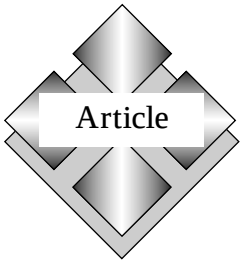
Films as Parables of Interpretation



by
Mary Cotes

Viewers not readers

In an article published in Viewpoints in September 1996, Terry Dunnell points out how very far we have travelled from being a book culture. The culture we now inhabit is one in which, for example, probably 90% of young people aged six to fourteen prefer watching TV to reading books. The vehicle for our cultural expression is no longer principally the written word: it has become the moving image. We are not readers but viewers.

There is no doubt that the situation to which Dunnell refers is one which presents a profound challenge to the Church. As he points out, the Church has been locked into book-based, literacy orientated traditions, especially since the invention of the printing press. Dunnell's response to the challenge is to argue for the importance of producing multi-media tools to assist people to explore the Bible. Important as that may be, what I am interested to discuss here is not how we might produce multi-media material for evangelistic and educational purposes in the church, but rather how secular films on video can be used in the process of Christian education.

Emerging from the cocoon

Over the last couple of years I have been using secular films more and more in Bible studies as a means of enabling groups to engage with the biblical text in a way which is culturally aware. I suspect that very often church Bible study can take place in a kind of cultural cocoon. There is a danger that those attending leave behind them not just their knowledge of current affairs but also the content of the three or four (or more) films they may have been watching during the week, and that they come to the study with at best an agenda which concerns their own domestic and church life. The use of film can jolt groups out of this cocoon and enable them to relate the biblical text to a world and a culture with which they are actually intensely, though not always consciously, familiar.

Whilst there is a whole range of ways in which secular films and videos of all kinds can be used creatively to this end, what I shall discuss here is the way in which I have been using films of the life of Jesus as an aid to Bible study, enabling groups to understand in an accessible way the process of interpretation by which the story of Jesus is related to our own times. As Christian people trying to live out our faith in today's world, this is a process in which we are all necessarily engaged. What I have to say could equally be said in relation to the use of paintings by which Christ has been interpreted, or the use of poetry or hymn. However I have principally used the medium of film, given that, as Dunnell says, the moving image is very much the preferred medium of contemporary culture.

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A Jesus who speaks to secular culture

When I write of using videos I mean not just the sort of evangelistic videos that I might find in my local Christian bookshop. I refer also to films made with no necessarily evangelistic purpose by directors who may or may not be Christian and who may not have any self-confessedly 'Christian' motive for making such a film. Considering that the culture in which we now live is often described as post-Christian, it is interesting that there is such a surprising number of such films, many of which have received considerable attention and acclaim, others of which have provoked scandal. The videos with which I have been working have included, for example, the BBC's 1969 production for the Wednesday Play of Dennis Potter's Son of Man, Pasolini's The Gospel according to St Matthew (1964), Zeffirelli's Jesus of Nazareth (1993), Scorsese's The Last Temptation of Christ (1988), itself a version of Kazantzakis' novel of the same title, and Jewison's Jesus Christ Superstar (1973). Of course this is by no means an exhaustive list: the 'canon', so to speak, is entirely open. The use of such 'secular' videos allows groups to see that the

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relevance of the figure of Jesus extends to modern secular culture and is not just limited to the confines of the Christian Church.

Jesus on film looks in two directions

Even the most superficial viewing of the films brings home in a pressing way the wide variety of interpretations of the figure of Jesus that exist even on films made in the last few decades. The differences between them are enormous, far more striking than what might be revealed by a comparison among evangelistic videos arising out of a specifically Christian arena. Pasolini's political Jesus, passionate for justice, who spits condemnation on the authorities, is a far cry from Dennis Potter's jibbering wreck of a Jesus, or from the Jesus of Scorsese, unsure of his capacity to fulfil his role and organizing his own betrayal.

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As they view the films, so groups can be helped to understand the extent to which the interpretations are a product of the culture and environment in which they were made. What was the agenda, for example, of the director of The Last Temptation of Christ? What issues must have been on his mind? Gradually a group may come to see why Dennis Potter's Jesus, interpreted at the end of the sixties in the wake of the hippy movement, grapples with the possibility of universal love and asks whether it be a reality or only the dream of a madman. Similarly they may come to understand how Pasolini's Jesus, filmed in Italy using non-professionals as actors, arises out of a deep political commitment. Such specific insights lead to more general ones: any film, any interpretation for that matter, of Jesus looks two ways, both towards the story of the Jesus of history and towards the world for which and in which it is made. In this way it offers a point of tension and intersection between text and culture.

A messy, complex business

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Moving on from this, from a viewing of the films it is possible to grasp just how multi-layered the interpretation of Jesus is. The Last Temptation is a good example of this. First Kazantzakis offers his own interpretation of the biblical story in his novel; then the novel is chosen as a subject for a film; then a scriptwriter has to convert the book to a screenplay; then the actors and director have to interpret that screenplay; then the film is edited before release; then an audience has to view and respond to the film in its finished form. The process well illustrates the point that interpretation is not neat and tidy. It is a messy affair, often stretching over long periods of time, crossing from one language into another, starting off in one medium and ending up in another. Often it is the product of many people's work, each one relating to and interpreting each other's interpretations.

Our context

In the light of the diverse interpretations on film by which they are confronted, challenged and often profoundly shocked, the group can come more easily to examine critically their own images of Jesus. How do they imagine Jesus to be? Where has that picture come from? What are its merits and shortcomings? Just as they are people made and moulded by the culture in which they live, so also will be their view of Jesus. Within the world of biblical criticism this is of course no new insight. It is now nearly a century since Schweitzer, commenting on nineteenth-century lives of Jesus, observed that the lives said as much about their authors as they did about Jesus. It is this same basic perception that underpins the work of liberation theologians who assert that no account of the faith can ever be objective or value-free, but always arises out of the context of the interpreter. These perceptions have, I suspect, not yet properly worked their way into our congregations who, for the most part, still cling to the Western gentle-Jesus-meek-and-mild as if this image were the right and only one. In fact, one group with which I was working was quite horrified, on viewing Son of Man, to find that the Jesus they had been brought up to picture closely resembled Potter's Judas!

The gospel writers' context

Once the group has understood that their own interpretations of Jesus are not value-free, then they can come all the more easily to understand that the gospel writers were themselves interpreters of the life of Jesus, each with preoccupations and presuppositions which arose out of their context. There is no such thing as a neutral, interpretation-free telling of the story which presents 'just the facts', any more than there could be a film which is interpretation-free. Mark, Matthew, Luke and John, no matter when or where they wrote, were all as much interpreters as each other. They each pre-

sented, however different, an interpret-ation of Jesus which looked in two directions: both back to the Jesus of history and to the context in which the interpretation arose. What is more, just as the interpretation which goes into film-making is a messy and multi-media process, so also was the process in which the gospel writers were engaged. They were not interpreting in isolation any more than Scorsese was working in isolation. They were surrounded by resources, all in their own ways the products of multi-layered processes of interpretation: scriptural traditions, oral traditions, written traditions, worship traditions.

Reading between the lines

Finally, I have found that using films within the Bible study context has enabled the group to explore in a concrete way something of the nature of biblical authority. This came out very strongly during the term in which a group studied the particularly ambiguous character of Judas. This was a theme suggested by a member of the group. Why did he betray Jesus? What really was his motivation? Once we had found that each of the four gospels had a different point of view, we viewed a number of films. One Judas was an informer from the start, put in place by the High Priest. Another was Jesus' best friend, persuaded by Jesus against his own better judgement to perform the act of betrayal. Another Judas was a high idealist, captivated by the Jesus who demanded justice and suddenly disappointed when the same Jesus allowed precious ointment to be squandered.

The questions which faced the group as a result of such differing interpretations were manifold. Were all these interpretations of Judas' role in the story equally valid, or were some more valid than others? Did they contradict anything that was in the biblical story or did they just 'read between the lines'? The whole process of discussing the films in relation to the written story enabled the group to see two important things. Firstly, they were enabled to see that on some things the text remains silent and open, and as such offers the possibility of creative engagement and multiple interpretation. Secondly, they were able to see how the text might act as a control, providing proper limits to 'permissible' interpretation.

Humility and cultural relativity

One more important thing needs to be said. Coming to understand that telling and hearing the story of Jesus is always a process relative to culture and context is a vital part of our growth as Christian churches. Such an understanding dislodges us from any arrogance which claims that our particular way is the only way or that our particular insight is the whole truth. It permits us to set ourselves not above but alongside Christian communities in other places and other times who themselves have been engaged in a culturally-relative process, and who have arrived at conclusions which differ very greatly from our own. Understanding cultural relativity is a path of humility as well as an exciting and imaginative adventure.

When Potter wrote Son of Man, he probably little thought that his script might one day be used in Christian education, to raise awareness of the process of story-telling in which the gospel writers were engaged. But then that is the nature of the messy, open-ended enterprise of interpretation.

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