

Film as a point of gospel engagement

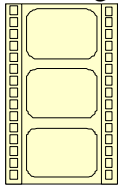
Note: These emerged from the Bible College of New Zealand Gospel and film class(2005) and from working with curates in the Nelson Anglican Diocese. Thanks to both those groups. You can use the notes only if you acknowledge the source (Steve Taylor). And if they help you, feel free, as an act of Christian encouragement, to let the author know.

1. Environments

When we consider that movies evoke emotions, then it is worth considering how film can engage with these experiences, specifically within a worship environment.

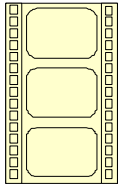
Film can be used to create environments and thus allow people's film experience to connect with the gospel.

Practically, a film clip as a call to worship they can evoke memories and feelings for people, allowing them to connect their previous experiences and their world with their Christian faith.



LOTR Fellowship of the Ring; Galadriel giving of the gifts as a call to worship, or Rivendell as a place of peace and reflection.

Ambient spaces can also be created through the continuous use of repeated video loops



The Crossing by Bill Viola at a baptism

2. Devotion

A range of books offer short devotions based on a film.

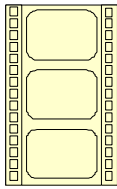
Richard Burrige, *Faith Odyssesy: A Journey Through Lent*, Eerdmans, 2001.

Edward McNulty, *Praying the Movies, Daily Meditations from Classic Films*, Geneva Press, Louisville, 2001.

3. Communication

Film clips can be used in a variety of ways in communication, to allow engagement between culture and gospel.

a) Illustration: This is the most common use. Wow, we're a trendy church because we use film to illustrate a point. Illustration works both by showing a clip (danger is that it might overpower the rest of your talk), or by referring to a clip (danger if the audience has not seen the film).



E.g. a desert storm scene from Lawrence of Arabia to illustrate Spirit as wind,
E.g the ending of the Matrix as an Ascension scene,
E.g O Brother Where art thou baptism scene

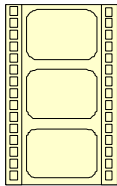
Resource sites:

<http://www.textweek.com/movies/movies.htm>

<http://www.hollywoodjesus.com>

However, hopefully this Gospel and Film course (even after today) has given you are more skills than just a bit of “colour” in your preaching.

b) Dialogue: movies are great for raising issues.



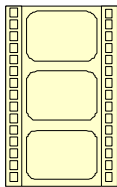
Facing the past as a theme in *The Interpreter*, *Whale Rider*, *In my Fathers Den*.

Watching these movies allows us to enter into dialogue with the questions our culture is asking. Before we even speak, our preaching is being shaped by engaging with the questions of our culture.

Reading books like *Gospel Images in Fiction and Film* (Larry Kreitzer), *Finding God in the movies* (Barsotti and Johnston) or *The Gospel according to Tolkien* (Ralph Wood) can further aid our processing.

Dialogue can impact our preaching in two ways. Firstly, we can reflect on the themes and then address it in our preaching ie “series on: facing our past”. Secondly, we can use clips to illustrate societal attitudes within our preaching. Thus “facing our past” is a major New Zealand cultural issue. Consider what is being played out with regard to the Treaty of Waitangi, with regard to apologizing to Chinese or Pacific Island communities, with regard to the placing of convicted sex offenders in our communities. These are quite broad, quite head orientated issues. The use of a movie clip can illustrate and often engage the head and the heart.

c) “Roll” your own: The use of film as moving images is not just restricted to Hollywood (or to Bollywood). With the rise of new technologies (handycam and computerized video editing) it’s easy to “roll your own.” Such efforts can vary in their technological skill.



E.g. Reading Colossians 3 from a vintage Roll or water Scriptures from a spa.
E.g. Steve’s “video sermon”
E.g Rob Bell’s NOOMA series.

In all these examples, the church is using film to engage. Sure the quality can be marginal and this needs care. Equally, the impact of people seeing people they know can communicate quite powerfully.

4. Community building

A number of churches in New Zealand hold their own video festivals. A theme is decided and various groups form. They script, act, shoot and edit a video, which is then presented to the church. Awards can be presented. It's a great night of fun.

Strengths include;

- Great community building activity
- Applauds engagement with the film world (out come all the in-house film jokes and various techie gifts never mentioned in 1 Corinthians 12).

Weaknesses can include;

- Can be just internal ie not "missional." Equally, if the groups are formed with a missional eye, it can include and community build among those on the fringes of a community.
- It can take a serious amount of time and this might need guidelines.

5. Missional discussion

Another way of using film is in terms of creating forums for discussion

a) Hey, lets go to the latest Star Wars and then have a coffee.

You are now a much more knowledgeable person about film than you were in February. You do now make a much more interesting café conversation partner. Missional discussion is as easy as inviting a non-Christian friend to check out *Revenge of the Sith* with you, and then discuss the character of Darth Vader (ie the nature of evil) over a coffee afterward.

b) Film Church: This is a slightly more organized approach.

Film Church: xxxxx

[10 Q's on xxxxx for Film Church]

Some background to Film Church:

I have been hanging out more at SOFF (Sundance Online Film Festival) - I watched a few more of the Short films, one was *The Act* - a clever piece on relationships. I found an interesting new program that they created this year to help everyone connect - they call it Film Church. Here is an excerpt:

Film Church is a new offering at the Festival that allows independent film industry figures to talk about whatever they would like using the Festival's film program as a point of departure (today's Film Church features John Pierson, speaking at 11 am at the Sundance House). "The metaphor of film church for us really was that in almost any religion there is a liturgy of some kind and there's a mediator of that liturgy."

It hit me as an interesting parallel - using the metaphor of church for a film industry platform and discussion - A creation of sorts for a unique film liturgy.

Seeing that film in many ways is the mantra of meaning for a culture that seeks truth and redemption in the stories and characters unravelled on the big screen - a culture which I am embedded in. I think this effort of 'film church' provides a snapshot of a cultural desire for community and an underlying value for liturgy and truth dispelled by someone who can facilitate the connections between story, life, love and authenticity. In essence Sundance has recreated a pseudo-church for the masses - in an attempt to make meaningful connections out of shared experiences

From http://deeper.typepad.com/deeper/2005/01/film_church.html

Film church involves showing a movie and facilitating a discussion. I announce the questions before hand. The questions serve to give people some “jumping off” points.

This approach is used by a church in the US and is being trailed (or was that trailered?) at Opawa Baptist in Christchurch. It has the potential of both increasing your congregations ability to read and interpret movies, allowing cultural engagement and providing a space to bring friends from outside the church.

6. Film festivals

A number of film festivals have arisen in recent years, which seek to engage the gospel and the church.

The most well known is the City of Angels Film Festival, linked to Fuller Theological Seminary in Los Angeles.

The City of the Angels Film Festival grew out of a dialogue between filmmakers and theologians who believe that spiritual perspectives are indispensable to the filmmaking process. We are dedicated to screening quality works that not only celebrate film as art but also raise vital religious and social issues.

The website at <http://www.cityofangelsfilmfest.org/> and includes

Each year a different theme is chosen. Examples include Chasing the Sacred, Reel Myths. Films are shown. Context setting essays are written. Panel discussions occur. It is a very serious attempt to engage with Hollywood. It is unlikely anyone in New Zealand could attempt this. Nevertheless, it serves as an example of the engagement of gospel with film.

Closer to home, the book *Lessons from reel life : movies, meaning and myth-making*¹ arose when a Gospel and film class took their lectures so seriously they said, “Right, let’s engage the gospel with film. Let’s organize a film festival!” Oh, for such students!

Even closer to home, Holy-wood: Our first Christchurch attempt!

¹ Michael Frost and Robert Banks, Open Book, Adelaide, 2001.