INTERACTING WITH LIFE AND FAITH THROUGH FILM

Kevin Ward, Candour, August 2009

At the end of the film Forest Gump, Forest ponders over Jenny’s grave, not sure who was right about the nature of life. Mama or Lieutenant Dan. Mama’s philosophy, pictured by the feather blowing in the wind at the beginning and end that life is all about chance, like a box of chocolates, you don’t know what you are going to get until you open it. Or Lieutenant Dan, that we have a predetermined destiny, and Forest had cheated him out of his to die a war hero like his dad and grandad. On the surface Forest Gump could not be described as an overly religious film, yet it resonates with deep questions about the human condition: Who am I? Why am I here? Where am I going?

Such questions are often not far from the surface of many popular films, making it important for Christians and churches to develop an ongoing dialogue with film. Film is now ‘the medium of the masses’, facing us with a challenge and an opportunity. The challenge is to engage with the medium, recognising the deep currents that film stirs in the hearts and minds of people. The opportunity is as we engage to bring out the themes within them that resonate with gospel perspectives and to bring in gospel perspectives when helpful to the questions they raise.

The great film director Martin Scorcese said “When I was younger… I wanted to be a priest. However I soon realised that my real vocation, my real calling was the movies. I don’t really see a conflict between the church and the movies, the sacred and the profane. Obviously there are major differences. But I can also see great similarities between a church and a movie-house. Both are places for people to come together and share a common experience. And I believe there’s a spirituality in films, even if it’s not one which can supplant faith… It’s as if movies answer an ancient quest for the common unconscious. They fulfil a spiritual need that people have: to share a common memory.”

So many films now being produced are addressing the major issues of life, death, and the survival of humanity and the planet that have come to dominate the emerging reflective spirituality of our age. Anyone wanting to know what questions people are now asking, and where they are searching for answers, need only look at the output of the film industry. It was perhaps predictable that in a post modern world, that is characterised, among other things, by images this was inevitable. For films not only reflect the popular mood, they also help to create it, so that people who thought they had no profound questions about the meaning of all things find that they do, when they visit the theatre to view the latest blockbuster.

Stories are one of the main ways we make sense of the often chaotic and haphazard world we live in. We script our lives by finding and seizing upon stories that fashion sense and order out of what is generally a disorderly existence. From the stories we heard as children at bed time – which told us that evil always lurked in the dark places and the good are always redeemed in the end – to the tales, both fantasy and true, we hear through the books and films and television we enjoy. These are the building blocks of our world view. They are the lenses in the spectacles through which we see our world and interpret it.

Often unlike propositional statements, the power of the story conveys more than just facts; it connects emotionally; it provides visual images that show the relationship between things and ideas; it motivates and inspires. Its as if we can’t be without stories and we find them where we can. Stories, mythologies, give us our context, they connect us as human beings to each other. Increasingly as our culture moves from that of modernity, with it’s linear propositional statements of truth, to a postmodern culture, meaning, ideas and values are packaged in narrative forms. Initially in an oral culture stories were told orally. Then as literacy advanced and, especially after Guttenburg when mass production became possible, literature became the primary means. Charles Dickens and Jane Austen became the great myth makers of our culture. Literature is still important for passing on story, but far more popular today is film.
George Miller (Babe, Mad Max and The Witches of Eastwick) suggests that cinemas have become our covert new cathedrals. “I believe cinema is now the most powerful secular religion and people gather in cinemas to experience things collectively the way they once did in church. The cinema story tellers have become the new priests. They’re doing a lot of the work of our religious institutions, which have taken so much of the poetry, mystery and mysticism out of religious belief, that people look for other places to question their spirituality.” While Geoffrey Hill in Illuminating Shadows writes that “As ironic modern worshippers we congregate in cinematic temple. We pay our votive offering at the box office. We buy ritual corn. We hush in reverent anticipation as the lights go down and the celluloid magic begins. Throughout the filmic narrative we identify the hero, vilify the antihero. We vicariously exult in the victories of the drama. And we are spiritually inspired by the moral of the story, all the while believing we are modern technopeople, devoid of religion. Yet the depths and intensity of our participation reveal a religious fervour that is not much different from that of religious zealots.”

The experience of watching a film is that of being temporarily drawn into an alternative experience of reality in which we are exposed to particular stories about basic issues of human existence. The myths portrayed on the screen may offer idealised stories of how life might be lived or dilemmas resolved and so can serve as a challenge as to how we might live in the real worlds we inhabit. They can then offer an image of how we can live and act well and so become a resource for reflecting on our own existence. The religious or spiritual dimension of George Lucas’ Star Wars saga has been well commented on and Lucas himself, who employed myth scholar Joseph Campbell as a consultant for the films, was quite open about the religious dimension. In an interview with Bill Moyes he claimed it was unfortunate that younger people no longer attended religious institutions as they had in the past and from which they learned the myths from which they gained their values and beliefs. He felt this was a great loss for society and so what he was trying to do in Star Wars was to create a new myth on which people could gain a religious perspective to provide the values and beliefs for living. He hoped it was not one for anyone particular religion, but one by which any religion could be carried. Alan Gordon argues that “In an era in which Americans have lost heroes in whom to believe, Lucas has created a myth for our times, fashioned out of bits and pieces of twentieth century U.S. popular mythology… but held together at its most basic level by the standard pattern of the adventures of the mythic hero.”

Since then other sagas such as Harry Potter, Matrix, Lord of the Rings and now Tales of Narnia have clearly performed a similar function. However many more popular and not so obviously spiritual films, such as Titanic, Forest Gump, Shawshank Redemption, American Beauty and from a New Zealand context Whale Rider also function in similar ways.

Does art reflect life or life reflect art?
As a major cultural expression, films have the power both to reflect and shape our society. They invariably portray ways of seeing and understanding something of the world in which we live. Such worldviews can support, challenge or subvert the political, philosophical and religious foundations on which our society is built.

Irrespective of whether obvious religious themes are present, films say something about the world in which we live and about the values which we live by. Their sheer pervasiveness affords a huge potential for influence. This should not be underestimated. Just as politics is too important for religions to leave to politicians, film is far too influential for us not to engage with it religiously, and I would add Christianly. Without such engagement there is no way of knowing how we as a society are portrayed by, and how we are shaped by, the films that are viewed by millions. Equally not to engage with films would be to miss opportunities to offer religious responses to the central human concerns that films are conveying.
Some of the most common questions are Who am I? What am I here for? Where am I going? Why is there suffering? Is there hope of redemption? How do I face death? They are just some of the questions that recur time and again in films. Sometimes they are answered in a very simplistic way which ignores the complexity of life. But nevertheless, the questions are very often there in a film if you scratch beneath the surface, even if they are not immediately obvious.

Engaging faith and film

If we come to film with a particular faith perspective dialogue is the key. Faith issues need to be brought alongside the film and the two be allowed to interact. God is active in the world today so we ought to have an openness to our faith being informed and changed by film. If we are serious about this task, we need to be open to the possibility that film will challenge us and sometimes cause us to rethink our understanding and expression of whatever faith we hold important.

Films frequently raise important issues and pressing concerns. It is a medium which has an immediate impact and power and has huge potential to influence people for good or bad. Alternative viewpoints and philosophies of life are also communicated to huge audiences. Consequently film presents a unique opportunity for us to meet others on their own ground and enter into dialogue.

Film can be an important dialogue partner for people of particular religious traditions who are interested in thinking seriously about their faith. In a sense film is a source of revelation – not necessarily about the nature of God or salvation or particular religious figures (although it can). Rather it is regularly and powerfully a source of revelation about ourselves and our world – about the “signs of the times.” Films reveal what we value as human beings, our hopes and fears. It asks our deepest questions, expresses our strongest rage and reflects our most basic dreams.

By raising peoples awareness of how to think about films can stimulate them to think about and interact with others on religious themes raised in films such as:

- the search for identity; (very postmodern issue)
- alienation and redemption;
- the sacredness of the universe;
- the concepts of grace and forgiveness;
- the nature of true love in relationships;
- what does it means to be human;
- the nature of evil;
- the question of death;

Figures indicate that going to movies is the only collective voluntary activity that more people do over a year than going to church. For this reason it is vital that Christians and the church learn how to engage positively and critically with this powerful cultural expression that does so much to shape the values, attitudes and behaviours of people today.