Hidden Biblical Characters in Popular Films: A Preliminary Survey of Four Categories of Sacred Subtext

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Abstract

Biblical characters are some of the most prolific types of subtexts hidden within the cinema, and they are an important, if frequently unacknowledged source of local entertainment for the video generation. However, popular films are not just diversionary entertainment, they can also be employed as: (a) faith enhancers, (b) knowledge bearers, (c) revelatory sources, and (d) applied religious education. The critical literature was reviewed, religious contamination fears were addressed, and selected sacred subtexts were explicated pertaining to: (a) the Old Testament, (b) the New Testament, (c) Christ-figures, and (d) biblical hybrids. It was concluded that these subtextual figurations are pedagogically useful for a 21st century visual piety approach to religious education. Further research into this exciting interdisciplinary field was encouraged.

Introduction

Filmic subtexts (aka infranarratives) have had a long and honourable history in the popular cinema, particularly biblical ones (Kozlovic, 2001). What are they? In essence, a filmic narrative can have a dual nature, that is, an overt storyline plus a covert storyline of varying complexity that is comparable to the metaphorical or symbolic within literature. As Bernard Dick (1998, p. 129) described the relationship: “the narrative and infranarrative (or text and subtext) are not two separate entities (there is, after all, only one film); think of them, rather, as two concentric circles, the infranarrative being within the narrative.” Through this arrangement, overtly secular films (e.g., science fiction) can engage in religious storytelling (e.g., about Jesus Christ) without appearing “religious,” albeit, this is not always consciously recognised by viewers.

As such, they are a viable theological resource for religious education and other instructive contexts, especially considering that “most people (even churchgoers) will watch more films than they will read books” (Ellis, 2001, p. 304), and coupled with a decline in both public church attendance and Bible reading habits. For example, amongst Year 9 and 10 students in Britain, only 5% (of 33,134) read the Bible at least once a week, while 66% never read it at all (Francis, 2000). This negative trend can lead to cultural illiteracy because our youth are not being instructed in the foundational myths of their Judeo-Christian heritage, regardless of whether they are believers or not. Regrettably, the Churches have not be rushing to address these problems, nor have they allowed Media Studies to fill in the gap, despite this being the age of the moving image, and nearly everyone today is a child of the media.

Church Resistance to Moving Image Culture

One of the traditional historical reasons for the Churches’ resistance to the cinema was the “popular” nature of feature films, particularly with its negative connotations of lower class, inferior quality and ephemeralness (i.e., the modern day equivalents of pharisaic condemnation and intolerance). Fortunately, these negative criticisms are less relevant today, coupled with the increasing number of testimonies from the religious who have experienced movie magic and been deeply touched by it. Such as Lutheran pastoral assistant Marlene Pietsch (2001) who reflected:
...what if I’d never seen Schindler’s List or Dead Man Walking or Babette’s Feast? They have encouraged much personal reflection on the themes of suffering, forgiveness and grace. Vivid images from them remain embedded in my memory (p. 164).

For others, the secular nature of film and fears of religious contamination are still a potent concern, and so it must be dealt with logically and compassionately before the field can progress pedagogically.

The Quelling of Religious Contamination Fears

For those worried about popular films as a religious pollutant or source of evil, one need only be reminded of the expulsive power of the Lord whom they can call upon in prayer for protection. Indeed, it could be argued that Christians need to be tough-minded to function adequately in a secular environment, and so popular film-watching can be a safe way to toughen them up while being in the world, but not of the world. Even if secular contamination is a real possibility, then Chaplain Bruce Fleming’s (2001) compassionate advice is pertinent here. Namely:

The early Church Fathers were able to discern intimations of Christianity in the pagan classics. Likewise, we might perceive the pointers to the Gospel in our own culture. It is by taking someone’s hand that we can lead them a bit further, but if we are always asking them to wash their hands first for fear of our own pollution, we will not be engaging them faithfully or fruitfully...we must remember that our hands are not spotless, and the perfection we so confidently claim comes second-hand unmerited... To share that Good News, occasionally we may have to reach out and take a dirty hand in ours (p. 23).

Not only was this good theological advice, but it was also good practical advice for as Marlene Pietsch (2001) pointed out:

Even if we regard it as pollution, popular entertainment is part of the air we breathe. This is the culture into which we bring the gospel, and we need to understand its myths and preoccupations. Perhaps it is films especially that provide an interesting point of contact between young and old, Christian and non-Christian...If we can use films and books to address these questions [of life and faith], and if they can at the same time delight us with their poetry or visual images, we have a powerful tool (p. 164).

One wholeheartedly agrees with her. Indeed, popular feature films can be proactively employed in at least four different ways, namely, as: (a) faith enhancers, (b) knowledge bearers, (c) revelatory sources, and (d) applied religious education.

1.0 Popular Films as Faith Enhancers

The 20th century anti-film fears of resentment and ridicule are slowly dying and being replaced by a more enlightened 21st century attitudes that see popular films as important for religious education because of their popularity. As Revd. Robert Ellis (2001, p. 304) put it: “It is precisely in those movies which might at first be dismissed as ‘popular’ that the most fruitful theological engagement may come.” Indeed, “because they are popular it is clear that the message these films communicate resonates with their audience” (Ellis, 2001, p. 305). So, what competent educator would willingly flitter away such a huge pool of good will and demonstrated pedagogic engagement?

For the religiously troubled, one only need be reminded of the preaching technique of the Apostle Peter on Mars’ Hill. He addressed the intelligentsia of Athens by confidently quoting pagan inscriptions (Acts 17:22-23), and during his discourse he referred to pagan poets using the following rhetorical tactic: “as certain also of your own poets have said” (Acts 17:28). If this
eminent Apostle considered it a useful tactic to quote secular sources for his missionary work, might not contemporary secular films serve the same instructive purpose? One is compelled to say a resounding “Yes!”

2.0 Popular Films as Knowledge Bearers

Nor is this filmic pathway just a bit of cheap diversionary fun. It can also serve legitimate and valuable Scripture Study purposes. For example, biblical scholar Mark Goodacre (2001) argued that film analysis was a useful new approach to resolving the Synoptic Problem by preventing academics from going around in circles making the same sort of mistakes as they keep investigating the same texts in the same old ways. Instead:

...there is a wealth of research waiting to be done on the ways in which Jesus films, for example, have combined and conflated synoptic (and Johannine) data, study that will no doubt prove not only to be generated by awareness of the Synoptic Problem, but which may also, in turn, shed fresh light on it (p. 30).

As he later suggested: “Instead of engaging only with Luke’s use of Matthew, why not also look at Pier Paolo Pasolini’s treatment of the same source in the film The Gospel According to St Matthew? Who knows?—fresh conversation partners might have fresh insights to bring” (Goodacre, 2001, p. 167), as biblical scholar George Aichele (2002) demonstrated when he analysed Pasolini’s film.

3.0 Popular Films as Revelatory Sources

It makes good sense to use a modern communications medium which contains theological issues to explore Christian desires, and especially one that provides new insights that people also find interesting. Indeed, not only can film-watching be highly entertaining and intellectually instructive, but it can also have divine, revelatory possibilities. As Fr. Michael Scully (1997) confessed:

I believe that movies...are ways that God speaks to us. More importantly, since most of us are engaged in religious education, I believe God speaks to the youth we instruct, through movies. If we as educators of youth can somehow get across to them that God is talking to them even in a movie they enjoy, perhaps they will be more receptive to God’s grace in their real lives (p. 1).

Therefore, it is worth watching popular films just for this sacred possibility.

4.0 Popular Films as Applied Religious Education

One thing is certain, film “as a medium for theological debate and exploration is here to stay” (Ellis, 2001, p. 304), and so the profession should be addressing the relevant issues as quickly as possible. For those bored or uncomfortable with overtly religious films of the Cecil B. DeMille ilk such as Samson and Delilah or The Ten Commandments, then pursuing “overtly religious themes in a secular ‘wrapper’” (Ellis, 2001, p. 304) via sacred subtext-hunting is a viable alternative. The critical literature was reviewed and selected cinematic examples were chosen to illustrate four important subtextual categories, namely: (a) Old Testament titillations, (b) New Testament testimonies, (c) the Christ-figure superstars, and (d) the biblical hybrids.

4.1 Old Testament Titillations

This category focuses upon the characters and themes from the Old Testament. For example, Bernard Dick (1998) considered the reporter film The Big Carnival (aka Ace in the Hole) starring Charles “Chuck” Tatum (Kirk Douglas) to be a cinematic recreation of the Genesis myth. As he claimed:
[Director Billy Wilder]... is using as the film’s subtext one of the oldest myths known to man—the lost paradise, the Eden infiltrated by the evil serpent. We are back in an archetypal garden, here a New Mexico desert community, where an innocent Adam lies transfixed in a cave, his Eve bites into an apple as if she were glorying in the taste of forbidden fruit...and a serpent’s coils vibrate against cardboard (p. 138).

Indeed:

The film then becomes an inversion of the book of Genesis, complete with a parody of the six days of creation. Had the rescue operation taken place as planned, Leo [Richard Benedict] would have been freed in sixteen hours, But he cannot last the week. A priest administers the last rites; a host is placed on the end of a long-handled device, which resembles a serpent creeping toward the dying communicant. Leo succumbs on the sixth day, his death bringing the grotesque parody of the creation myth to a close as the shadow of a snake passes across his resigned face. The desert is still; presumably the seventh day will be one of rest (p. 138).

Maurice Yacowar saw similar Edenic resonances in I Confess starring Fr. Michael Logan (Montgomery Clift) as a metaphoric Adam, and Ruth Grandfort (Anne Baxter) as a metaphoric Eve. This was Alfred Hitchcock’s priest film about a murderer who hid behind the seal of the Catholic confessional. As Yacowar (1972-73) claimed:

Christian myth permeates the film. Villette [Ovila Legare] is the serpent in Eden. He has two gardens, one where he first discovers Logan and Ruth, and one in town, which he hires Keller [O. E. Hasse] to tend...Keller is more a human agent of evil, the Cain figure, a man without a country, driven by his evil compulsions to kill the things dear to him, his wife and his best friend, Logan. There is even an obligatory apple in the film, eaten ostentatiously by a fat woman in front of Otto and Alma [Dolly Haas] when Logan is mobbed outside the courtroom. At that point of the film Father Logan wins his duel with Keller in their allegorical struggle for Keller’s soul; “Alma,” of course means “soul.” Keller loses his soul to his destructive urges here, but manages a pious death in Father Logan’s arms...The curse upon Ruth is that she is unable to forget the Eden she experienced earlier with Michael...Logan’s curse is the inescapable imperfection of man... (pp. 20-21).

In a similar interpretative fashion, Keefer and Linafelt (1999) detected erotic parallels between Breaking the Waves and the Song of Solomon. As they argued:

Just as the concept of Eros functioned to link the divine and the human in the allegorical interpretation of the Song of Songs, so does the embodiment of Eros in the character of Bess [Emily Watson] serve to link the divine and human in Breaking the Waves. As human sexuality and theology mingle in the allegorical commentaries on the Song of Songs, so do Bess’s desire for God and her desire for Jan [Stellan Skarsgard] come together (p. 59).

Moses-figures, Job-figures and Delilah-figures frequently inhabit this genre category.

4.2 New Testament Testimonies

This category focuses upon characters and themes from the New Testament with, or without, Jesus Christ. For example, Caroline Vander Stichelen (2000) considered that the human-looking, Maria-as-robot (Brigitte Helm) from the silent SF classic Metropolis, was an exemplar of the Great Whore of Babylon from Revelation (17:1-19:3). Why? Because:

...she makes an appearance on stage, scarcely dressed in a futuristic oriental outfit, holding a cup in her right hand, and standing on a beast which looks like a giant turtle or snail with seven heads. The workers in the forefront stretch their hands out to her. In the end, however, the robot undergoes the same fate as the Great Whore, because the same workers burn her as a witch. In this case an interesting dialectic takes place between the robot ‘playing’ the Great Whore and the Great Whore, reincarnated as robot (p. 128).
Similarly, Donna Bowman (2001) saw a number of New Testament figures in the Brazilian film Central Station (aka Centro do Brasil) which she considered was a compelling religious allegory of the Christian mythos. For example, she saw a cinematic transfiguration of the Holy Family because: “Josue [Vinicius de Oliveira] repeatedly stares at pictures of the Virgin and Child. It’s clear that in the context of the plot, Dora [Fernando Montenegro] is the virgin and Josue is the child. The boy is looking to complete the picture with a father” (p. 3). Later on:

...Dora [is] sleeping on a sidewalk with her head in Josue’s lap, a gender-inverted Pieta. The man inhabiting the first house they visit is named Jesse (a reference to King David’s father and Jesus’ ancestor); he points the way to Jesus [the name of the boy’s absent father-cum-absent-Christ-figure]. When they finally reach Jesus’ house, there is a painting on the wall of father, mother and child – the first time Josue has seen a trinity rather than the Virgin-Child duality (p. 4).

Judas-figures, John-the-Baptist figures and Mary Magdalene-figures frequently inhabit this genre category. However, the star of all these biblical subtexts is the Christ-figure.

### 4.3 The Christ-Figure Superstars

This category specifically focuses upon the cinematic transmutations of Jesus Christ from the New Testament (and sometimes from other extracanonical sources). For example, Bernard Dick (1998) saw NYC undercover cop Frank Serpico (Al Pacino) as a Christ-figure in Serpico. There was a certain physical resemblance between the bearded Serpico with his mesmeric eyes, and pop art depictions of Jesus. But more significantly, this cop’s non-conformism, diligent exposure of corruption, and resultant rage resembled Jesus’s religious radicalism and holy vandalism towards the merchants abusing God’s holy house (Matt. 21:12). Like Christ, Serpico was “a cop who found his apostolate on the streets and underwent the traditional scapegoat cycle of harassment, betrayal, and desertion” (Dick, 1998, p. 141).

Nor do Christ-figures necessarily have to be male to be legitimate. For example, Steve Lansingh (1999) saw Ripley (Sigourney Weaver) in the SF classic Aliens as a female Christ-figure rather than a feminist Rambo. As he argued:

Perhaps the most striking Christlikeness of Ripley isn’t just the fact that she’s a savior, it’s that she’s a personal savior. She get to know Newt [aka Rebecca Jorden (Carrie Henn)]; she protects her from the horror but doesn’t lie to her about danger; she promises never to leave Newt. Her actions are reminiscent of Christ’s when he talks about leaving the herd of sheep to save the one lost lamb [Luke 15:4] (p. 4).

Similarly, Samuel Ewing (2001) saw Superman’s Kryptonian cousin Kara/Linda Lee/ Supergirl (Helen Slater) in Supergirl as:

...a Female Messiah figure...[who has] experiences with fighting the Shadow (Biblical Dragon/Satan), traveling [sic] through inner space in an egg shaped craft that becomes a flower (the World Egg), her love for nature, using lightning against the Dragon, fighting to save the human male sweetheart, descending into Hell to death then rising with renewed power as if resurrected, Argo city (the Solar Ark of Deity in ancient texts) etc...The main theme of this movie is that Supergirl is pure Love Personified from the descent and human perspective to the cosmic level (npn).

Indeed, alien Christ-figures are a particular Hollywood favourite in this genre category.

### 4.4 The Biblical Hybrids

The above three categories are fairly neat and orderly, but on occasion, subtextual characters can result
from a fusion of two or more sacred identities to create biblical hybrids. Two fundamental sorts exist, namely: (a) between Testament hybrids, and (b) within Testament hybrids.

4.4.1 The Between Testament Hybrids

This phenomenon was very pronounced in the portrayal of Karl Childers (Billy Bob Thornton) in Sling Blade. It was a fusion of the Christ-figure, the New Testament and the Old Testament which forced people “to reconsider all they ever thought about motivation, love, and the law” (Vaux, 1999, p. 142). The mentally retarded Karl (as hinted at by his surname Childs) had spent the last twenty-five years in a psychiatric “nervous hospital” for murdering his mother and her lover. Nevertheless, this frequently called “re-tard,” and presumed village idiot, displayed an intense purity of heart in what was considered by Sara Anson Vaux (1999, p. 144) to be “a remarkable modern telling of Matthew 25.” As Daniel Batt (1998) elaborated:

Thorton portrays Karl as a Christlike figure. His only possessions are a Bible and books on carpentry and Christmas [i.e., accoutrements with Christic resonances]. He has a gentle and deep self-giving morality. And in the final scenes of the film, three of the characters call out to him three times as he goes to confront Doyle [Dwight Yoakam]. Thorton uses this inversion of Peter’s betrayal of Jesus to create a moral ambivalence over Karl’s actions. Sling Blade makes no secret of only ever leading to this final confrontation, which is a strange mix of Christ-like self-sacrifice and Old Testament Law (p. 2).

Vaux (1999, p. 145) also detected another New Testament resonance in Karl’s life. Namely, “a sad recasting of the parable of the prodigal son (Luke 15:11-32), [when] Karl confronts his father with the baby’s death [i.e., his brother] and his own [physical and emotional] abuse. His father continues to say that he has no son” and in essence he abandons Karl for a second agonising time.

Of course, hidden biblical characters do not have to be limited to human beings to have religious import. For example, critics have considered the marauding Great White Shark with its smart, malignant disposition in Jaws as a nature symbol of “menacing evil” (Malone, 1988, p. 35), or as “a demonic representative of the Dark Force” (Drummond, 1996, p. 219), possibly “the devil incarnate” (Kozloff, 1981, p. 82). Mythologically speaking, Lee Drummond (1996, p. 205) considered Jaws to be “old semiotic wine in the new cultural bottles of the moving picture” whilst biblicists Jewett and Lawrence (1977, p. 142) considered the filmic narrative as an American monomyth that had fused together “Apocalyptic…[and] retributive ecstasy.” They considered the story to be situated in an “Edenic setting…Amity Island…[which] suggests paradisal qualities” (p. 149), indeed, “Amity is Eden compared to New York” (p. 151). It subsequently featured “a disruption of paradise by evil” (p. 149) in the form of a killer shark variously characterised by Lee Drummond (1996) as “a demonic being unleashed from the deep recesses of the Death Force…[it was] Animal as an Evil Other” (p. 219), it was “the face of Evil itself” (p. 220), “an evil, malignant thing of the sea” (p. 221).

Jaws had plenty of blood (itself an iconic feature of Christianity) and was a film which Jewett and Lawrence (1977, p. 156) characterised as a “redemption drama with a sexually segmented redeemer.” This redeemer was in the form of Sheriff Brody, the resident “patriarchal savior of the community” (Ryan & Kellner, 1988, p. 57) who had to combat the evil shark as his professional nemesis (biologically, socially, spiritually, metaphorically). Indeed, Jane Caputi (1978, p. 309) argued that: “Christian symbolism in Jaws extends beyond its echoes of Leviathan,” that is, the biblical forerunner to the monster shark (Ps. 74:13-14). She considered that the film’s three main protagonists, Sheriff Brody (Roy Schneider), shark hunter Quint (Robert Shaw) and ichthyologist Hooper (Richard Dreyfuss) are a “surrogate Christian Trinity” (p. 310). “We need not strain to discern that these three men are the superstar surrogates of three other well-known figures, the Father, Son and Holy Ghost of the Christian religion [Matt. 28:19], performing their appointed and mythic mission” (pp. 310-311).
In any case, “Jaws affirms that we live in a good world which, despite horrors, is not destroyed by an evil principle” (Malone, 1988, p. 35), but who is itself obliterated by Sheriff Brody as the conquering Christ-figure. The sacred had once again defeated the sinister. Why is Brody triumphant? In addition to it being an expected Hollywood convention, the shark is “a metaphoric projection of fear” (Ryan & Kellner, 1988, p. 168) and so this “Evil must vanish from the face of the earth” (Britton, 1979, p. 54) to ensure everlasting peace. Well, almost, until its many filmic sequels with its equally menacing relatives arrived! Indeed, the death-based “reward for the audience conforms to a Deuteronomic pattern of compensating every virtue and punishing every vice” (Jewett & Lawrence, 1977, p. 159).

Sheriff Brody (metaphorically Jesus/Good) wins, the shark (metaphorically the Devil/Evil) looses, and safety and order (moral, spiritual, physical, social) returns to Amity Island (metaphorically a peaceful Edenic world once again).

4.4.2 The Within Testament Hybrids

This phenomenon was very pronounced in Jesus of Montreal where the character of Pascal Berger (Cedric Noel) was an NT resonating hybrid of Judas Iscariot and John the Baptist. Pascal was a Judas-figure because: “Symbolically he has hanged himself at the climax of the play which opens the film” (Malone, 1990, p. 42). At film’s end, via his advertising poster image, he became Judas again by “allowing his face to be prostituted, [so] he metaphorically hangs himself spiritually” (Fraser, 1998, p. 103). Pascal was also a John the Baptist-figure at the beginning of the film. After the on-screen theatrical play had ended and the actors mingled with the public:

...Pascal turns from the risibly effusive Garibaldi -- who is just then declaring him “the greatest actor of your generation” -- to Daniel (Lothaire Bluteau) and declares, “Excuse me, but there is a good actor”...This is a mutual recognition scene...[that] can be seen to correspond to the episode of mutual recognition between Jesus and John the Baptist that in the Gospels prefaces Christ’s ministry [Matt. 3:13-17]...Pascal’s last appearance in the film, his head served up on a platter [Matt. 14:11], is the garish advertising poster, confirming [that] Quintal [(Monique Miller) as a Salome-figure] has got what she said she wanted of him [i.e., his head] (Testa, 1995, pp. 98-99).

Similarly, in his analysis of The Matrix, Chad Barnett (2000, p. 366) accepted the argument that Neo (Keanu Reeves) was a messianic figure. He then reinforced it by making links between Christ and other New Testament figures that were presumably built into the character’s name. For example, he claimed that: “Neo’s real name is Thomas Anderson, which simultaneously suggests Doubting Thomas and the Son of Man; a particularly relevant name given Neo’s reluctance [to accept] that he is the messiah [sic] come to save humanity.” Indeed, The Matrix is replete with numerous biblical references and worthy of further research. So, despite the diversity of these sacred subtexts, what is their legitimacy?

Celluloid Religion as Rhinestone Theology?

Peter Manseau (2001, p. 1) termed the phrase “rhinestone theology” to describe Hollywood dressing up its product with religiosity. These films are supposedly “plastic sentiments that sparkle in the right light but are not worth much in the end....[being only] God-flavoured fluff.” Indeed, even the enterprise of Christ-figure hunting sits uneasily with some religious commentators. For example, Revd. Robert Ellis (2001, p. 305) noted the “temptation to find such ‘Christ’s’ too readily,” while Linda Mercadante (2001, p. 1) was “often concerned that... students, in effect, “baptize” films that did not ask to be converted.” She was also concerned about the negative lessons that might be learnt by her students while engaging in the enterprise. As she confessed regarding the heavenly blessed (or mentally unstable?) Bess (Emily Watson) in Breaking the Waves. “I worry that when they do find a film with distinct Christic allusions, they may uncritically accept images that have been used to
promote or justify destructive human behavior” (Mercadante, 2001, p. 1). Notably, Bess’s repeated prostituting of herself with the local men in the carnal-psychotic/spiritual(?) cause of her paralysed husband Jan (Stellan Skarsgard).

For other critics, filmic Christ-figures were so common that they experienced minor revulsion. As Peter Manseau (2001) annoyingly confessed:

You know the drill: The Matrix dresses Keann Reeves up like a eurotrash seminarian, calls him “Neo” and hopes we’ll buy him as the new New Adam. The Green Mile tells the story of death row inmate John Coffey (J.C., get it?): “Like the Lord, but spelled different,” he’s Jesus too. In a similar grab for ever-allusive “meaning,” The Beach kills off a character named Christoff for the sole purpose of pushing audiences to ponder, “Like, did that guy die for Leo’s sins?” Nice try, but it all made me think was, Jesus Christ, enough already (p. 1)!

These concerns, even if valid, do not mean that one should abandon the enterprise, or adopt a head-in-the-ground approach. Rather, one needs to become more empowered in dealing with both the issues and the diversity of subtextual figurations through proactive engagement with popular films, even if they may be nothing more substantial than “theological costume jewelry” (Manseau, 2001, p. 2). But then, as Nathanael said of Jesus: “Can there any good thing can come out of Nazareth?” (John 1:46), and no doubt he was presumably very surprised later on, as will diligent film-watchers. Pragmatically speaking, this means learning the art of film analysis to the point where such concerns evaporate, or are able to be managed correctly in educational contexts. If done faithfully and with excellence, it has intrinsic merit beyond the putatively obvious.

Conclusion

The more one looks for sacred subtexts in popular films, the more can be found there, especially if one has eyes to see and ears to hear (Ezek. 44:5). This “hidden” dimension is one of the enduring trade secrets of successful feature filmmakers, and so it is worthy of further research as both cinematic art and cultural reconnaissance. It is also very important as religious education, especially for the video generation who are continually immersed in a moving image culture. Cinematic theology (aka religion-and-film, celluloid religion, theo-film) is what Prof. Fr. Andrew Greeley (1988, p. 9), called a “locus theologicus,” that is, a theological place in which one may encounter God, learn about God, tell stories about God, and teach about God. This itself can be an intrinsically pleasurable event. As Revd. Robert Ellis (2001, pp. 304-8) noted: “we shall sometimes stumble across the gospel travelling incognito in some celebrated box office hit. Such a joyful discovery is reason enough to take seriously this powerful and popular medium.” In which case, both God and humankind are well served by utilising these visual piety aides to religious education. Further research into this exciting interdisciplinary field is warranted, warmly encouraged, and highly recommended.

Endnotes

1. All scriptural quotes refer to the Authorised King James Version of the Bible.

References


Batt, D. (1998, February update). Slingblade – “fascinating”, are the poor in spirit...


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**Filmography**

*Aliens* (1986, dir. James Cameron)

*Babette’s Feast* (1987, dir. Gabriel Axel)

*The Beach* (2000, dir. Danny Boyle)

*The Big Carnival* (aka *Ace in the Hole*) (1951, dir. Billy Wilder)

*Breaking the Waves* (1996, dir. Lars von Trier)

*Central Station* (aka *Centro do Brasil*) (1998, dir. Walter Salles)

*Dead Man Walking* (1995, dir. Tim Robbins)


*I Confess* (1953, dir. Alfred Hitchcock)

*Jaws* (1975, dir. Steven Spielberg)

*Jesus of Montreal* (1989, dir. Denys Arcand)


*Metropolis* (1926, dir. Fritz Lang)

*Samson and Delilah* (1949, dir. Cecil B. DeMille)

*Schindler’s List* (1993, dir. Steven Spielberg)

*Serpico* (1973, dir. Sidney Lumet)


*Supergirl* (1984, dir. Jeannot Szwarc)

*The Ten Commandments* (1956, dir. Cecil B. DeMille)