and utilize film in a way that benefits himself and his ministry? This paper presents a strategy for viewing movies in a way that enables a pastor to discern value from a film and explores the value that movies hold for the pastor in understanding his community and people. In addition, this paper will provide practical application of film study and usage in the life of a congregation, as well as an analysis of several recent movies using the method presented.

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Introduction

In 1894 people shuffled into a crowded parlor in New York City eager to see what they had heard rumors about but believed to be impossible: a picture that *moved*. In the parlor sat two rows of bizarre machines - Thomas Edison's latest invention, the Kinetoscope - with eye slots at the top for one individual at a time to look through. It lasted for only a moment, but what they saw was astonishing albeit commonplace: a man sneezing. *Fred Ott's Sneeze*, the earliest complete film on record at the Library of Congress was only the beginning.¹

Innovation after innovation would follow and films would evolve from capturing singular moments to telling entire life stories. Georges Méliès, a pioneer of these narrative films², transported people from their seats in his French theater to the moon and back long before Neil Armstrong took his first steps on its surface.³ Other directors followed Méliès's example and movies increased in their complexity. As technology advanced and directors refined their craft, movies were able to take people to brand new worlds that seemed to defy imagination. Today, filmmakers fabricate entire universes without having to leave their computers.

Movie-making is a multi-billion-dollar business in the United States. It has grown from Edison's little parlor shop filled with Kinetoscopes to multi-screen cinemas scattered across the world. In 2017 movie-goers spent nearly ten billion dollars at theaters in the United States alone. The 2018 calendar year eclipsed those numbers, with motion pictures hauling in a staggering \$11,374,282,724. Additionally, streaming services such as Amazon, Netflix, Hulu, et al have brought the theater into people's living rooms and viewers can travel the universe/multi-verse without ever having to leave their homes. Fans of cinema the world over can access and stream

¹ Richard Barsam and Dave Monahan, *Looking at Movies*, 437-438.

² Richard Campbell, Christopher R. Martin, and Bettina Fabos, *Media & Culture: An Introduction to Mass Communication*, 191.

³ *A Trip to the Moon* (1902)

movies on their phones wherever they go. As the film industry has grown, so too has the influence of movies on the American psyche. The role that literature and the news press had of influencing and shaping imaginations in the 19th century has largely been replaced by the moving images of film⁴ and, if the box office trends continue, it appears that America's consumption of film will only grow. As such, movies present a golden opportunity for pastors, not just for personal benefit but for ministerial benefit. This paper will seek to explore these benefits and answer potential questions raised about the Christian and film.

But what is a film exactly? And what about movies? Is there a difference between the two? There is a perceived difference, perhaps, but in reality, they are one and the same:

For whatever reason, the designation *film* is often applied to a motion picture that is considered by critics and scholars to be more serious or challenging than the *movies* that entertain the masses at the multiplex... *film* derives from the celluloid strip on which the images that make up motion pictures were originally captured, cut, and projected; *movies* is simply short for motion pictures.⁵

Richard Barsam and Dave Monahan's point is simple: movies and film are different words that talk about the exact same thing. The names are interchangeable and will be throughout this paper. As for what movies are, simply put, they are a means of modern-day storytelling. Throughout history, storytelling has been the primary means by which civilizations have communicated their morals and beliefs, myths and legends, hopes and fears. Stories are how peoples preserved great moments in history and how they remembered important figures.⁶

God's people behaved the same way. They handed down their history from generation to generation long before God used Moses to record it in the Old Testament. When looking at

⁴ Conrad E. Oswalt, "Conclusion: Religion, Film and Cultural Analysis," in *Screening the Sacred: Religion, Myth, and Ideology in Popular American Film*, ed. Joel W. Martin and Conrad E. Oswalt (New York: Rutledge, 1995), 153.

⁵ Richard Barsam and Dave Monahan, *Looking at Movies* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2013), 3.

⁶ Brian Godawa, *Hollywood Worldview: Watching Films with Wisdom and Discernment* (Downer Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2009), 61.

God's Word, the dominant way that God communicates with his children is through dramatic stories: The Gospels, Acts, the Pentateuch - all narrative. In a way, we could say that God even *loves* movies.⁷ God uses sweeping narratives, epic battle sequences, and intimate family dramas – all Hollywood staples – to reveal himself to his people. God paints his plan of salvation on the canvass of everyday human life and experience and, in turn, enters that painting through Jesus. Jesus taught his people through stories – his parables. Had Jesus' earthly ministry occurred in the twentieth or twenty-first centuries, perhaps he would have used movies instead.

Movies are not going anywhere. The Hollywood machine keeps rolling, pumping out film after film and the messages those movies propagate do not just casually pass by people. What a movie says affects us and, as Robert Konzelman writes, that influence is unavoidable: “It is as impossible for us to evade the influences of our society as it is for the river bottom to avoid contact with river... Thus the cultural wash sweeps over and about us, molding and shaping us and never leaving us the same.”⁸ Such an impactful ‘cultural wash’ can hardly be ignored by a pastor and his parishioners.

A common phrase heard among Christians is to “be *in* the world, but not *of* the world.” While not a direct biblical quote, the meaning is nevertheless biblical, drawn from 1 John 2:15-17: “Do not love the world or anything in the world. If anyone loves the world, love for the Father is not in them. For everything in the world - the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life - comes not from the Father but from the world. The world and its desires pass away, but whoever does the will of God lives forever.”⁹

⁷ Godawa, *Hollywood Worldviews*, 12.

⁸ Robert G. Konzelman, *Marquee Ministry: The Movie Theater as Church and Community Forum* (New York: Harper and Row, 1971), 2.

⁹ All Biblical quotes are taken from NIV11.

Children of God have been set free from their sin and from the power of the devil - they have heaven as their home. So, God says do not be attached to anything in this world because this world is filled with sin and nothing in this world lasts. And yet, here believers still remain, living in this sinful world. They cannot escape it until their Lord calls them home. They have to live *in* this world, while not being attached to or being *of* the world.

And that world includes film. As Christians watch and engage with film, they must be careful to avoid two distinct ditches: cultural ascetic and cultural glutton.¹⁰ The cultural ascetic looks at movies as vehicles by which a sinful society communicates its way of life and attempts to indoctrinate the masses. As a result, they withdraw, choosing to avoid movies altogether. On the other side, the cultural glutton looks at movies and says, “It’s only entertainment! It’s all good.” without taking the time to analyze the potential dangers lurking in a film. Both ditches are easy to fall into, and both have consequences.

The cultural ascetic, by choosing not to engage with film, misses opportunities to be a part of the culture in which he lives. They miss the positives that movies can bring which can limit their understanding of the way the people live, act, and interact in the world. For the pastor who wants to effectively communicate the gospel, this can place potential barriers in his way, as it can damage his ability to relate to people. Film certainly is not the only way a pastor comes into contact with his surrounding culture, but it remains an important way in which cultural values are communicated. The cultural glutton, while understanding his culture, perhaps goes too far with his understanding and can do damage to his faith. When the potentially harmful images and messages that films convey become nothing more than entertainment, it becomes an indulgence, or perhaps even justification for engaging in the same kind of activities.

¹⁰ Godawa, *Hollywood Worldviews*, 19-20.

This paper seeks to walk that line between cultural ascetic and cultural glutton and present the value that careful engagement with film can hold for a pastor. First, it will examine what Scripture says, or rather does not explicitly say, concerning film and construct some parameters for movie watching by looking at the warnings and cautions that Scripture presents. With a Biblical foundation in place, this paper will then seek to answer the question, “How does one watch movies to gain value?”

Here, it will explore the building blocks of a film, both in terms of story and technical aspects. Building on this cinematic literacy, the paper will then address the societal value that film presents, which showcases the concerns that are on the hearts of the people within and outside of a congregation. This will be done so primarily through the examination of two recent films, *Crazy Rich Asians* and *Love, Simon*. Finally, it will utilize all three sections – Scripture, cinematic literacy, and film and society – to make practical applications to the ministry of a pastor.

Although it may not be something he would naturally be drawn towards, by studying the narrative and technical aspects of a film, a pastor can uncover what a film is trying to convey to its audience and determine how that message impacts the viewers. With this message uncovered, a pastor can then better understand the culture in which he serves, recognize issues that weigh on the hearts of Christian and non-Christian alike, and apply the gospel in poignant ways. But all this must be done through the lens of Scripture, lest he falls into the ditch of cultural gluttony. Scripture is the one true guide and by examining the warnings that it gives, a pastor can guard himself against the dangers that wreak havoc on his spiritual well-being, and the well-being of those whom he serves. By watching movies with a ministry intent, a pastor can turn a medium

some perceive as mere entertainment or sinful indulgence into a valuable tool to better proclaim the truths of God's Word.

Biblical Warnings and Cautions

If there were a host of Biblical teaching on film – say an Epistle to Hollywood - that would put an end to much controversy. But with such material lacking, the approach must be of a more general nature. Since interpretations differ, it should be no surprise that there is a wide diversity of opinion on what the Christian view of cinema is, or even if there can be one.¹¹

God's Word never specifically addresses film. This should come as no surprise since the inspired writers could never have dreamed of the kind of technological advances that would allow for such a thing as moving images. As such, the matter of movie-watching is clearly an adiaphoron, but one worthy of both casual *and* conscientious critique.

In their Christian freedom, a person can choose whether or not he or she wants to watch movies at all. But that does not mean that the Bible has nothing to say on the matter. There are a number of principles that can be gleaned from Scripture and applied to film. There are two specific areas that must be considered before taking a look at the value of film for ministry: First, how it affects a pastor's own spiritual health, and second, how his viewing habits and choices affect his Christian brothers and sisters.

In the case of his own personal spiritual well-being, the Bible has much to say. Scripture makes it abundantly clear that the Devil, the world, and our sinful nature are constantly at work, seeking to pull believers away from God. Watching movies is not in and of itself sinful, but it can easily lead the believer into sin. In James 1:14,15 God warns, "But each person is tempted when they are dragged away by their own evil desire and enticed. Then, after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin, and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death."

What begins as an internal desire or struggle can quickly turn to outward sin. That is not to say that the initial desire that comes as a result of temptation is not a sin either, as Jesus

¹¹ K.L. Billingsly, *The Seductive Image: A Christian Critique of the World of Film* (Westchester, IL: Crossway, 1989), X.

himself tells us in Matthew 5:28. Physical action is not the only way we sin against God. Our thoughts too condemn us before him.

But where is the line of acceptable and unacceptable content? For each individual viewer, it may be different. The Bible distinguishes between those who are weaker and those who are stronger in faith in Romans 14. In verse 2 Paul writes, “One person’s faith allows him to eat anything, but another, whose faith is weak, eats only vegetables.”

This entire chapter deals with Paul calling out those who look down on their brothers and sisters who have weak faith, but he clearly communicates that there are some whose consciences did not allow them to participate in certain things. A person’s conscience can certainly work in overdrive, at times even condemning him for things which are *not* sinful, but the truth remains that the conscience is there to help a person from falling into sin, which would cause him harm. Each individual has certain temptations that plague him or her more than others; temptations that are more difficult to resist than others. One person may have a particular weakness for alcohol, another for sexual sins, and another may indulge in violence. Therefore, each Christian must be aware of what his or her particular weaknesses are, and how certain films may lead them into indulging in that weakness.

In regard to film, one person may be able to watch a certain film without giving into temptation, while another may be unable to watch because what he sees will lead him to sin. When one combines these two biblical truths, it becomes clear that a person must be aware of what his or her own limits are when it comes to film content. If a person finds himself lingering too long on a certain scene in a way that is contrary to what God commands, it is wise to turn off the movie or leave the theater. This is what Paul talks about at the end of Romans 14, where he wrote, “But whoever has doubts is condemned if they eat, because their eating is not from faith;

and everything that does not come from faith is sin.” Now, the person is longer in the realm of adiaphora. Now, his or her actions are condemning.

But even for those who are able to engage with films with more questionable content, there is a limit to how far he can take it. Simply because one person can watch certain things and another cannot, that is not an excuse to watch anything and everything. Godawa points this out in his book *Hollywood Worldviews: Watching Films with Wisdom and Discernment*:

As viewers we must be sensitive to our own weaknesses and negative propensities. One person’s sense of exploitation may simply illustrate his own prudery, while another person’s tolerance may actually be her own indulgence in besetting sin. So we must be careful to draw personal lines that we will not cross, based upon what particular things affect us negatively when we are exposed to them in movies.¹²

Understanding one’s own limits and what temptations beset him the most is of immense importance when tackling film.

A final danger to keep in keep in mind when it comes to personal spiritual health is the matter of desensitization. Even to the casual movie viewer, it is easy to notice the change in what is deemed ‘appropriate’ content in movies has changed drastically over the years. What was unacceptable is now the norm in many films. Robert K Johnston notes, “In 1939, producer David Selznick used the original dialogue from the book *Gone with the Wind* [Frankly, my dear, I don’t give a damn], rather than have Clark Gable say, “Frankly, my dear, I don’t give a hoot.” He was fined five thousand dollars for this indiscretion.”¹³ In 1939, the word “damn” was deemed inappropriate enough to warrant a fine. Today, it is not uncommon for that specific word to be used in movies rated PG. American society seems to have become desensitized to this kind of language. It is commonplace. This fact remains true with the violence and sexual content that is

¹² Godawa, *Hollywood Worldviews*, 251.

¹³ Robert K. Johnston, *Reel Spirituality: Theology and Film in Dialogue*, 2nd Edition (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), 220. Contents in brackets added by the author.

seen in movies as well. Christians must be careful lest they become desensitized by what they see. Paul warns the Ephesians about growing numb to sin in Ephesians 4:17-19:

So I tell you this, and insist on it in the Lord, that you must no longer live as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their thinking. They are darkened in their understanding and separated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them due to the hardening of their hearts. Having lost all sensitivity, they have given themselves over to sensuality so as to indulge in every kind of impurity, and they are full of greed.

The danger here is that if Christians subject themselves to the excessive sinful content that can occur in movies, they can grow numb in their identification of such sins in reality and become more tolerant of those or similar sinful behaviors, or finally cease to see them as sin at all - simply the norm of society. Again, understanding one's own limits and expressing a godly willingness to wrestle with, but not disregard sin in movies is of paramount importance.

However, a pastor's own spiritual well-being is not the only concern when it comes to movie watching. He must also consider his brothers and sisters in faith. The Bible speaks of showing awareness and concern for the conscience of another in 1 Corinthians 10. Paul speaks of eating meat sacrificed to idols and, in particular, when not to. In verses 28 and 29 he says, "But if someone says to you, 'This has been offered in sacrifice,' then do not eat it, both for the sake of the one who told you and for conscience. I am referring to the other person's conscience, not yours. For why is my freedom being judged by another's conscience?"

A pastor knows his people and knows what sins and temptations trouble them the most. He may be able to watch a certain movie with a clear conscience, but another brother or sister in the faith may not. This means he must exercise caution so that he does not burden another person's conscience by what he watches and speaks about. Perhaps this means waiting for a certain movie to reach Redbox or Amazon before watching it, instead of going to a theater. If a pastor goes to a theater and happens to run into that member, he could burden the person's

conscience and cause him to stumble. If he sees his pastor going into a movie, he may think that it must be ok for him to see the same one, without understanding where his own weaknesses lie. This could lead him to fall into temptation and into sin by what he sees.

Closely connected with this is Paul's list of pastor qualifications in 1 Timothy 3. Listed among the qualifications two, in particular, relate to the topic of film-going: above reproach (1 Tim. 3:2) and a good reputation with outsiders (1 Tim. 3:7). What kind of impression does a pastor give, not just to his members but to the members of the community with his viewing habits? Would a pastor be able to see movies like *Deadpool* or *Django Unchained* (movies renowned for their vulgarity and graphic violence) at a movie theater without compromising his reputation or causing some offense to someone who sees him enter the theater? When a pastor exercises good judgment and prudent discernment, he may decide that he can watch one of these movies, but the setting of movie theater may be out of the question.

Finally, so as to provide transparency on the topic of the pastor and film, it is important to briefly point out a few things this paper is *not* saying. First, this paper is not advocating that a pastor should devote "x" number of hours to the study of and viewing of films. It would be poor stewardship of time, and potential unfaithfulness to his office as pastor and unfaithfulness to his family to carve out two to three hours a night or every other night watching a movie, even if it is for personal growth, cultural understanding, perspective widening, or mere entertainment. In addition, there would be the potential that such fervent and frequent viewing could harm his own spiritual health. Second, this paper is not endorsing the viewing of films on the basis of "the Bible depicts similar things." Godawa attempts to approach this topic, but in a misguided way. He points out that while Christians are critical of the content of a film, the same kind of content is depicted in the Bible - often far more graphically than what is typically seen on screen. For

example, he cites the intensely graphic violence that God shows to Christians in Judges. The battle scenes are bloody; the actions grotesque. He writes that “if the book of Judges were to be filmed, it would easily be rated NC-17.”¹⁴

Godawa raises an interesting point. God does not shy away from showing his people the cruelty of sinful mankind and the consequences of that sin. The judgments that God announces on Israel’s enemies and on an unrepentant nation, from the unbeliever’s perspective, seem barbaric and cruel. The believer, however, understands the context in which these things take place and, more importantly, recognizes *why* God is showing them these things. It is not because God delights in violence and bloodshed (quite the opposite!) but rather that God is showing the reality of a sinful world and how seriously he takes sin. The consequences are real and they are severe!

But notice the important distinction: when one reads about the violence and, sometimes, gore that appears on the pages of Scripture (or the sexual promiscuity, for that matter), this is something that the infinitely wise, infinitely loving God has decreed, “I want my people to see.” The Creator of the universe is the one calling the shots and saying what it is his people can set their eyes upon. A sinful human being does not get that same authority. Humans’ sinful minds that delight in violence and bloodshed love to look at Godawa’s point and say, “See! Anything goes!” That is just not the case.

But where is the line between acceptable and unacceptable? And how can each individual identify his or her line? God’s Word does not give us a hard and fast answer to that question. The movie watching habits of one individual will look very different from that of another. This is where discernment comes in. This is why God has given human beings reason and logical

¹⁴ Godawa, *Hollywood Worldviews*, 35.

thinking - to take the truths that he has given to them in his Word and properly apply them to their specific situations. But there are a few things that can be done to help make this identification.

First is to look back on one's own viewing history. Are there certain movies that a person is drawn to more than others? For what reason? If a primary reason is the sinful content in such films, one may have just identified a weakness. In the same way, one can ask if there are certain scenes that linger in one's mind or that have led a person to sin. Whether it be sexual content, profanity, violence, or anything else, if what a person watches begins to creep into his daily life in ways they had not before (as sinner-saints Christians recognize that they will never be free from sin this side of heaven), this too may identify a weakness.

When a weakness (or potential weakness) is uncovered, pray. Pray to God for his forgiveness, trusting that in Christ he gives that forgiveness and will lead you away from that which has created false worship to true worship. Pray to God for strength to stand firm when those same temptations come. Pray to God for wisdom in the future, to avoid those settings where temptations may come. Then, trusting in God's forgiveness, a person can take actions to avoid those temptations in the future. Simple actions such as doing some research before seeing a movie can help avoid films that would cause a person to stumble. It can be as mundane and paying attention to the rating given by the MPAA and the criteria for such a rating, but it can also go a bit deeper, as there are times when a PG-13 movie may be more dangerous to a person than one that is rated R. Pay attention to the content! Even the more secular website IMDB offers a parent's guide section that offers greater detail on what kind of content a movie contains, while also avoiding spoilers for the film. This can better equip a viewer in his selection of film so that he does not bring spiritual harm upon himself.

With that said, movies can be, and often are, as this paper hopes to present, a wonderful blessing from God. But even the best blessings from God can turn into a curse when used indiscriminately and inappropriately. Even though God does not specifically address movies and movie-watching in his Word, he nevertheless gives his people guidelines with which they can engage with this medium in a way that is God-pleasing. May God give his people strength and wisdom as they enjoy the blessing that movies can be!

Cinematic Literacy

*Christian discrimination is called for, but in two senses of that word. Not only should Christian moviegoers be at times selective, but they must also become knowledgeable film viewers as well.*¹⁵

Watching a movie is not a difficult task. Virtually anyone can sit down in front of a television or pull out their iPhone to distract themselves for a few hours with the moving images they see. It could be said that movies, in a sense, are mindless entertainment. But is that really true? Robert Johnston would disagree: “Movies cannot be dismissed as simply entertainment and diversion, though they are also that. Rather, movies are life stories that both interpret us and are being interpreted by us.”¹⁶ While people certainly are, as Johnston states, entertained by movies, there is more happening on screen. A filmmaker may have a desire to entertain, but that is not his or her only goal. Instead “filmmakers *intend* to influence the public through the values and characters they portray in television and film.”¹⁷ In even the smallest of ways, films are conveying meaning. From the biggest building blocks, like the overall story, to the smallest, such as lighting, filmmakers are trying to *say* something. Figuring out exactly what it is that they are trying to say is where the challenge lies.

This is especially true for the pastor who wishes to utilize film. How can he dig in and understand what he and his members are being influenced by (consciously and unconsciously sometimes)? How does he learn more about the issues with which his culture is fixated and struggling? How can he gain perspective into people and their problems or proclivities with whom he has no sense of commonality? For this reason, a pastor who wishes to utilize film must first understand and learn how movies convey their meaning and how he can peel back the layers

¹⁵ Johnston, *Reel Spirituality*, 23.

¹⁶ Johnston, *Reel Spirituality*, 33.

¹⁷ Godawa, *Hollywood Worldviews*, 25.

of a film to get at the core issues.¹⁸ Although, he does not need to take the time or energy to attend a masters level course on the subject a pastor needs to at the very least ought to become cinematically literate at a foundational level.

In some ways, analyzing a film is similar to the way pastors do text studies. When they translate the text from one language to another, they are peeling back the layers of the language for gems that give a clearer understanding. Then they look at the text in the immediate context of its book and its context in the overall scope of the Bible. They consider the implications and meaning for those to whom the letter was originally written, the implications and meaning for their modern setting and examine the genre of the text and the people involved in the story. All these building blocks are then utilized to unearth specific law and gospel, which can then be applied to his congregation.

The same can be done with film. A pastor can analyze the building blocks of a movie and peel back its layers so that he can unearth and uncover what exactly the filmmaker is trying to say - to him, about him, or otherwise. Understandably, the building blocks look vastly different. Instead of analyzing verbs and grammatical structures, one analyzes lighting, composition, and camera movement. Instead of context in a book, one looks at the context in the created world of the film.

However, it is important that one not overlook the glaring differences between the two. The chief difference is, of course, the 'text' being used. In a text study, the text is God's holy and inspired Word. It is the ultimate source of truth, from which we gain the only true spiritual

¹⁸ For the sake of clarity, not *every* movie a pastor watches needs to be viewed under a microscope and scrutinized. Watching a movie need not be a 'locked in' time. When he sits on the couch with his family on a Friday night, he does not need to switch into critic mode. He can just sit and enjoy the movie with his family. However, there will be some movies that almost demand that he has his guard up and truly seeks to uncover the meaning behind what is happening.

answers and meaning. God's Word has the final say on what is right and wrong and is mankind's guide in this life. In film analysis, the 'text' is the film, which is not inspired. It may contain themes and ideas that reflect what is contained in Scripture but is not, by any stretch of the imagination, on the same level as the Word. In Scripture, God determines meaning, in a film the meaning is often determined by the viewer, making the interpretation of a film subjective in nature. God's Word is objective truth.

Nevertheless, it is wise for a pastor to watch films with a critical eye, carefully examining what he is seeing, hearing, or feeling to discern what the film is saying. But in order to do that - in order to truly 'peel back' the layers of a film - he must know what those layers are and what filmmakers are attempting to do when they shoot or craft a film, both *narratively* and *technically* speaking. A certain amount of cinematic literacy will enable a pastor to effectively identify the themes that are being communicated through the medium. To better explain what this looks like in practicality, this paper will examine the 2017 film *Logan* throughout this section.

Narrative

Perhaps the most common way a person discovers meaning and gleans value from a film is through the story itself. After all, what are movies if not visual stories? Even the most auteur and obscure films have some semblance of story to them. In film, "The composition of a story leads a viewer through emotional and dramatic experiences to see things the way the storytellers want the viewer to see."¹⁹ But how does a person recognize what is being communicated? In *Reel Spirituality*, Robert Johnston lays out four key elements to story that will serve as a basis for how

¹⁹ Godawa, *Hollywood Worldviews*, 79.

this paper will analyze what a movie is trying to communicate: plot, character, atmosphere, and point of view.²⁰

Plot

Plot and story may seem to go hand in hand, and it is easy to assume that plot and story can be interchangeable terms. While the two are certainly related, there remains a difference between them. The story is *everything* that happens to the characters, while the plot is *only* the part that the viewer sees on screen.²¹ The entire story may last for several years (or decades), but the *plot* only lasts for two to three hours.

A plot is made up of conflicts, events, and situations that progress the story.²² In a movie, everything happens for a reason. No scene is there to simply add ‘fluff’ or to up a run-time. In fact, “From what a person eats to what is going on in the background, everything is precisely ordained by writer and director to communicate character, plot and theme.”²³ Filmmaker and writer Michael Dean gives this advice to aspiring screenwriters: “Joshua [a friend of Dean] said that to rewrite a script, some people make numbered index cards, one for each scene in the script, and the write three things on each card: What the scene is. What it means. What it does for the story... You use the scenes that work and advance...and cut the ones that don’t.”²⁴ That is a helpful formula that can be used when approaching a movie - break it down scene by scene and ask those three questions. Those three simple questions, which are not always so easily

²⁰Johnston, *Reel Spirituality*, 145. Note: this is not the only way to look at a story, nor is this a comprehensive list of story characteristics. But for the purpose of this paper and for its readers, this is a thorough enough list to allow a pastor to analyze a film’s story. Johnston’s four characteristics are familiar, simple, and yet complete enough.

²¹ Grant Horner, *Meaning at the Movies: Becoming a Discerning Viewer* (Westchester, IL: Crossway, 2010), 83.

²² Horner, *Meaning at the Movies*, 84.

²³ Godawa, *Hollywood Worldviews*, 99.

²⁴ Michael W. Dean, *\$30 Film School* (Boston: Cengage Learning Course Technology PTR, 2006), 10.

answered, can tell a great deal about what the overall purpose of a film is and help to reveal other crucial elements in a film.

Movies that are plot driven tend to focus on the action and unfolding of events, rather than on the characters within it. But this can happen in different ways. The plot can unfold linearly (A causes B, B causes C, etc.), as in films like *La La Land*, *The Social Network*, and *Toy Story 3*. It can also unfold non-linearly (A happens, then the film jumps to D, then back to B, etc.), as is the case in *Dunkirk*, *Pulp Fiction*, and *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*. Within these two broad categories (and there are others), filmmakers play with how the events unfold by using flashbacks, alternate timelines, or telling the story in reverse.

But regardless of the structure of a film's plot, one critical element remains: plot provides the context in which the events unfold. The plot may be the actions and conflicts themselves, but it will also reveal *why* these events are happening (although not always explicitly) and thereby shape how those events are seen. To focus merely on the events themselves and not the context the plot creates takes the events out of context and allows the viewer to twist them any way he or she pleases. This should be familiar to a pastor, as it is precisely what happens with Scripture so often. Jacob having four wives in Genesis does not mean that God approves of or condones of polygamy. He says exactly the opposite. The greater context of the 'plot' makes it clear just how problematic that kind of family arrangement is. Godawa explains this is the same case with movies: "Just because a villain gets away doesn't always mean the story is glorifying villains or saying that crime pays."²⁵ The goal, therefore, is to understand the 'why' of the movie.

Logan offers a good case study on plot. *Logan*, while technically a superhero film, is something far deeper than the typical popcorn flick about spandex-clad crime fighters. The film

²⁵ Godawa, *Hollywood Worldviews*, 55.

focuses on a now aged Logan, better known by his X-Men alias Wolverine. Set in the late 2020s, the once feared Wolverine now drives a limo for bachelorette parties in order to care for the former leader of the X-Men, Charles Xavier. Xavier is succumbing to dementia and frequent seizures that affect everyone around him due to his psychic abilities. Logan is contacted to transport a young mutant girl who has escaped from an experimental facility to a mutant 'safe zone.' Mangold chooses to tell this story linearly and utilizes only a limited number of flashbacks along the way, instead typically choosing to relay background and past information through dialogue. The rationale for this is actually quite simple: this is a film about moving forward; about leaving the past behind. Logan can leave his past of violence and agony behind and instead embrace what is coming for him in the future, even if that future does not involve him. He can help to lead a kindred spirit, Laura, down a path that is different than what his life was.

Character

Virtually all films have characters of some kind. They are the ones who exist in the story. They are the agents of change and action. They react, respond to, and often create the conflicts around which the film pivots. In fact, in some cases, the characters are much more interesting than the plot itself. Character analysis is an important part of film study. Perhaps even more so than the plot, characters reveal the heart of a film. How do they handle the situations with which they are presented? Why do they do the things that they do? Will they change? Will the change continue?

One can look at film characters in the same way that he does literary characters. The same character types can be identified: dynamic and static, flat and round. Dynamic characters are ones that undergo a change over the course a film - for better or for worse. Static characters

are the opposite: they remain the same throughout the events of the plot.²⁶ It becomes easier to identify which category a character fits by analyzing the character arc within a plot. Nearly all characters have some sort of character arc through which they progress in a film. In simplest terms, the character arc is the progression of a character through the plot of the film.²⁷ A static character will ‘move’ through their arc, but remain unchanged, while a dynamic character will undergo some kind of internal transformation. The Bible presents similar ‘characters.’ In the Old Testament, Saul is a powerful example of a dynamic character. Throughout his narrative, he undergoes the transformation from a faithful king to one who is rejected by God. God, if he can be called a ‘character,’ is *essentially* static in the narrative of the Bible. The foundation of who he is rooted to his unchanging, unwavering faithfulness to his promises.

Dynamic and static characters are to be distinguished from flat and round characters. The distinction between flat and round is not quite as neat as dynamic and static. The ultimate issue is *depth*, similar to the difference between two-dimensional and three-dimensional objects. A flat character is often defined by one key trait and that trait alone. Round characters are multi-faceted and have character traits that overlap, intersect, and, at times, are at odds with each other. Protagonists, antagonists, and supporting characters can all fit into either category. Biblically, there are examples of these character classifications as well. King Herod is a flat character, defined almost entirely by his cruelty. In contrast, King David exemplifies a round character. He is complex, with various emotions and traits that intersect, such as his faithfulness to God and his complicated family dynamics.

²⁶ It is important to note a dynamic character is not necessarily a better character than a static one. A character who does not change despite the actions of the plot can sometimes reveal a great deal more than one who is fickle and ebbs and flows with every shifting of the wind.

²⁷ Godawa, *Hollywood Worldviews*, 83.

Why spend time discussing character types? Because the viewer identifies with characters. The best characters are ones with whom the audience members can share some kind of common bond; some kind of point of reference where he or she can say, “I can see myself in the protagonist or antagonist.” As characters can convey both positive and negative morals and attitudes, the ability to analyze them becomes a necessity. A person must ask himself what is it about a certain character that makes them relatable or appealing? What is it about their situation or motivation that makes them sympathetic or reprehensible? Why is it exactly that we see ourselves in a certain character? As one becomes more critical and aware of the actions, attitudes, and intentions of the characters he both admires and resents on screen, this can help the way he looks at himself as well. Are there actions which a character does in a film that are immoral and sinful that I find myself doing as well? In a way, as those familiar with God’s Word, the study of a character can point us back to the law and help us recognize even more clearly our need for the gospel.

Sticking with *Logan* as a reference point, the different character types can readily be identified. Logan himself is a round, dynamic character. Over the course of the film (and, for that matter, the entirety of the *X-Men* franchise) Logan wrestles with his past and where his future is headed. After a life of violence, Logan has resigned himself a simpler life, and yet is thrust back into violence as his life intersects with Laura’s. Logan not only struggles with his nature as a perceived violent ‘animal’ but also with the degeneration of his body and abuse of alcohol. It is once Laura comes into the picture, that his outlook changes. At first selfishly reluctant to see her to safety,²⁸ Logan grows to see her as a kindred spirit, really not all that different from himself.

²⁸ While Logan is concerned about the health of Professor Xavier, his motivations are nevertheless selfish. To transport Laura to safety from her pursuers would mean putting his own plans aside. It could even be argued that his own motivations for taking care of the ailing Professor are selfish as well, as Professor Xavier has always been

This becomes especially clear once he discovers that she is his daughter, or at least his flesh and blood, created in a laboratory using his DNA.

When the climactic battle finally takes place in the third act of the movie, Logan sacrifices himself so that Laura and other young mutants are able to escape. He has transformed from a selfish war-veteran still looking for some kind of meaning in the world, to a man whose primary concern is for Laura and her well-being. In the end, Logan found and fulfilled his purpose of giving her the chance to live free from the violence and pain that he had never escaped.

The plight of Logan is a common struggle and one that many pastors will be familiar with as they interact with their members and communities. The struggle of ‘finding meaning’ in a world filled with tragedy and heartbreak causes some to do what Logan does – withdraw oneself and take solace only in the mundane or self-medicate by the bottle, or otherwise. Mangold makes it clear that the way Logan lives is not pretty. Logan’s haunted look at himself in the mirror as he forces bullets out of his flesh tells the audience all they need to know: Logan is miserable. He is a beaten man. In the film, Logan finds his ‘redemption’ in the form of helping Laura. Where does that ‘redemption’ or new meaning come from in the real world? People may look for other ways, but the only place true redemption and true meaning in life is found are in the gospel.

Atmosphere

Robert Johnston describes a film’s atmosphere as the “unalterable given(s) against which the story is told and the characters develop...It is the unchangeable backdrop against which the story

the one who has been able to keep Logan focused on the protection of others. Without the Professor, Logan may not know what to do with himself or where his violent tendencies could lead him.

is played out”²⁹ This means that atmosphere extends far beyond the overall mood or tone that a movie conveys. It is more than the overwhelming sense of dread in a horror movie or thriller, or the lightheartedness of a romantic comedy. In essence, the atmosphere is the nature of reality in which a film occurs. That reality may or may not be the same as the one that exists in the real world, but for the characters, it is *their* reality. It is the proverbial ‘cloud’ that hangs over their heads that they are unable to escape.

Wesley Kort (from whom Johnston derived his list of four story elements) further describes atmosphere in this way: “Atmosphere, the conditions of the fictional world, the limits or boundaries of that world which make some things possible and others not, is involved with the belief as to what is and what is not possible, with the boundaries of human existence.”³⁰ In a movie like *Logan*, elements of atmosphere would include things like the existence of mutants in the world, the realities of cloning, and the hostility between mutants and humans, among others.

Atmosphere factors into evaluative practices because it essentially influences what happens during the film. Without the given - the atmosphere - in *Logan* that mutants and humans are, and have been, at odds, the entire narrative crumbles. Atmosphere shapes the perspective of the film and forces the viewer to watch from a specific starting point, ensuring that, although the end result and takeaway may be different from viewer to viewer, there is a common ground from which all begin.

Pastors deal with atmosphere every time they write a sermon, go on a prospect visit, or sit in a counseling session. All humanity and all human actions exist against the backdrop of sin. It is the ‘given’ that is inescapable no matter how hard people attempt to run from it or deny it. In

²⁹ Johnston, *Reel Spirituality*, 147.

³⁰ Wesley A. Kort., “Religion and Literature: Some Methodological Questions” in *Christianity and Literature* No. 29 Vol. 3 (1980), 45–49.

the same way, all humanity exists in the atmosphere of Christ's forgiveness. No human being is outside of the reality that Christ's life, death, and resurrection paid for his or her sin. It is simply an objective reality.

Point of view

Those familiar with point of view from literature will be able to identify first person, third person limited, and third person omniscient as the primary forms authors use to narrate their stories. Filmmakers are almost exclusively limited to third person points of view.³¹ But, according to Johnston, the point of view of a film is not limited to the way in which a film is shot, but also the attitude of the narrator (or implied narrator) toward the story or characters.³² However, there is often overlap between the shooting point of view and the attitude of the narrator.

Point of view is what gives the viewer the perspective in which they are observing the events, which could be drastically different from character to character. Imagine how different a film would look if it was shot from the perspective of the antagonist instead of the protagonist. The whole world of a film could be flipped on its head. The way we look at and perceive the characters would drastically change.

Perhaps one of the more deliberate examples of how this can happen is in the 2007 film *Atonement*, directed by Joe Wright and based on the novel by Ian McEwan. A story set against the backdrop of World War I England, *Atonement* is about a young girl named Briony and how something she sees, but does not understand, has far-reaching effects. In the film, she witnesses

³¹ In reference to the primary way in which the story is shot. Often directors will utilize first-person shots (also known as point-of-view shots) so as to clue the viewer in on what the character(s) are looking at, but the overall narrative is almost always shot from a third person perspective. There have been a few films that have attempted to tell the story exclusively from the first-person perspective, making the viewer the main character in a sense. Examples include many of the 'found footage' films like *Cloverfield* and *The Blair Witch Project*, and, more recently, the action film *Hardcore Henry*.

³² Johnston, *Reel Spirituality*, 147,148.

the courtship of her sister Cecilia, by the farmhand Robbie. Wright first shows what happens from Briony's perspective. The viewer witnesses a scene unfold by a courtyard fountain, where Robbie, in a seemingly aggressive way, gestures to Cecilia. Cecilia then removes her outer garments in front of him, which causes Briony to recoil from her second-floor window. When she returns to the window, she sees a sopping wet Cecilia emerge from the fountain, grab her clothes and storm passed Robbie. Wright is intentionally forcing his viewers to view this scene through the naïve and out of context eyes of a young girl. The audience, along with Briony, views Robbie with a great deal of suspicion. He seems aggressive and manipulative, almost even perverted.

Wright then rewinds the clock and shows the exact same sequence of events, this time from the perspective of the young lovers. Cecilia seeks out the company of Robbie using the excuse of filling a vase with water from the fountain. When the two sit on the fountain's ledge, Robbie insists on helping Cecilia fill the vase and inadvertently breaks it, causing shards of pottery to scatter across the ground and fall into the fountain. He stands back as Cecilia chastises him. He gives a warning gesture to stop Cecilia from stepping on a pottery shard and then watches in both shock and embarrassment as Cecilia removes her outer clothes to enter the fountain and retrieve the pieces of the vase.

When the viewer sees the reality of the situation from the point of view of those involved, their attitude towards the characters, particularly Robbie, changes. Now he no longer seems aggressive and perverted, but cautious, caring, and even a bit clumsy. The naïve point of view of Briony is critical to the plot of the film, as her misconception about the nature of the relationship between Robbie and Cecilia causes her to later condemn Robbie for an action he did not commit.

Wright intentionalizes the aspect of point of view to manipulate the audience and as a focal point of the plot.

In *Logan*, James Mangold has the audience view the film through Logan's eyes. Logan is war-worn and weary of a world that has hated and hunted him his entire life. He is skeptical of people's intentions and pessimistic about the world in general. As the viewer watches the plot unfold, he, too, is skeptical and pessimistic. When Logan discovers the mythical mutant safe-zone of Eden was taken straight out of a comic book written about him, the audience groans along with Logan. This whole trip has been a waste; the mission a lie!

An awareness of cinematic point of view allows the viewer to better understand what the director is trying to convey. It allows us to more closely scrutinize a character's actions and the way he interacts with the other characters, and at times, even question the nature of what is really happening. Is the perceived narrator reliable? Can we trust them?

A pastor can utilize this methodology in ministry. By shifting the point of view, he can lead his members to perceive events differently. One example of this would be in a counseling situation, where he can help someone better consider the viewpoint of others. The same technique can be used in Bible class. To understand the circumstances of a particular figure in a portion of Scripture, it may be beneficial to place those in the class in the shoes, so to speak, of that character. How drastically the account of David and Jonathan changes when we see it not from David's perspective, but Jonathan's!

Technical Considerations

For pastoral purposes, narrative is undoubtedly the most important aspect of a film for him to analyze. The average movie-goer is far more likely to go away reflecting on what the movie was

about as opposed to *how* the filmmakers told the story. However, just as nothing arbitrarily happens in a film's plot, so too nothing happens by chance on the technical side of a film. Even more controlled is the way in which a film is shot, lit, and scored. Filmmakers make deliberate decisions on what they want the audience to see and how they want them to see it. This is underscored in filmmaking textbooks:

One thing you will learn as a filmmaker is that everything is to be for a reason - for every choice you make, whether in the story, the location, the props, whatever. Random choices do not help you tell your story. These choices may not always be conscious decisions (although all the major ones should be), but to simply “let things happen” will almost never result in a coherent, smooth flowing story that conveys your original intentions the way you wanted.³³

This paper will view these technical aspects as supporting characters, supplementing and aiding the narrative points previously discussed. They offer insights into how the director wishes certain characters and events to be portrayed when they do not wish to explicitly say so. They also at times provide foreshadowing to the true nature of characters before their real motives become evident

Camera angle

The camera is the eye of the viewer. It is the lens (literally and figuratively) through which the audience views the events of a film. Directors and cinematographers collaborate on how to most effectively shoot a film so that what is seen on screen best meshes with what they wish to be conveyed. When a scene or character is filmed from above (a high-angle shot), with the audience looking down on the action, it creates a sense of dominance for the viewer. The higher the angle of the camera, the more assumed power the viewer has over the subject. This can cause us to

³³ Blain Brown, *Cinematography: Theory and Practice: Image Making for Cinematographers and Directors* (New York: Focal Press, 2012), 2.

look down upon characters or even have pity on them.³⁴ The opposite is true of low angle shots, where the audience looks up at what is happening. The characters seem to tower over the viewers, creating a sense of menace or presumed power for the character. It creates apprehension.³⁵

Lighting

Out of all the technical elements of film, perhaps the easiest to spot is lighting. As with every other cinematic element, the lighting decisions made by the director of photography are meticulously planned and executed to create the exact type of mood the filmmakers wish to display. Barsam and Monahan explain what this can look like: “We can generally (but not always) associate hard, high-contrast lighting featuring deep shadows...with serious or tragic stories and soft, even lighting...with romantic or comic stories.”³⁶

The way a film is lit can give the viewer an ominous feeling or one of lighthearted folly. It can create tension when characters are hidden from sight or cast a character in a light of naivety. This invariably affects the way the audience views characters as well. Lighting from below can give a character an eerie or sinister perception, perhaps revealing his true intentions, while lighting coming from above can make a character appear vulnerable.³⁷ Characters cast in shadows, entirely or partly, can suggest ulterior motives before those motives are explicitly stated. Careful attention to the way characters or situations are lit in a movie can go a long way

³⁴ Brown, *Cinematography: Theory and Practice*, 64.

³⁵ Brown, *Cinematography: Theory and Practice*, 65. These are merely two examples of different types of shots filmmakers will utilize in a film. There are many more at their disposal, but high-angle and low-angle are easy to identify and have fairly straightforward meanings.

³⁶ Barsam and Monahan, *Looking at Movies*, 238.

³⁷ Barsam and Monahan, *Looking at Movies*, 241.

in determining not only what the viewer is meant to see, but also the way in which the director wishes them to be perceived.

Score

While film is a visual medium, that does not mean that vision is the only sense that aids in the interpretation of a film. One of the primary elements of a film is sound. From the spoken dialogue to the whizzing of a bullet as it flies across the screen, filmmakers bombard our ears with sound. The most impactful type of sound (outside of the dialogue) is the film's score. The film's score is the purposeful orchestration that happens throughout the course of a film. This is contrasted with a film's soundtrack, which contains vocal lyrics. Soundtrack contain original songs for the picture or include songs from popular culture which the director feels enhance his film.

Music has been an integral part of films since the very beginning even before dialogue. The earliest silent films frequently had musical accompaniment, often played live in the theater itself.³⁸ Music had to convey the emotion and mood of a scene because the actors were not able to do so outside of their actions. Barry Taylor summarizes this nicely: "More than language, more even than imagery, music can bypass our cognitive abilities and impact our emotional centers."³⁹

This is hardly lost on film viewers. Many who have sat in a theater seat have had their hearts tugged upon when the swell of a love melody crescendos as the leading man and woman share their first kiss or felt their stomach lurch as the eerie theme of a villain swirls in a horror

³⁸ Barry Taylor, "The Colors of Sound: Music and Meaning Making in Film" in *Reframing Theology and Film: New Focus for an Emerging Discipline*, Robert K. Johnston, ed., 51-72 (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic), 55.

³⁹ Johnston, *Reel Spirituality*, 178.

movie as the villain closes in on the hero. It prompts the appropriate feelings from the audience, paces action sequences, and places emphasis on significant moments.⁴⁰ If those in the audience are ever looking for confirmations about a character, his motives, or how we are supposed to respond, often they need to do nothing more than open their ears and listen to what the music is telling them.⁴¹

Summary

In order to dissect a film, a person must be able to speak its language. He must pull apart the sum parts so that he can understand what a film is trying to say. It is admittedly artificial to speak about a film only in terms of plot, atmosphere, and the like, for it can risk missing the forest for the trees.⁴² These are but elements that make a cohesive unit. On their own, these elements do not tell the story. Rather, they serve as gears in a complex machine that turn in unison to craft something that has meaning. It is by analyzing the parts that the overall picture becomes clearer. A pastor need not be an expert in cinematic literacy. But with this very basic vocabulary and at least some semblance of understanding of the elements of film, a pastor can look at a film through new eyes. He can start to pull out meanings and themes that perhaps he would not have

⁴⁰ Johnston, *Reel Spirituality*, 180.

⁴¹ To make this concept less abstract, consider the following example. Damien Chazelle's 2018 biopic *First Man* focuses on Neil Armstrong in the years leading up to and including the Apollo 11 moon landing. Composer Justin Hurwitz created a majestic score for the film. One of the chief musical themes is a tranquil, melodious piece played on the harp. It radiates the serenity that Armstrong feels when he is with his family, particularly in the aftermath of his daughter Karen's death to cancer. It shows up exclusively in scenes where he is surrounded by his family – with one notable exception: the moon landing sequence. Here, Hurwitz takes the same theme and ratchets up the intensity. He substitutes the harp for reeds and brass and accelerates the tempo. It no longer gives a feeling of peace but one of anxiety and grandeur. So why use the family's musical theme in this singularly intense moment? Because that is what the entire movie is about – Neil's use of the Apollo program to cope with the loss of his daughter. This one moment is not only the climax of the mission, but it is also the climax of Neil working through his grief. A touchdown on the moon not only means success, it means that he can finally move forward with his family. All of this is masterfully conveyed through Hurwitz's score.

⁴² Johnston, *Reel Spirituality*, 149.

seen before. This will allow him to better unearth meaning from a film, which he can then apply to his ministry.

In all of this, there is a singular goal in mind: to be able to better utilize the gospel in the context of the 21st-century American world. By looking at what a film is trying to say - whether explicitly or implied – a pastor can begin to see the struggles our society is facing today, the internal angst of individuals, and the way that abstract concepts manifest themselves in the real world in ways that we had not considered. This will be explored more fully in the following sections of this paper.

Above all, a pastor must keep in the forefront the need for a solution to the universal problem of sin, a need that is not met in any of the worldly solutions that a film might put forward in the ‘redemption’ characters receive or produce. That solution is found only in the gospel of Christ crucified.

Film and Society

*Simply put, film is the ultimate form of cultural expression in the modern world. Film is where culture is at. Film is the most powerful image of itself that humanity has ever produced. No one would deny that books, art, music, politics, social consciousness, and so forth are significant, but film is the one “cultural location” where all of these other categories may meet and have a discussion. In film, all the varied and disparate elements of the human experience come together and talk with each other.*⁴³

It would difficult to find someone in the United States today who would deny that movies have been impactful on modern society. One can see the evidence everywhere, from highway billboards to the movie characters plastered across children’s backpacks and t-shirts. The American pastor lives in a time and place that is undeniably molded by movies.

In a very real way, film *is* culture.

Culture is “what grows out of the soil of humanity; it is the sum of a people-group’s practices, beliefs, traditions, and ways of looking at and understanding the world.”⁴⁴ So to say that film influences our *culture* (or vice-versa) really is incorrect.

Film is part of our culture.

Instead of being influenced by or influencing our culture, what film does is interact with society - the everyday behaviors, values, thoughts, and mindsets of the individuals who inhabit a specific culture.⁴⁵ Leonard Quart and Albert Auster assess it:

There are no straight, clear lines to be drawn between the film industry and the popular mind - neither is it a mirror of public feelings or habits, nor can one make the vulgar, mechanistic connection that implies the industry is some evil empire conspiratorially shaping the social values and political opinions of the supine public. However there is no question that Hollywood’s genius for manufacturing and publicizing seductive images... should not be minimized, the images often becoming a substitute for reality for their audiences.⁴⁶

⁴³ Horner, *Meaning at the Movies*, 26.

⁴⁴ Horner, *Meaning at the Movies*, 40.

⁴⁵ Leonard Quart and Albert Auster, *American Film and Society Since 1945, 5th Edition* (Santa Barbara: Praeger, 2018) 2.

⁴⁶ Quart and Auster, *American Film and Society Since 1945*, 2.

As undershepherds of a portion of Christ's flock, pastors live and interact with their culture and society on a daily basis, as do the sheep they have been charged to serve. If a pastor is going to be able to effectively proclaim the gospel in his community - and equip his members to do the same - then he has to understand the values and beliefs of his society. He must also be able to understand those beliefs and values on their own terms and not by creating a strawman or caricature.

The quote from Grant Horner at the beginning of this section highlights the ability that film has to connect the dots, so to speak, of cultural expression. As such, it often presents a closer picture to what the collective population, or at least the dominant demographic, actually think, rather than a snapshot from social media or a news soundbite. Instead of crafting a ridiculous and inaccurate strawman that can be easily attacked and taken down, film presents what is likely closer to reality.

The Apostle Paul understood the importance of this kind of cultural exegesis. Paul was a well-educated man, with years of study under the well-known teacher Gamaliel. But in Acts 17 he shows us that his education was not limited to Scripture knowledge. He says in Acts 17:28,29, "For in him we live and move and have our being. 'As some of your own poets have said, 'We are his offspring.' Therefore since we are God's offspring, we should not think that the divine is like gold or silver or stone – an image made by human design and skill." Paul was well versed in secular philosophy. In a way, this was the pop culture of his day and these philosophies represented beliefs and values of the Areopagus, his audience that day. Here and elsewhere Paul demonstrated that he knew the cultural values and beliefs of his audience and he used that knowledge well for the benefit of preaching the gospel. Church members might know next to

nothing about more classic forms of philosophy, but they do watch movies which are filled with modern and postmodern philosophy as well as reincarnations of classic philosophical arguments.

This is what makes film study valuable. If film truly is where all the elements of the human experience intersect, then it would be wise to explore that intersection. This intersection produces stories of the human struggle and triumph. It showcases the viewpoints of both the minority and the majority. It is where culture is not just seen, but experienced. By dissecting this juncture, a pastor can be better equipped to venture out into his society with an understanding of what *really* is out there.

Closely connected to the societal values of a film are the values of individuals. After all, a society is made up of a group of individuals and each comes into a movie with their own personal worldview and beliefs. Those values are inevitably influenced by the culture and society in which a person lives and with which he or she commonly interacts.⁴⁷ Through its ability to *show* these values, not just *tell* about them, film is a powerful connection point. Many films tell stories, that although fiction, feel real and the events that they portray are often (if not always) rooted in something that is, was, or likely will become.

As Conrad Oswald posits, individuals recognize and identify with these types of stories and the characters.

Film and other cultural forms have the potential to mirror, reinforce, challenge, create, overturn, or crystallize beliefs and fears. The bottom line is that film can become, and sometimes does become, an important vehicle or critic of society's values and accepted truths, and popular films most assuredly reflect or otherwise interact with the "social and moral values" of the predominant culture. In addition, popular films not only express values and identities but can also create them.⁴⁸

⁴⁷ Godawa, *Hollywood Worldviews*, 26.

⁴⁸ Oswald, "Conclusion: Religion, Film and Cultural Analysis," 156.

Even if someone is not actively aware of it, a value, belief, or worldview is being communicated to him by a film. By recognizing these worldviews, a pastor is then able to apply Scripture to the meanings convey.

However, it is not helpful to speak of the values, beliefs, and influences of a film in abstract terms. To fully appreciate what movies do in terms of the messages they convey, one must actually look at movies to feel the pulse of culture. In *American Film and Society Since 1945*, Quart and Auster identify a number of issues currently resonating in American society that have received increased emphasis in recent years. These include issues like the financial crisis of the mid-2000s, racial tension, feminism, LGBT+ struggles, among others.⁴⁹

While this is certainly not an exhaustive list, Quart and Auster provide a general overview of some of the primary contemporary issues. It is beyond the scope of this paper to cover a film that treats each of these issues in a fair manner, so instead, it will discuss two - feminism, utilizing the film *Crazy Rich Asians*, and LGBT+ struggles, using the film *Love, Simon*.

Feminism and *Crazy Rich Asians*

Jon Chu's *Crazy Rich Asians*, based on the novel of the same name by Kevin Kwan, was a massive hit when it was released in 2018, making over \$175,000,000 in the American box office. On the surface film is a fairly straightforward romantic comedy. It centers around Rachel Chu, an economics professor at NYU, who travels with her boyfriend, Nick Young, to Singapore to meet his family for the first time while attending the wedding of Nick's best friend. What she does not know is that Nick and his family are crazy rich real estate moguls in Southeast Asia.

⁴⁹ Quart and Auster, *American Film and Society Since 1945*, 281-333.

Crazy Rich Asians sticks with many of the classic elements of romantic comedies. It even ends with the clichéd ‘guy gets the girl’ trope, although it would be more accurate to reverse that in this case. What helps *Crazy Rich Asians* to stand out from other similar films is the dominance of the female characters. This is not a dual-lead film, as many other romantic comedies are. This is wholly Rachel’s story. Nick is an important part of the story, perhaps he even the fulcrum on which the whole film balances. But this is Rachel’s film. Now, the emphasis on the women alone does not necessarily make this a feminist film, but the depiction of the women does.

Rachel is a successful woman who does not need Nick to justify and define her. She is an accomplished professor (“The youngest on the faculty!” Nick announces to his family) and a self-made woman, raised by a single, low-income, immigrant mother. Rachel is offset by Nick’s matriarchal mother, Eleanor (played masterfully by Chinese film legend Michelle Yeoh), who is the unquestioned power of the Young family.⁵⁰ These women have conflicting worldviews, which, when they converge around Nick, causes strife between them. In the end, it is actually from Eleanor that Rachel seeks approval and respect, not Nick.

The women of the film do not rely on the men. In fact, the men are often the problem. Rachel is viewed as ‘gold-digger’ by the women of Singapore for no other reason than that Nick is rich. Nick is the reason for the conflict between Rachel and Eleanor. The men are uninteresting, flat, and unchanging.⁵¹ The women are starkly different. Instead of waiting to have their problems solved for them, they take action. When Rachel considers not attending the wedding because of the animosity between her and Eleanor, her best friend Peik tells her, “You don’t need Eleanor to like you, you need her to respect you.” Instead of involving a man (Nick),

⁵⁰ Nick’s father is still alive, but never makes an appearance throughout the entire film. Although Eleanor is not the ‘bacon-bringer’ of the family, she proudly asserts that she sacrificed a career as a lawyer to marry her husband and raise a family.

⁵¹ Nick’s defining character trait is that he loves Rachel.

Rachel takes the initiative. She shows up in a beautiful, confident dress, sits at the front of the church and engages in conversation with a well-known, but almost unapproachable, guest. She attempts to solve her problem herself. It is not insignificant that Rachel never asks Nick to say anything to his mother. She vents her frustrations to him, but nothing more. *She* is determined to find a solution to her problem on her own.

What is refreshing about the kind of feminism depicted in *Crazy Rich Asians* is that it stands in stark contrast to the militant ‘death to patriarchy’ feminism that often permeates social media and many films. In his Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary senior thesis, Kurtis Wetzel describes this kind of militant feminism as one that seeks not equality with men, but rather preference over men.⁵² Instead, what *Crazy Rich Asians* does is place women in a state of equality. They are their own rescuers and problem solvers. There is no proverbial knight in shining armor to do the rescuing as the women are fully capable of doing so themselves. Recognition of this is important. It allows men to understand, at least in a limited way, what it is that women are seeking in the world. We do not have to create a caricature of women’s views; we have it before our eyes in a real-world setting.

Wetzel’s thesis, which involved interviews with five WELS women, demonstrated that women often feel undervalued and, at times, dismissed in congregations.⁵³ God teaches clearly in his word that men and women occupy different roles - men the position of head and women that of helper. Yet this teaching does not suggest that women are somehow inferior or that they are not equals. Paul says quite the opposite in 1 Corinthians 12:12-31, where he describes the body

⁵² Kurtis Wetzel, *Hearing the Helpers: An Examination of How WELS Women Understand the Teaching of the Roles of Men and Women in an Age of Feminism* (WLS Essay File, 2016), 3.

⁵³ Wetzel, *Hearing the Helpers: An Examination of How WELS Women Understand the Teaching of the Roles of Men and Women in an Age of Feminism*, 22-27.

of Christ, the church, as being made up of different parts. None of any higher or lower value. All different, yet equally important.

The roles of men and women might be different, but that does not mean that men are more capable or that they can use their role of authority as an excuse for exercising power and dominion. As Wetzel writes: “While God has given us different roles in our social settings, we are all equally loved and redeemed in his Son... the Bible demonstrates how the Christian church can be a community where men lead humbly with self-sacrifice and women are empowered for service.”⁵⁴ As a pastor, in turn, applies law and gospel on the *Crazy Rich Asians* depicted matter of equality-seeking feminism, there are applications to be made to both men and women.

For men, it is using the Law to convict of abuse in their headship. In *Crazy Rich Asians*, Nick’s brother-in-law, Eddie, exhibits this while at the groom’s bachelor party. He calls out the status of Rachel’s family, her lack of a position in a high income and high-profile job and condescends to Nick, asking “What does she bring to the table?” This is hardly what God calls for when he lays out the role of men. God calls them to be self-sacrificing leaders and love their wives in the same way that Christ, the church’s bridegroom, loved the church and sacrificed himself for her. This means not diminishing, downplaying, or mocking the role that women have, but rather recognizing the unique gifts and abilities that women have and helping them make faithful use of them in a congregation. For women, it is the reminder that God has called them to the helper role and that God has called them to be content in that role. But in this role, they offer equally valuable service in the body of Christ. In both cases, the Gospel is the reminder that in Christ, men and women are equals; both genders sinful and in need of a savior, and both genders equally redeemed by Christ and co-heirs of eternal life through him.

⁵⁴ Wetzel, *Hearing the Helpers: An Examination of How WELS Women Understand the Teaching of the Roles of Men and Women in an Age of Feminism*, 26.

Crazy Rich Asians is not the only recent Hollywood production that has portrayed this kind of equality-elevating feminism. *Wonder Woman* (2017), *Joy* (2015), and *The Post* (2017) all portray women in the roles that have historically been male - superhero, entrepreneur, and business head - and do so in a way that does not suggest superiority, but rather seek to 'level the playing field,' so to speak. Is this a message that should worry pastors? I would argue not.

What *Crazy Rich Asians* does well (without realizing it) is depicting women operating within their God-given roles, while not seeking in any fashion to supplant or evict men from theirs. Even though Eleanor is the familial head, this is only because Eleanor's husband is away on business for the entirety of the film. Instead, the movie demonstrates that women are perfectly capable of operating within the roles God has given them, while not having to default to a man for the solution to every problem, nor by overtaking the headship role God has given to men.

Love, Simon and the Struggles of Same-Sex Attraction

"I'm just like you. I have a perfectly normal life. Except, I have a huge-ass secret." The final words of Simon's movie-opening voiceover narration set the tone for Greg Berlanti's 2018 coming-of-age movie *Love, Simon*. The titular Simon is exactly who he says he is: a normal high school kid with great friends and a loving family. His secret? He is gay. Simon, ever anxious that someone might discover his secret, reaches out anonymously one night to a fellow high school student known only by the pseudonym "Blue." Blue has recently come out as gay on their high school's social media blog. Through a series of emails, Simon and Blue forge a romantic attachment to each other, yet neither knows who the other is.

Simon continues to hide his secret from his family and friends, all the while longing to discover who Blue is. He uses the clues that Blue reveals in their emails to take guesses yet

Blue's identity remains a mystery. Things become more complicated when Simon forgets to log out of his email account on a school computer and a classmate, Martin, reads through Simon's emails. Martin uses the emails as blackmail, forcing Simon to help him secure a date with one of Simon's best friends, Abby. If he refuses, Martin will post the emails online so that the whole school will know his secret. Martin is portrayed as a bit of sympathetic bully. He appears to exude confidence, but under the surface lies vulnerability and a tinge of loneliness. While no one would look upon his blackmail actions as a positive thing, they underscore his longing for the kind of friends that Simon has. He wants to be included and liked does this in an immoral and immature manner.

Not wanting to upset his world, Simon agrees to help, although he knows this is losing cause. Abby will never fall for Martin. When Martin follows Simon's advice and embarrasses himself in an attempt to impress Abby, Martin leaks the emails. As a result, Simon faces ridicule from his classmates and isolates himself from his friends, who still support and love him, even if they are upset with him for lying to them. When Simon finally comes to grips with life 'out of the closet,' he posts a confession post online and reaches out to Blue (who had stopped responding to his emails) and earns the respect of his classmates. The film ends with a 'happy ending,' as Blue (who is really Simon's friend Bram) and Simon finally 'meet' face to face and kiss atop a Ferris wheel while their classmates cheer them on from below. This is the film's moment of triumph: both Simon and Blue get to be who they think they really are and not have to hide any longer.

Love, Simon might be a movie that a pastor looks at and immediately passes on seeing. Another homosexual film promoting a lifestyle that actively goes against what God's Word says. But perhaps he should not skip every movie like *Love, Simon*. This film in specific provides

tremendous insight into the struggles a teen, or anyone, for that matter, goes through as they deal with same-sex attraction. The film does not sugar coat things. Simon, while not necessarily trying to deny or ignore his sexual orientation, has immense amounts of fear and agony. Coming out is not something that he takes lightly, nor looks forward to doing. He describes his family as the quintessential all-American family; his father the former high school quarterback, mom the valedictorian, and sister a wannabe chef (after watching too many hours of *Chopped* on the Food Network). While he thinks they would be fine with him being gay, he is reluctant to come out and risk upsetting the relationships he has with them. At school, he witnesses how the one flamboyantly gay boy is ridiculed by the jocks. It all creates anxiety and fear.

As could be expected in this film, when Simon is finally outed, those he cares about the most are accepting of his orientation - his family *still* loves him; his friends *still* love him; he even gets the guy in the end! Yet some of his fears come to fruition. The same jocks who picked on the other gay student do the same to him. His relationship with his friends is damaged at first because they are hurt at his reluctance to tell them. For Simon, being gay and coming out are no walk in the park, and the film refuses to pull its punches about this immensely significant moment.

There are likely many “Simons” sitting in WELS pew and attending WELS schools. Outwardly their lives appear fine, yet under the surface, they are struggling with confusion, confliction, fear of discovery, or any other number of emotions. Unlike the Simon of the movie, there is an additional factor in play. If they are members (active or not) of a WELS church, likely they know what God says about homosexuality, but are taught something drastically different by the world. Therefore, not only is this young person dealing with the aforementioned emotional stress, there is also likely a sense of guilt and shame for how they feel.

Now, admittedly *Love, Simon*, while offering a glimpse into the struggles of those dealing with same-sex attraction, is still a work of fiction. The circumstances in Simon's life are drastically dramatized for the sake of telling a good story. Nevertheless the emotions behind the film reflect those of real human beings, with real fears, and real anxieties. The message of *Love, Simon* is to be 'true to yourself' and 'love who you love.' Embrace it, own it, and people will accept you for it. This is the message of the world that is seen, heard, and celebrated by American society. God says differently. But even the face of such a situation, Christ's death paid for that sin just the same as it did for every other.

To be able to understand, in a limited way, what a young person struggling with same-sex attraction is going through, a pastor must be able to see the necessity for an evangelical approach all the more clearly. The emotions involved are complicated and often not apparent – they can be hidden beneath a mask. To approach such a topic with care and love is of utmost importance. What *Love, Simon* offers is a framework for a pastor to better understand the emotions involved in such an individual. In addition, it can be used as a valuable tool to help place the issue of homosexual attraction in a real-life setting that allows others to analyze and approach the issue and how they can respond in a loving way.

Summary

Linda Mercadante makes a profound statement about the relationship between film and society when she writes:

Film has become a common parlance in our culture, less likely constrained by class, culture, and age divisions that literature or other meaning-makers. It is our communal "dream factory," comparable to what myth and storytelling have been for other cultures. Film is important because it engages a wide audience, cuts to the heart of issues quickly, and provides an accessible meeting place. This medium can project our lived reality in a way that enables us to see it from a different perspective. It is no longer, if it ever was,

“merely” entertainment. Although there is legitimate pleasure principle involved, there is more. Film feels especially satisfying because it takes the jumbled, unclear reality we live in and endows it with an aura of order and meaning.⁵⁵

It does not take a film scholar to notice how deeply film has played a role in shaping modern American society. Pastors exist in that society and interact with it on a daily basis. As proclaimers of the gospel, the ability to understand the society and community in which they serve is a crucial part of that proclamation.

Movies are indeed among 21st century America’s chief meaning-makers. They can reflect, establish, clarify, and expound on the issues that are affecting the lives of people every day all across America. By utilizing the tool of film, pastors are able to gain a glimpse into the lives of people that they may never have come into contact with and even view life through their eyes for the length of a film (and beyond). In this way, film can provide a framework for how a pastor interacts with and approaches conversations with people as he will also be able to engage in those conversations without having to rely on a caricatured version of their reality. Film gives that glimpse into what is really being said and what is really out there. And through this glimpse, a pastor can begin to better understand how best to apply law and gospel to individuals both inside his congregation and outside of it.

⁵⁵ Linda Mercadante, “Using Film to Teach Theology” in *Theological Education* Vol. 42 No. 2, 2007, 21.

Utilization of Film in Ministry

Though I am free and belong to no one, I have made myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible. To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews. To those under the law I became like one under the law (though I myself am not under the law), so as to win those under the law. To those not having the law I became like one not having the law (though I am not free from God's law but am under Christ's law), so as to win those not having the law. To the weak I became like the weak, to win the weak. I have become all things to all people so that by all possible means I might save some. I do all this for the sake of the gospel, that I may share in its blessings. (1 Corinthians 9:19-23)

The Apostle Paul was willing to go to great lengths so that more and more people would be won over by the gospel. The above verses from 1 Corinthians show just how adaptable Paul was. He strove to find a common denominator with the people. He wanted to speak their language so that he could better serve them with God's Word. Should the pastor serving today not strive to do the same? Culture and customs have changed significantly from Paul's day to now, but the necessity for a pastor to understand his culture and people has not. It is still important for the pastor to speak the language of his people so that more and more people may be brought to faith in Jesus Christ. One of the biggest 'languages' of the people today is movies. Therefore, utilizing film in ministry is a logical way in which the pastor of today can be all things to all people, just as Paul was.

Much of what has been discussed in this paper has been theoretical: the understanding of language and principles and their application to the watching of various films. If the goal is to make the study of film practical and beneficial, then it must be put into practical situations. How can the pastor implement what he learns through his study of film into his congregation and into his ministry? There is no one right answer to that question. There are many ways in which film can be utilized in a *beneficial* way. The word beneficial is key. There ought to be a reason as to why and how a pastor uses this tool. It is valuable, yes, but just like any tool it can be abused and

overused, and thereby lose much of its value. There are also times where utilizing film may be inappropriate. For example, in *Marquee Ministry*, Robert Konzelman proposes that it may be useful at times to utilize movies *as* a sermon text. He cites Jesus' parables as grounds for such a proposition, saying that Jesus would likely utilize film were he walking among us today.

Therefore, we should embrace the medium in the same way.⁵⁶ Replacing Scripture with a film as a sermon text would be an utter failure on the part of the pastor, as it is only through the means of grace that God has promised to speak to his people. In addition, using film – even as an illustration – in a way that usurps a person's attention from God's Word or from Christ is to be avoided. Like reason and logic are servants of Scripture, film too is a servant. It is to aide our use of the gospel, not dominate it or stand above it.

In terms of beneficial use, there is one fairly simple thing that stands out. A pastor wants to be in touch with what is relevant in popular culture. Movies, being one of the dominant forms of popular culture today, provide a great way to connect with the people we serve and understand things that are current and relevant in their lives. So, go see what the people are seeing. Of course, not every popular film is going to be something that would be wise for a pastor to see. *Fifty Shades of Grey* grossed over \$160,000,000 in the domestic box office, yet there would be little wisdom in seeing such a film, both personally and in consideration of others.

Yet, there is wisdom in going to see the latest Marvel superhero movie or other major 'franchise' films, as these movies routinely sit at the top of the yearly box office earnings⁵⁷ and would likely not cause harm to a person's faith, nor be seen as objectionable. In other words, pay attention to the box office totals and to the movies about which people are talking. Then do some

⁵⁶ Konzelman, *Marquee Ministry*, 74-76.

⁵⁷ In 2018, *Black Panther* and *Avengers: Infinity War* each totaled over \$675,000,000 in the United States, with *Infinity War* crossing the two billion dollar mark worldwide.

homework on them. These are the movies that can provide talking points and ways of building relationships.

The study of film yields greater rewards than only talking points with members, youth groups, and prospects. In terms of professional growth, understanding, and education, movies can provide fresh perspectives and skills that can aid a pastor in his work of sharing the gospel of Jesus. Below are listed various ways that film can be utilized by a pastor. It must be noted that this is not to say that these are the only ways in which a pastor can use what he learns through film, nor must these ideas be utilized at all.

Reading Scripture and Sermon Writing

Previously in this paper, the observation was made that the study of film can aide a pastor in his ability to read and understand Scripture, particularly in the interest of sermon writing. Film analysis is not unlike literary analysis, examining themes, characters, and composite elements to derive meaning. In the section on cinematic literacy, a number of cinematic language terms were discussed: plot, character, atmosphere, and point of view. These four broad groups served as the foundation for film analysis, which allows one to peel back the layers of film and uncover meaning. By utilizing these same tools, and even visualizing the action as it unfolds in Scripture, these tools could be used in a thorough text study.⁵⁸ Obviously, this is not to be a replacement for the study of the text in the original languages, nor of considering the works of commentators, and personal devotion with prayer. Rather it can be an additional tool in the pastor's bag with which he studies the Word of God.

⁵⁸ Practically speaking, the most benefit to using these tools would likely come in the narrative portions of Scripture, as movies are narratives. But that is not to say that they cannot be applied to the epistles, prophecies, wisdom literature.

Likely, these are the kinds of skills that a pastor is already using as he studies a text in preparation to preach. By analyzing the ‘plot’ of text, he is able to recognize the immediate context in which the events are happening, while also noting the overall progression and how the smaller events fit together in a cause and effect relationship. Observing the text’s plot also means seeking its context in the greater story that is God’s plan of salvation. If studying a synoptic gospel, or if the same account is located elsewhere in a different book, what sets this author’s ‘plot’ apart from the ‘plots’ of the other gospels? Why?

A pastor can look at the real-life ‘characters’ of a text and discern what their motivations are. How do their background and history influence their actions? What kind of worldview are they bringing to the ‘scene’ and of what are their actions indicative? Analyzing the atmosphere, he can determine what the givens of a text are – culturally, spiritually, politically, etc. Point of view is perhaps the most difficult, but this too can be accessed by looking at the human author of the book and determining what his aim or objective in writing is. Just like the aim of film analysis is to help the viewer discern the meaning of a movie, utilizing the same kind of analysis with Scripture can help the reader or sermon writer unearth the meaning of a text – the law and gospel.

In addition to sermon prep, movies can also be incorporated into the body of a sermon as a means of illustration. Rather than place a film as the focal point, as Konzelman suggest, a pastor use them to ground a point in a real context and help his members better picture what he is trying to say. However, doing so presents the potential to alienate those who have not seen the movie or have no interest in doing so. A few guidelines for selecting a film illustration could include: making sure the film chosen would not bring offense to anyone; making sure the scene

described is appropriate, and giving a brief synopsis of the film so that those who may not be familiar with the film will not be completely lost.

Bible Studies

Robert Konzelman's proposition that a film can serve as a sermon text was noted as being an inappropriate use of film in ministry. However, would it be inappropriate for a pastor to utilize a film as the basis for a Bible study? Professor Matthew Rindge of Gonzaga University notes that classes on the Bible and film have already become prolific in academic settings (both seminary and university) across the United States.⁵⁹ If educational institutions are engaging in this practice, why not do so at the congregational level, albeit in a much more limited and informal fashion?

Practically speaking, what does this look like? There are essentially two ways that a pastor can utilize film in a Bible class setting: 1) by utilizing carefully selected scenes that can help to make a point, illustrate some idea, or focus discussion, or 2) by viewing a movie in its entirety and then discussing such a film in a formal class or conversation based setting.⁶⁰ Either is a valid way of proceeding, although each offers some pitfalls. Rindge notes that divorcing a clip from the greater context does a disservice to the film: "Extricating a scene from its broader, intended context (that of the film) removes one of the fundamental experiences that a film offers, namely the opportunity to enter a constructed narrative world composed of characters, plot, atmosphere, music, and so forth."⁶¹ The same principle is used with Scripture. A pastor dares not pull a portion of God's Word out of context, lest he twists the intended meaning. As for a full

⁵⁹ Matthew S. Rindge, "Teaching the Bible and Film: Pedagogical Promises, Pitfalls, and Proposals" in *Teaching Theology and Religion* Vol. 13 Issue 2, April 2010, 140.

⁶⁰ Dennis Haack, "Movies for Church Leaders" in *Reformation and Revival* Vol. 7 No. 1, 1998, 183.

⁶¹ Rindge, "Teaching the Bible and Film: Pedagogical Promises, Pitfalls, and Proposals," 143.

film, some of the potential dangers involve the overall content of a film (is this going to be appropriate for everyone in the class?) and the time factor, as many movies have a run time of upwards of two hours.

Nevertheless, each approach offers value. The clip method can be a fantastic way to help people visualize what is happening in a Biblical account. In recent years there have been several big-budget Hollywood productions based on different accounts from Scripture that do a good job of showing the reality of certain events. *Exodus: Gods and Kings* (2014) has a terrific portrayal of the plagues God inflicted on Egypt. *Noah* (2014), while being a poor overall reflection of the flood account, does showcase the terror that the flood would have struck upon those who were outside of the ark. *The Passion of the Christ* (2004), while perhaps lingering too much on gore, depicts the horrors Christ endured in a realistic, though graphic, way.

Clips can also be utilized to illustrate a point brought out in Scripture. In a confirmation class I taught during my vicar year, I used a sequence from *Captain America: The First Avenger* (2011) to showcase the power of the Holy Spirit in conversion. In *Captain America* an entire team of scientists and engineers had to invent a remarkable machine using brand new technology to create the super-soldier Captain America. A host of tubes, electrical generators, and mechanical process were needed just to give one person superhuman abilities. While the result is impressive, it pales in comparison to the power of Holy Spirit to take a soul that is dead and make it alive again using nothing but the Word of God and the means of grace. No fancy technology. No advanced processes; just the still, small voice of God in his Word.

Offering an entire Bible study based around a singular film offers the opportunity to dig deep into a film and discuss it in meaningful ways. A pastor must exercise sound judgment in his selection of films, but at the same should not be deterred from choosing one purely based on the

film's rating. In some cases, it would be wise to limit the potential class for such a film, as well as full disclosure about the content of the film. Such a study would also likely require multiple class sessions.

As movies continue to dominate popular culture in the United States, it is valuable to demonstrate to members of a congregation how they can interact with and watch movies in a way that provides value and understanding, as well as giving them the ability to discern what kind of messages a film is conveying.

In addition, with WELS remaining a predominantly white church body, the opportunity to present real-life situations from the perspectives of minorities and those from different cultures is valuable. It can even help in better understanding the need to carry out the great commission to all nations. Which means that a pastor's choice of film would be wise to include selections that depict people of color and even of varying sexual orientations.

But how would one structure such a course? Linda Mercadante outlines her pedagogical method in various classes, utilizing out of class film viewing, in-class presentations led by students, as well as teaching film theory (cinematic literacy).⁶² However, her method would be overly ambitious and impractical for a congregational or small group Bible study. I propose using a simpler format, that although it does not delve as deep into the realms of cinematic literacy, it provides enough depth so as to impart more than one-time skills to the students. The study would consist of four parts per session. Part one would be viewing a portion of the film, the longer the better. Part two is a discussion of what was watched, with the instructor utilizing open questions concerning the central issues of the plot, analysis of the characters, their actions and response, as well as perhaps venturing into a few technical aspects. Part three would have the

⁶² Mercadante, "Using Film to Teach Theology," 27.

students dive into God's Word to find what Scripture has to say about the situations and events of the plot, the characters and their struggles, and the underlying message of the film. Finally, students would, in a sense, insert themselves into the film and apply God's Word to the situation.

If they were the best friend, grandmother, co-worker of a film character, how could they respond to the situations in the film? What words of encouragement or comfort could they give? This Bible study approach would allow the students to not only dig deep into a film, but would also allow for a practical study of God's Word, with immediate application they could see in a somewhat realistic situation.

Conclusion

Film has come a long way since the days of Thomas Edison's Kinetoscope parlor in New York City. Movies have captivated audiences across the globe for more than century and played a role in shaping the way people look at the world around them. Movies themselves dominate popular culture. Stars of the silver screen cover tabloids at the grocery store and fill social media newsfeeds. Movies are all around, and their popularity continues to grow.

But movies also take a look under the hood of society, so to speak. They depict the emotions and struggles of everyday life and splash them across a giant screen in a cinema. They highlight the issues that affect people today and bring them to light for new audiences who may have never known those issues existed. Whether good or bad, Movies often have their fingers on the pulse of what is currently resonating in society and put it on display for the world to see. Every movie is saying something. From the biggest blockbuster to the smallest arthouse flick, every movie has something to say. Some of those messages are profound, others are not.

For the pastor, film presents a bit of a challenge: how can he engage with this medium, so often filled with sinful images and depictions, and do so in a way that is not harmful to his own spiritual health, but rather beneficial in his calling as a pastor?

The goal of this thesis has been to present a solution to this challenge. Through study of God's Word and a willingness to recognize one's own sinful weaknesses, a pastor can prepare himself to watch movies in a God-pleasing way and exercise sound judgment in his choice of film. If a pastor wants to best serve his parishioners and those in his community, an understanding of the culture and society in which they live is important. If movies present such a powerful glimpse into that that society – both its positives and negatives – then it would stand to

reason that it is wise for a pastor to form a familiarity with the medium and, more importantly, how to interpret the messages that movies convey.

Film presents a great opportunity for a pastor to present his members with situations that are as close to real life as possible so that they can engage with their society and respond to it according to God's Word. By utilizing this medium in group Bible studies, sermon illustrations, and everyday Bible study, a pastor can challenge himself and his members to identify core issues and perceive life from new perspectives. They can wrestle with the questions that they themselves may have, without creating caricatures of other viewpoints. This study of film certainly does not replace being active in one's community and engaging with people in real life, rather it provides an additional tool with which a pastor can better understand and relate to those he serves.

Appendix A: Films Referenced

Atonement (2007)

The Social Network (2010)

Avengers: Infinity War (2018)

Toy Story 3 (2010)

Black Panther (2018)

A Trip to the Moon (1902)

Crazy Rich Asians (2018)

Wonder Woman (2017)

Deadpool (2016)

Django Unchained (2012)

Dunkirk (2017)

Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind
(2004)

Exodus: Gods and Kings (2014)

Fifty Shades of Grey (2015)

Fred Ott's Sneeze (1894)

Gone with the Wind (1939)

Joy (2015)

La La Land (2016)

Logan (2017)

Love, Simon (2018)

Noah (2014)

The Passion of the Christ (2004)

The Post (2017)

Pulp Fiction (1994)

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