

A Shared Hope: The Imagination of Cinema and the Church

By Alexander Carpenter

Film, like faith, “gives substance to our hopes and convinces us of realities we do not see” (Heb. 11:1 REV). For about one hundred years, cinema and the church have negotiated separate spheres of the sacred and secular. Easily posited against each other, film and religious faith are often viewed as mutually exclusive, or even overtly antagonistic. This antipathy often appears as religion attempts to reassert its identity in the face of secular expansion. Sometimes these ideological boundaries have softened, from Cecil B. DeMille’s classic biblical epics to contemporary Power-Point sermons that now employ movie clips.

Recognizing this inherent ambivalence within modern Christianity’s attempt to isolate itself from the world, twentieth-century theologian Paul Tillich suggested, “[T]he religious and the secular realm are in the same predicament. Neither of them should be in separation from the other, and both should realize that their very existence as separated is an emergency, that both of them are rooted in religion in the larger sense of the word, in the experience of ultimate concern.”¹

Thus, the secular should not be automatically dismissed as the enemy of religion, but recognized as a reflection of the same sacred search. Beyond their surface separation, perhaps cinema and the church share an ultimate concern: participation in the collective human hope for transcendence.

Early History of Cinema and Church

Everyone has heard the negative voices in religious circles that attack Hollywood and bemoan the lack of good, clean movies. But in the early days, when the moving picture emerged as a new form of media, opinion varied as to its value.

In 1910, Thomas A. Edison wrote an editorial for *The Congregationalist and Christian World* that explained the reasons he had conducted experiments in moving pictures in 1887. He wrote, "it is obvious that the motion picture is an important factor in the world's intellectual development. This general diffusion of information is having and will have a great uplifting effect on the morality of mankind."²

Boldly placing film on the side of God, one pastor wrote an article reprinted in the *Nickelodeon* stating that the moving picture was a "new enemy" of Satan. He added that film was "part of the equipment of the up-to-date church . . . almost as necessary as a janitor, an organ or the . . . pews of oak."³ As early as 1911, pastors were noting that films could be used effectively in prisons and ministry among the urban poor. The revivalist with a moving picture projector was perhaps a precursor of the modern evangelist, roaming the conference district with laptop and presentations in tow.

Criticisms of the nascent film industry centered on constant concern over the morality of the stories. In addition, American Christendom wrestled with movie attendance on Sunday. Some religious leaders expressed concern over this new competition and attacked moving pictures as a temptation for Sunday amusement. Film historian Terry Lindvall writes: "The theaters and nickelodeons were subtly, and most probably unconsciously, competing with churches for leisure time and money, as well as supplanting them in telling the old stories and myths."⁴

One of the most common criticisms of the theater was that it focused attention upon the human self rather than reinforcing the Christian virtue of unselfishness. In response, some religious leaders counterattacked critics on socioeconomic grounds, asking why the rich could watch similar stories live at the opera, while the poor man was denounced for seeing a show on film.

As early as 1909, the moving picture periodical *Nickelodeon* printed the article "Missionaries and Moving Pictures," which showed that churches and mission organizations were able to find a practical use for moving pictures. The article stated that "Hymns were thrown upon the screen at intervals while the audience sang."⁵

Lindvall writes that "before the end of the decade, *Moving Picture World*, *Motography*, and *Nickelodeon* would puff the cinema's triumphal replacement of the

saloon . . . that moving pictures were aiding the Temperance Movement, by keeping men inside the theatre rather than aimlessly wandering into bars."⁶

By 1920, the church and the cinema were at a zenith of symbiosis. In fact, over one hundred churches in New York city were using Hollywood produced films in their Sunday services. The Methodist convention even commissioned a film from D. W. Griffiths, for which it built the largest outdoor screen to that date.

But as the decade progressed, several public Hollywood scandals aroused the ire of American Protestants, which confirmed conservative worries about the moral influence of film. As the 1920s continued, without saloons to attack, this separation between faith and film widened as the Church reacted against the social changes of modernity and turned toward its fundamental roots.

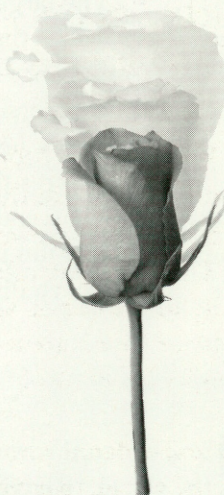
Experiential Relationship Between Cinema and Church

In his book *The Seventh Seal*, critic Melvyn Bragg writes:

And the cathedral, where congregations gather to see the great illuminated stories in glass, to watch the ritual performances on the stage of the altar, to follow, through the calendar, the great epic of Christianity with its

heroes, its villains, its disputes and digressions, its strange character parts, its compelling story-line, can be seen as the cinema of the pre-celluloid era.⁷

Clearly, both cinema and the church have employed similar devices to deliver their messages. Participating in the expression of human ultimate concern, cinema and the church draw from the same human communicative needs. These include story, sound, and image.



Story

Plot is memorable; language is portable. Without memory, faith falters, and without the word, faith disappears. Union of these, through story, gives us our soul.

There is something transcendent about the cinematic story. Wesley Kort writes that "character in narrative . . . [provides] an image of human possibilities or a paradigm of human potential."⁸ The mythos of film communicates a collective vision of what it means to be human. Like religion, film creates a culturally connected community. It promulgates our shared experiences, weaving our stories together, revealing a meaning bigger than the individual. Film circulates a truth universal, creating a congregation of shared ideas and emotions.

This canonical narrative of human experience, often of redemption, teaches us how to be better humans. Through story, film defines the good and the bad in a compelling and catholic manner. Think of John Wayne's characters, or *Dirty Harry*, or *The Godfather*. Cinema helps us know who the bad guys are, how we mess up our lives, abandon our friends, or fail to confront evil. It interrogates humanity's

tough questions, who to love, why we sometimes act destructively, and what is the meaning of redemption, the miracle of second chances.

Film incarnates our heroes and heroines. Humans have always used stories of their heroes to help explain why things happen and how to react. Our heroes have always been humans who were extra special. They are like us, but different, a little beyond, giving us something for which to strive. Aphrodite embodied beauty, Odysseus cunning. Dido teaches us about unrequited love. Gilgamesh explores the borders of friendship. Jesus Christ shows us divine love. Saint Francis of Assisi teaches us about compassion. Morgan Freeman informs us about duty. Woody Allen reflects our neuroses. Julia Roberts, Nicole Kidman, and Brad Pitt embody success and beauty.⁹

Celebrities today are modern saints. As mythic heroes, celebrities seem to transcend the mundane. The larger-than-life projection of ordinary people deifies them. Following their published exploits, the audience mixes reality with filmic fiction. Medieval believers read popular books called the *Lives of the Saints*. Just like any religious canon, the cinema story inspires through the union of human actors and transcending story.

Film is the most popular of shared American storytelling faiths. To watch film is to participate in

Can Filmmaking and Christianity Coexist?

A Conversation with Director
Rik Swartzwelder

By Alexander Carpenter

CARPENTER: How did you start making films?

SWARTZWELDER: I started in grade school, way before the video explosion. After my grandfather passed away, I asked my grandmother for his Super 8 camera, tripod, and home editing system. I got the neighborhood kids to act parts, we'd stay up late, and I'd recruit my family members. In a lot of ways, for me, it was like breathing. Plus, it really gave me something

to throw myself into after my parents divorced.

Part of the fun was that, as a kid, I could create a film world where I could control how things ended up. I think that is why so many of us love happy endings so much. The control that they require is so hard to find in real life.

CARPENTER: Why do you make films now?

SWARTZWELDER: When we premiered our latest film, *The Least of These*, in Washington, D.C., we did it at an art theater next to a documentary called *Porn Star*. At first I was really uncomfortable because I knew a lot of people coming to see my film would be offended by that title. But the more I thought about it, the more it made sense. Because that, to me, is the point. When we can have a story like *The Least of These*, which might nudge people toward God, side by side with a film called *Porn Star*—that is the reason I make movies.

CARPENTER: So, do you consider yourself a Christian director?

SWARTZWELDER: I wouldn't want to put myself in that kind of box. I prefer just being a director who is

our plot, to know ourselves better. Stories, such as the Christian/Hebrew Scriptures, are a record of defining experiences, not primarily an historical record of events, but an existential reel, a canon of meaning.

Music

This “perceived similarity of cinema to religion,” film historian Terry Lindvall writes, “provoked Communist critic Moussinac to protest against the movies’ mystical appeal in its luxuriously decorated cathedrals/palaces, where worshipping spectators would become ‘intoxicated.’”¹⁰ Interestingly, it was especially the organ music that reminded Moussinac too much of the appeal of the church.

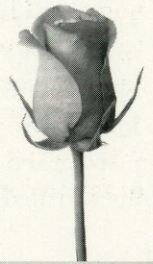
Music combines rhythms and melodies and is often the most effective component of church services and movies. Free from the physical restriction of space, music expresses both the time and the timelessness

of human desires. The individual who sings “It Is Well with My Soul” or hears John Williams’s soundtrack soar participates in a community where feelings are collected and magnified. Sound with image forms memory.

Remember Wagner’s “Ride of the Valkyries” in *Apocalypse Now Redux*, an echo of bombastic hopes of glory, or Mozart’s “Clarinet Concerto in A major,” which expresses love in *Out of Africa*? Recall fear in the two-note ostinato of *Jaws* or the liberty in the remixed melodies of *Moulin Rouge*?

Aristotle praised the theater because it gives people a place to go and watch their hopes and fears acted out on stage, causing them to be realized, shared, and purged. Greek theatrical choirs expressed the feelings of the audience, and most church appeal songs are used for precisely the same purpose. This cathartic realization happens as a group hears and feels the experience.

The revivalist with moving picture projector was perhaps
a precursor of the modern evangelist, roaming the conference
district with laptop and presentations in tow.



also a Christian. I don’t see myself exclusively as a religious filmmaker. At this point in my journey, I don’t feel compelled to make Bible movies or end-time movies. For now, I am much more fascinated by the contradictions and complications of trying to live today, in our postmodern world.

CARPENTER: You have done writing, acting, and directing. Which do you prefer?

SWARTZWELDER: It is all a fun process, but my favorite is probably writing. It’s the life of the story. You start with a script, then you bring in actors, and, if they are good, their own ideas will come out and sharpen the story even more. It’s also the one and only time in the process when there is virtually perfect control.

Next to writing, I’d have to say I like editing. It’s writing with pictures. It’s a close second. Actually, you could even call editing the final stage of the writing process.

CARPENTER: When you first became a Christian, did you feel any tension between your new beliefs and

your interest in film?

SWARTZWELDER: Absolutely. I was living in Florida at the time, writing for a sketch comedy show, like “Saturday Night Live.” We did that show for two and a half years and it got to be pretty successful. We sold out every show and it started getting bigger, and then I got into film school at the University of Central Florida in 1990. That was the same film class that included the guys who made *The Blair Witch Project*.

All of this was happening as I was making the decision to become a Christian. I wasn’t sure if filmmaking and Christianity could coexist. So I left film school. I traveled around the country. Ultimately, I ended up committing my life to Christ in January 1991. Then I moved back to Florida and worked as a maintenance man for a retirement community—all I did was read my Bible and go to church. It was an intense time.

Then, my mom called from Ohio. I had a great aunt and uncle in their nineties who were connected with Columbia Union College (CUC). My mother

Image

The cathedrals of the Middle Ages used religious iconography to tell the stories of the Bible, to remind people of their duties, and to show them what heaven and hell would look like. The stained glass and statues, the frescoes and wood carvings created a living canon of faith.

Martin Scorsese writes about his early memories of the movie theater. "The first sensation was that of entering a magical world—the soft carpet, the smell of fresh popcorn, the darkness, the sense of safety, and, above all, sanctuary—much the same in my mind as entering a church. A place of dreams. A place that excited and stretched my imagination."¹¹ Whether through the image of the priest or pastor backed by choir, illuminated stained glass, or megachurch video projection, sacred iconography incarnates the theater space.

Film genres inhabit a visual grammar, a familiar landscape of the mind: the compelling evil of Dark Vader's mask, the tempting red rose petals of *American Beauty*, the stark figure of Death in *The Seventh Seal*, or crazed Jack Nicholson yelling "Heeereee's Johnny" in *The Shining* while leering through the just-hacked hole in the door that separates him from his terrified wife.

Like the iconography of Scripture, spectacle draws spectators. The horned and hollow-eyed beasts of Daniel and Revelation have provided more than just an explanation of world events. They also solicit attention, like a horror movie poster. "A whole volume could well be written on the myths of modern man, on the mythologies camouflaged in the plays he enjoys, in the books that he reads," writes Mircea Eliade. "The cinema, that 'dream factory,' takes over and employs countless mythical motifs—the fight between hero and monster, initiatory combats and ordeals, paradigmatic figures and images (the maiden, the hero, the paradisaal landscape, hell, and so on)."¹²

Pioneering French film critic and Christian André Bazin reportedly quipped that film is a record of the everlasting face of God. The church is the body of Christianity, the daily incarnation, where the word is made flesh, visible, aesthetic. The cinematic image is the script incarnated, the text of life, illuminated manuscript.

The Hope of Faith and Film

Church and the cinema employ similar means, but to what end? Tillich has suggested that this common denominator is the experience of ultimate concern.¹³ So what is this ultimate concern of faith and film, of the religious in the broader sense? According to Kath Filmer, religion offers

called and encouraged me to go up there and take care of them and finish my degree. At CUC, I studied communication and religion and was getting a lot of encouragement to go into the ministry.

When I finally chose to attend Florida State University's graduate film school instead, I was told by some very loving but possibly misguided people that I was hardening my heart to God. That was tough stuff for a young Christian to hear.

CARPENTER: What part of film appealed to your new beliefs as you returned to the camera?

SWARTZWELDER: I saw very few films for a couple of years. I just kept praying and studying.

Then I saw three films in particular that nudged me toward graduate film school: *Leap of Faith*, *Groundhog Day*, and *Searching for Bobby Fisher*. Those three films told really compelling stories and said something on a level that affirmed to me that films could be entertaining and also something more. And then, honestly, I prayed.

It was a difficult decision, but I realized that as a Christian I had a worldview to share beyond the jokes of that comedy show. As great as it was, it was just entertainment. It was about making people laugh, which is good, but there is more. It's better to make people laugh and think. That's the challenge.

CARPENTER: You spoke about laughing and thinking. What would be the ideal effect of your work on an audience?

SWARTZWELDER: That is a hard question to answer. Good films are entertaining, which is not inherently bad. The best sermons are entertaining. The best parables are entertaining, in terms of conflict and compelling characters. I want my films to be entertaining, but more. I used to believe that a film should change someone, but I'm not sure I necessarily believe that anymore.

CARPENTER: What do you mean, "change someone"?

SWARTZWELDER: I think that it is very rare that someone watches a film and is immediately a different

people a framework for “looking at and explaining the human condition, and seeing in it something for hope,” as both reflector and directors of human experience, in which cinema and the church seek hope.¹⁴

Film expresses common experience, thereby creating a shared memory—just like attending church. Common vocabularies and common hopes link society together. Richard Rorty writes, “the vocabularies are, typically, parasitic on the hopes—in the sense that the principal function of the vocabularies is to tell stories about future outcomes which compensate for present sacrifices.”¹⁵ Religious communities not only share cultural/moral practices, but also ground these in an ultimately faithful vision.

Jesus told his followers to possess the faith of a child. Many sermons and books have been presented on what that childlike faith really is. Often simple, naïve, obedient to authority, or evangelistic, certainly pure, perhaps it is also imaginative. It might at first seem necessary to dismiss imagination from religion, perhaps in an attempt to get at reality, but pure reality gives

no transcendence, no hope. Without hope faith is dead.

Western traditional religion has always been uncomfortable with de-ploying the imaginative arts, often banning visual art, novels, plays, dances, and film because of the compelling fantasy world they present. But perhaps it is a bit of rivalry. What person hasn't dreamt at one time or another about what heaven will be like? These dreams of heaven are often tailored to fulfill personal needs and desires: gold mansions, country homes with vineyards, ruling planets, talking with animals.

This sounds like some movies. Film is often accused of being mere escape, but then so has religion. Perhaps the antipathy that popular religion expresses toward cinema stems from the fear that motion pictures provide a more accessible escape from the reality of the immediate. Instead of telling people to read and use their imaginations to construct heavenly pleasures, popular film gives it on demand and in Technicolor.

Just like any religious canon, the cinema story inspires through the union of human actors and transcending story.



person. Not impossible, but rare. Which is why I am not a big fan of most conversion movies, you know, where the gang leader becomes a preacher or whatever in ninety minutes or less.

Most folks watching those flicks are already converted anyway. Now, there's even talk about making fifteen-million-dollar Christian movies, which is a lot of money to spend on choir robes for the converted, on something explicitly religious.

CARPENTER: And artistically dubious.

SWARTZWELDER: Possibly. The last thing the church needs is more celebrity culture. We don't need a movie star version of the contemporary Christian music scene. We don't need Christian stars with entourages asking for 13 bottles of Evian or 10.4 cucumber sandwiches with the crusts cut off with exactly 1.9 ounces of tofu mayonnaise.

Oliver Stone has called cinema and the media “a drug.” A lot of the big, multimedia churches are trying to compete and hold people's attention with

the same techniques as the entertainment world. I think that this can ultimately exhaust us.

Now, please don't get me wrong, I participate in multimedia churches and am blessed by them. But sometimes, I just long to shut my ears and eyes to the noise and lights, and embrace the stillness of God.

On the other hand, some people think that unless art is explicitly religious then it can't be spiritual at all. Funny though, someone can be a Christian dentist and that doesn't mean that every client gets a gospel presentation. For some reason, artists are given different expectations.

CARPENTER: So perhaps we don't need a cross on every canvas?

SWARTZWELDER: Exactly. I believe that the passing along of stories that nudge people toward God is sacred work. Just like Jesus did. In all of his parables, most of which were not blatantly religious, many do not contain a conversion experience. They've lasted for centuries, nudging people toward a fuller

Conclusion

Both the church and the cinema fill a similar need of humanity: the will to hope. In their book *Hope Against Hope: Christian Eschatology at the Turn of the Millennium*, Richard Bauckham and Trevor Hart explain:

The quest for meaning, truth, goodness and beauty is closely bound up with hope as an activity of imagination in which we seek to transcend the boundaries of the present, to go beyond the given, . . . in search of something more, something better, than the given affords us. . . . Hope is a matter of both knowledge and will (we know what has happened before, and we know what we desire) but is characterized above all by the application of imagination and truth to a future which is essentially open and unknown. . . . Hope is, in this sense, an activity of imaginative faith."¹⁶

Much has been written and visually explored about film as dream factory. Much of the Judeo-Christian paradigm is constructed from the hopeful dreams and visions of its prophets. It is this imaginative aspect of

movies that visibly intersects with religion. Film and faith are both visionary experiences, and visions are imaginative spectacles, concerned with ultimate meaning.

The four highest grossing films (not necessarily aesthetically equal) in the last twelve months all celebrate imaginative hope. These are *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*, *The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring*, *Star Wars: Attack of the Clones*, and *Spiderman*. Clearly, people are drawn to stories, music, images that transcend reality. Humans desire saviors, hope for the future, and triumph over evil. Movies are a reification of our dreams. Sci-fi, kung fu, Mary Poppins—it is all miracle.

Film, like faith, is a form of imaginative self-transcendence. By telling our collective stories, playing our tunes, and appealing to our eyes, cinema and the church allow people to protest in the face of the present, to say "no, there is something beyond all this. Something better." It is a projection, a forward-looking to our deepest hopes, dreams, aspirations, fears. It is also a critique, giving people a voice to say they want something better.

Faith and film articulate our deepest concerns, thereby giving substance to our hopes and transcending the realities we see.

understanding of the spiritual.

CARPENTER: Filmmaking is full of artistic tension as the visions of the writers, producers, actors and directors are all mixed together. How do you work all that out?

SWARTZWELDER: Creative people do tend to have healthy egos and appreciate their share of control. So sometimes there is tension, but that is not always bad. I am still learning, and I enjoy the collaborative process. I appreciate it when someone has a good idea that makes the overall vision better. The Christian virtue of respecting different ideas applies here, too. I have been saved by others on countless occasions.

CARPENTER: You mentioned that you are still in the learning process. Who do you learn from?

SWARTZWELDER: Whenever I write a new script I send it out to some writer friends in Los Angeles to have them critique it. They are vicious with it, which is what I want. I also have some friends who are directors and we talk together about shots, about

mistakes. This is where some DVDs are great, too.

Listening to the director's commentary is like film school in your living room. But the best training I received as a writer was that comedy show. For those two and a half years, I got to do a lot of writing and make a lot of mistakes that not a lot of people will ever see, thankfully. Learning by doing is my best teacher by far.

CARPENTER: Who are your influences?

SWARTZWELDER: In terms of influences, I have to give a lot of credit to Frank Capra, especially for *Meet John Doe*, a film he made starring Gary Cooper in 1941. Also Barry Levinson (*Diner*, *Rain Man*, *Wag the Dog*) as a writer/director. I admire their work greatly.

I know this question regards cinematic influences but, honestly, my biggest influences have been and continue to be the people of faith around me who believe in what I'm trying to do and their relentless encouragement in the face of impossible odds.

Notes and References

1. Paul Tillich, *Theology of Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1959), 9.
2. 95.29 (July 9, 1910): 46.
3. Terry Lindvall, *The Silents of God* (Lanham, Md.: Scarecrow Press), 6.
4. Ibid, 105.
5. "Missionaries and Moving Pictures," *Nickelodeon*, Jan. 1909, 10, 16.
6. Lindvall, *Silents of God*, 5.
7. Melvyn Bragg, *The Seventh Seal* (London: British Film Institute, 1993), 10-11.
8. Wesley Kort, *Narrative Elements and Religious Meaning* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975), 40.
9. Clearly there is a place for evaluation here. Do these celebrities help or hurt our quest for meaning? Does popular film all too often perpetuate stereotypes and reduce serious issues to limp lines and contrived solutions? I am intentionally avoiding rating film content. This essay concerns the function of film and faith. It is a description—not a validation—of how film appeals to its audience.
10. Lindvall, *Silents of God*, x.
11. Duane Byrge, *Private Screenings* (Atlanta: Turner Publishing, 1995), 141.
12. Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion*, trans. William R. Trask (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1959), 205.
13. Tillich, *Theology of Culture*, 9.
14. Kath Filmer, *Skepticism and Hope in Twentieth-century Fantasy Literature* (Bowling Green, Ohio: Bowling Green University Popular Press, 1992), 138.
15. Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Cambridge, Eng.: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 86.
16. Richard Bauckham and Trevor Hart, *Hope Against Hope: Christian Eschatology at the Turn of the Millennium* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1999), 52-53.

Alexander Carpenter graduates from Andrews University in May 2003 with degrees in English literature and religion.

Whether through the image of the priest or pastor backed by choir,
illuminated stained glass, or mega-church video projection, sacred
iconography incarnates the theater space.



In particular, this is true of Bryan Zervos, the executive producer of *The Least of These* and the upcoming *Old Fashioned*. His stubborn refusal to give up on me or the idea that making movies can be a noble endeavor has made all the difference. Columbia Union College was also exceptionally helpful with the production of *The Least of These*.

Now, I'm not trying to slip in a commercial for CUC here, but it is important to point out that filmmaking, though a lot of fun, is a difficult task. It is easy for institutions as well as individuals of faith to throw stones at Hollywood. It is another thing all together to rally behind those who are trying to "create cathedrals" of light and image and sound and emotion and thought.

It is vitally important that faith communities invest not so much in the attack of movies they oppose, but rather in those artists in their midst who are struggling.

CARPENTER: What are you working on next?

SWARTZWELDER: God willing, a romantic comedy

called *Old Fashioned*. That's about all I can say at the moment. We're planning to shoot this fall, but it looks as though the success of *The Least of These* might actually affect our start date.

Then, after *Old Fashioned*, we've got another project we're cookin' up. Best advice I ever got in this biz is, "Enjoy it while it lasts." So, for as long as it lasts, I'm just glad to be able to use what Orson Welles called "a great paint box" to tell meaningful stories.