

# Hollywood & the Holy Word - Film & Biblical Echoes

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An article exploring opportunities for a creative dialogue between film, general revelation and biblical evangelism.

There's a tunnel on an eco-trail that follows the path of an old railway line behind the town where I live. Its dark and damp, has an unpleasant odour, and the walls are covered with questionable graffiti and chewed gum. Yet whether we are walking, cycling or jogging, my family can't resist a pause in that tunnel. The children's faces light up as we shout at the top of our voices for the thrill of hearing the echoes reverberate around us. We are the only ones there, but the very place speaks of others, and the irony is that although alone, we feel surrounded.

Contrast this with the image of a commuter. Sitting on a train crowded with other people, he shuts everybody out with the simple accessory of an ipod - he is surrounded, yet alone. But the deeper irony in this is that he is actually still surrounded. Choirs and orchestras fill his ears as he immerses himself in the experience of that bustling concert hall, or packed out stadium.

## Significance

Peter Berger and Thomas Luckman take these ironies one step further, observing that cultures simultaneously exist - as both objective and subjective reality. [1] The cultural artifacts that we produce, such as music, poetry and film, are at one level tangible expressions of the inner life. But their intrinsically subjective nature often produces an undeniable objective response as it shapes the cultural environment that affects our human life, thought and experience. Clifford Geertz illustrates this:

'the concept of culture I espouse' is essentially a semiotic one. Believing with Max Weber, that man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun. [2]

Humanity enjoys listening to its own voice, whether this is children making echoes in a tunnel, or commuters listening to music on their i-pods on a train. But as we reflect on the skill, beauty and creativity of the artists our individual, subjective experience begins to influence our actual, objective reality, connecting us with one another in these 'webs of significance'.

But the echoes of our own voices and the voices of other people throughout history and around the globe are joined by another far more significant voice. The voice that spoke creation into being reverberates around the universe still. It speaks to the children discovering science and nature and it speaks to the commuters discovering culture, however isolated they think they may be.

It is precisely because the subjective voices of our culture has the power to shape our reality that it is vital that we try to hear past them to recognize God's authoritative voice echoing through iTunes, the internet and the film industry. Helping these echoes become more audible is a powerful resource in our evangelistic and apologetic ministry. It draws on the *sensus divinitatis* that haunts every heart, and points out the fingerprints that the creator of the universe left on all that exists and on the moral sense that informs every conscience.

In our western cultures we are used to the latent biblical echoes that have infused classical art and literature, and have shaped our language and our heritage. However as these echoes resonate in contemporary culture, we will see that God's voice continues to speak in perhaps the most unlikely of places, and we will explore how, through watching films more closely, we can tune in ourselves, and

help others to hear the timeless message of eternal life.

## Source

The Bible teaches that even without the special revelatory influence of God's word, his people or his Spirit, something about God can be discovered through general revelation. In western cultures it can be difficult to differentiate between general revelation and the lasting impact of the historical biblical values that once underpinned our societies. For example, general revelation may cause someone to experience a sense of wonder as they reflect on the intricacies of the created order (Romans 1:18-20), or a sense of guilt due to a personal pang of conscience (Romans 2) or a longing for a connectedness with a higher being (through the *sensus divinitatis* in Ecclesiastes). The social impact of a historical Christian heritage however can also be seen as that same sense of wonder compels the viewer to sing 'All things bright and beautiful' or as the guilt is expressed in terms of the fear of social exclusion, or as the connectedness is sought out in a cathedral or other recognized 'sacred space'.

In the short term the source of the echo makes little difference either to the receiver or to the evangelist. Whether based on aspects of general revelation, or cultural biblical memories, these examples demonstrate points of contact between the world and the gospel. In the longer term if the decline in biblical literacy both within and outside of the church community goes unchecked we can expect the echoes based on biblical memory to diminish, just as the clarity of an echo dissipates the further you move from the source of the echo. However the echoes of God's general revelation will always remain in any and every culture as God will not leave himself without witness.

The chart (on my website) indicates the different ways in which we experience God's voice echoing through contemporary culture. We will look closer at each type of echo using an example from film to show how points of contact can be detected. There are two main distinctions that need to be highlighted. Firstly the echoes can be either intentionally or unintentionally included by the author or creator of the cultural artifact. Secondly those echoes can be either convergent with biblical truth or inverted appearing opposed to biblical truth. Recognising these polarities can help us to locate the echoes as the following examples will illustrate.

### Intentionally Convergent Echo

Some films deliberately seek to grapple with biblical themes even if their directors are not Christian. The Matrix Trilogy is an example of this where the authors mix shades of Buddhist thinking, Christian thinking and number theory to interesting effect. The Messianic figure of the character Neo, the chosen one, experiences death and resurrection, the love of the character called Trinity and victory over the dark forces. These themes have been powerfully used by evangelists to illustrate the big picture of the gospel.

Alternatively we could look at the more recent film *Gran Torino* where Clint Eastwood plays Walt, an angry war veteran who has seen his neighbourhood 'invaded' by, in his eyes, the very people he fought against in Korea. But he is transformed by the generous hospitality of his neighbours and his growing incense at the injustice around him. The climax of the film shows Walt facing down the gang that has been terrorizing the neighborhood leaving the audience to expect the typical gunslinger victory finale. Instead Walt poignantly forsakes violence, and offers himself as a willing victim in a gruesome yet heroic death that leaves his enemies undone by their own evil and Walt dead on the pavement in cruciform.

A film like this follows Brian Godawa's archetype of a core redemptive narrative and can be used evangelistically both as a foretaste and foil for the gospel, as it is discussed in terms of how it compares and contrasts with the story of Christ's passion. The biblical references are deliberate but they are inadequate to express the richness and subtleties of biblical revelation. In a missional

context the echoes can be incredibly helpful as touchpoints for the gospel, but the film is not the medium for the nuanced exposition of Scripture or the direct exegesis of doctrine. Instead film can reference, evoke and provide narrative expressions of elements of biblical theology that can awaken an appetite for Scripture.

#### Unintentionally convergent echo

Some films inadvertently demonstrate a biblical echo. *Finding Nemo*, *Changeling*, and *Taken* are recent examples of very different genres of film that centre on the relentless search of a parent, against apparently insurmountable odds and challenges to be reunited with their missing child. Perhaps the films grasp the significance of the God-given genetic coding that draws families together. Perhaps the films betray a latent memory of the ancient biblical story of the prodigal son? Maybe more significantly they betray the longing in each of us to be reunited with our Father God?

The evangelist can draw on these themes as Paul's Areopagus sermon demonstrates. Affirming when culture gets things right and using them as a bridge for fuller revelation has missiological efficacy and biblical warrant. And so the films can be used to explore the emotional response to this popular and prevalent theme of the unstoppable force of parental love. Whether it is Angelina Jolie facing incarceration in an insane asylum, Liam Neeson taking on the entire sordid underworld of Europe, or Marlin the clownfish facing down sharks, these films all demonstrate the incredible lengths to which a parent is willing to go in pursuit of a lost child. The evangelist can steer discussion to enable viewers to see the world from God's perspective, desperate to restore relationship, and to see themselves from God's perspective, valuable enough for him to face death to save us.

#### Intentionally inverted echo

The 1995 Ron Howard film *The Truman Show* tells the story of a man raised by a television station to be the star of a reality show that he does not know he is in. Through psychological and sociological manipulation Truman is confined to Fairview Island and every single participant in Truman's life story is an actor performing to the hidden audience of a million television viewers. The director of this vast enterprise is 'Christoff' who from his omniscient viewing station in the sky seeks to control every aspect of Truman's life experience to maximize audience ratings. The none-too-subtle references to Christoff's godlike role are underlined by throwaway lines such as 'cue the sun?', or by unmistakable actions such as sending lightning bolts to prevent Truman's escape from the meta-narrative that has subverted the reality.

This finely crafted film, powerfully critiques the commercialization of life and the role media plays in the social construction of reality. Even using that limited hermeneutic to explore the film can be a very helpful resource for the church in an advertising saturated age. But the film is also a deliberate distortion of the biblical story. Howard revises the biblical account of the fall of humanity by allowing his God character to be exposed as a power-hungry, self-obsessed manipulator that seeks to confine and control his creation out of a personal sense of inadequacy. This inverted echo can nevertheless be a very useful apologetic tool. It enables the audience to bring their suspicions of God out into the open, and it provides a dialogue partner for a genuine interaction with the God of the Bible.

#### Unintentionally inverted echo

Many films operate in a worldview that is subconsciously at odds with biblical values and the echoes in these films are probably the most difficult to locate, but also the most crucial to locate. The dark pessimism of a film like 2009's *Hurt Locker*, which depicted a US bomb disposal expert descending into an addiction to the adrenalin rush that being in war produces, provided no hope or redemption, only a cycle of despair. The protagonist found no refuge in normal life and could only feed his addiction by returning the battlefield. The film reveals the author's sense of meaninglessness of life and death, and his blurring of moral standpoints, allowing accepted standards of good and evil to be questioned.

One way inverted echoes can be used in evangelistic ministry is to allow a film to paint its picture of life and focus on the discontinuities and discrepancies, both with personal experience and with the biblical explanation. The book of Ecclesiastes demonstrates exactly this kind of "life without God" thinking as it explores life "under the sun" - life without God in the frame. This ancient literature from the heart of our Old Testament comes to the same conclusions of many of the darker films of our time.

This anti-apologetic approach builds on what the American apologist Francis Schaeffer describes as "taking the roof off". It allows people, particularly in western cultures, to see what happens when we abandon the things we prize most about our culture, things that are actually vestiges of the Christian cultural legacy. Many films that depict meaninglessness, anarchy, isolation are a way of experiencing life with the roof of the Christian worldview removed, allowing us to feel the cold wind of life without God. In contrast, when we see people admitting that they value life, integrity, a sense of justice and equity, or law and order for example, we can help them to see that they are sheltering under the umbrella of the biblical worldview.

## Story

Film is a powerful communicator. It speaks to the emotions, the imagination and the mind. It tells a story, but the story it tells can redefine what we believe about the world, the future, even ourselves. It can reinforce or undermine our value system, our moral compass and our spiritual openness. But it is not the creator of the film who has ultimate power over us. We are hardwired to hear the voice of the one who created the filmmaker and the world we live in. We are immersed in the story he is writing, and it is as we read and study the plot synopsis that are our Scriptures, that we will hear God's voice speaking to us, find resonance with the echoes in our culture, and draw a new generation of people to be part of God's story.

[1] Berger & Luckman(1967):149

[2] Geertz(1993):5

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## Website Link:

<http://krishk.wordpress.com/2010/05/16/hollywood-and-the-holy-word-biblical-echoes-in-contemporary-film/>