

## Finding God... in Contemporary Film

Online streaming video is one of the most popular pastimes for people. Movies deal with topics as diverse as transcendence and terrorism. How does cinema overlap with theology in engaging with God and our beliefs? This session explores some of the cinematic commentary in recent films and shows and asks: what is cinema saying? And how can we make use of it and engage with it meaningfully in our outreach?

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***'[A]LL CARE ABOUT MOVIES, AWAIT THEM, RESPOND TO THEM, REMEMBER THEM, TALK ABOUT THEM'***

**STANLEY CAVELL**

***'I THINK THAT CINEMA CAN EXPRESS OUR COLLECTIVE DREAMS...AND THAT'S PROBABLY THE REAL SIGNIFICANCE OF IT.'***

**WERNER HERZOG**

Malcolm Guite: Apologetics as 'Jostling the soil of the imagination' Michael O'Sheal  
**Does film do this jostling too?**

- Redeeming film: moving beyond cultural reticence to engagement
- Extending from salvific parallels, or good illustrations to taking film seriously

### I. **Is film a way of thinking about the world?**

Film-philosophy as an emerging discipline: 'Film-Philosophy is dedicated to the engagement between film studies and philosophy, exploring the ways in which films develop and contribute to philosophical discussion.'

**What is it? Is it real philosophy? Is film doing philosophy? Is film a type of philosophy?**

- Analytic philosophy can connect easily enough through aesthetics
- Continental and phenomenological philosophy easier to find connections.
- Stanley Cavell – *The World Viewed*
  
- **Is film a way of thinking about the world? It would seem so.** Films are very clearly about certain things. For example:
  - *Hiroshima Mon Amour* – atomic bomb at Hiroshima and Nagasaki, trauma, PTSD and memory
  - *The Martian* – the power of science
  - *The Revenant* or *Gladiator* – justice and revenge
  - *Slumdog Millionaire* – love, luck and fate
  - *Love Actually* – existential empowerment
  - *Frozen* – the power of sisterhood, love and being yourself

**Theology is also a thinking about the world. We may find that there are some overlaps here.**

## **II. THEOLOGY ON FILM: the possibility of film working on theological issues**

**How might film be interacting with theology?**

REFLECTIVE THEOLOGY: Even if it lacks a direct, religious subject matter, a film may still function theologically for the viewer. This is where we can begin to talk about the idea of theology as a conversation, between ourselves, the world and God.

PROPHETIC THEOLOGY in the genre of post-apocalyptic or science fiction.

SYSTEMATIC and ETHICAL THEOLOGY as films take on direct engagement with primary source materials and try to work out principles and understandings

E.g. Garth Davis's *Mary Magdalene* risks the question of how Christ treated women, and then presents its own argument.

The kind of theological work that might be on offer here:

- systematic & ethical theological interaction
- prophetic theology
- reflective and invitational theological engagement

Let me try to give you a few ideas of what to look for if you are open to these kinds of theological conversations.

## **III. QUESTIONING: Examples of film jostling the soil**

**Genre and film-philosophy: 5 big questions**

**1. Detective fiction and truth/reality/order questions:** Can we know the truth? Can we get to the facts? Can we overcome human attempts to obscure it/hide it? (reality/truth issues) Why is detective fiction so popular as a genre of fiction? What makes it so interesting and appealing? How does detective fiction speak to the human heart? What does our interest in detective fiction say about us? What does it tell us about ourselves?

*'WHAT THE DETECTIVE STORY IS ABOUT IS NOT MURDER BUT THE RESTORATION OF ORDER.'*

*P. D. JAMES*

*Poirot, Dirty Harry, Insomnia (2002), The Third Man (1949), Blade Runner (1982), Memento (2000), The Big Lebowski (1998), Seven (1995), Vertigo (1958), The Silence of the Lambs (1991), Wallander, Lie to Me, Vantage Point, Sherlock, Luther, House, Bosch, Endeavour, Morse, CSI.*

**2. Moral thrillers and ethical reasoning:** What is right? In a world of complicated ethical choices, what is the right thing to do? Can you harm the one to save the many? Is torture morally permissible? What happens to moral agents who have to do that?

(integrity objection to utilitarianism). Is it morally permissible to do wrong in the service of a greater good? Are human beings morally compromised? What do you do when you don't know the answers?

*24, House MD, Dexter, Taken 1-3, Juno, Atonement, The Dark Knight, Watchmen, Toy Story 2, Sophie's Choice, A Hidden Life, The New World, No Country for Old Men, The Island.*

**3. Romantic comedies and tragedies: How can you keep love?** Is long lasting love possible? Can love shape reality? Does love always find a way through? What is the purpose of life? How does sex relate to love? Is it ever just sex? What is the true nature of love? Is romantic love an ethical starting point?

*Love Actually, Sex & City, Closer, Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind, Brokeback Mountain, Love Island, As Good as It Gets, Slumdog Millionaire, Sleepless in Seattle, No Strings Attached, Annie Hall, Four Weddings and a Funeral, 40 Year Old Virgin, My Best Friend's Wedding, When Harry met Sally, Notting Hill, Bridget Jones' Diary, You've Got Mail.*

**4. Films that deal with human nature:** why do human beings do things that are wrong? What explains murder or evil in the human soul? Why are humans such a mixture of good and bad? Can bad people change? What is a bad person? What are the consequences of wickedness? Can evil be transformed or confronted? Is there a way of fighting against human wickedness or selfishness?

*No Country for Old Men, Before the Devil Knows That You Are Dead, There Will be Blood, The Last King of Scotland, The Interview, The Hunger Games, The Lord of the Rings, Insomnia, The Boy in The Striped Pyjamas. Pay It Forwards, Forgiveness, The Tree of Life, Badlands, Bonnie and Clyde, Iron Man 1-3, Batman, Avengers, Spiderman, The Mask, Liar Liar.*

**5. Science fiction, hope and purpose: What is worth living for?** What can we hope for? What is coming next? What will the future be like? How will being human look in the future? What is our relationship with technology? What is technology? How much hope ought we to put in scientific possibilities? Is there a way of confronting and overcoming death? Does space exploration help us to answer fundamental questions? What is 'out there'?

*The Grey, Collateral, Garden State, Into the Wild, Batman-Dark Knight & Dark Knight Rises, Gravity, Transcendence, Existenz, The Matrix 1-4, Terminator, iRobot, Ex Machina, Ghost in the Shell, Gattaca, Star Trek.*

"I didn't want you to enjoy the film. I wanted you to look very closely at your own soul."  
Sam Peckinpah

Francis A. Schaeffer's slideshows: listening to the soul of a culture

***'THERE IS NO VEHICLE WHICH DISPLAYS THE GLORY OF GOD AND THE WONDER OF GOD AS CREATOR AS CLEARLY AS THE PRACTICE OF THE HUMANITIES... AND IN WHAT WE USUALLY CALL ART.'* FRANCIS A. SCHAEFFER**

- Conventional religious beliefs (*Eat, Pray, Love*)
- Hedonism (*Alfie*)
- Atheism / Nihilism (*Collateral*)
- Transcendence (*The Thin Red Line*)
- Abortion (*Cider House Rules, Juno*)
- Euthanasia (*Million Dollar Baby*)
- Capital Punishment (*Dead Man Walking*)
- Free Will and Determinism (*Gattaca, Minority Report, Donnie Darko*)
- Personal Identity (*Memento*)
- Love (*Closer, Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind, Pretty Woman, Legends of the Fall, Pride and Prejudice, The Bridges of Madison County*)
- Worldview analysis itself (*Waking Life, I Heart Huckabees*)
- Human Nature (*Citizen Kane, Before the Devil Knows that You Are Dead*)
- Reality/Knowledge (*The Truman Show, Inception, Matrix*)
- Counterfactuals/events that might have happened but did not (*It's a Wonderful Life, Run Lola Run*)
- Cynicism about Morality, Liberation thru Desire (*Pleasantville, American Beauty, The Cider House Rules*)
- Naturalism vs. Religious Knowledge (*Contact, 2001: A Space Odyssey*)

#### IV. STORYTELLING

- Narrative forms and gospel echoes
- Eucatastrophe in film
- Heroes and Christology

#### V. VIEW FROM INSIDE

- The value of Christian films
- A questionable missiological starting point?

#### VI. LOOKING AHEAD

- Cinema as a prophetic vision
- Transcendence & Transhumanism: humanity downloading hope

#### VII. TICKET STUBBS

- Ask yourself: what deeper questions and issues are being dealt with here?
- Try to identify the fair questions that are being asked

#### ***Suggested Readings***

Sorfa, David. *What is film-philosophy?*

<https://www.eupublishing.com/doi/epdf/10.3366/film.2016.0001>

Cavell, Stanley. *The World Viewed* (Harvard, 1979)

Godawa, Brian. *Hollywood Worldviews*

Watkins, Tony. *Focus: The Art and Soul of Cinema*

Schaeffer, Francis A. *Trilogy*

Rookmaker, H.R. *Modern Art and The Death of a Culture*

***Suggested Viewings***

- The Revenant
- The Case for Christ
- The Tree of Life
- A Hidden Life
- Babette's Feast

***Online Articles***

Price, Tom <https://www.bethinking.org/apologetics/corinth-and-acts-17>

Dahle, Lars. <https://larsdahle.no/acts-17/>

***Websites***

[bethinking.org](http://bethinking.org)

[www.ransomfellowship.org](http://www.ransomfellowship.org)

[www.rottentomatoes.com](http://www.rottentomatoes.com)

[www.imdb.com](http://www.imdb.com)

Film-philosophy journal: <https://www.eupublishing.com/loi/film>

***Great Films to Talk About***

- 12 Years a Slave
- 13 Conversations about one thing
- About Time
- Amazing Grace
- Babette's Feast
- Casino Royale
- Chocolat
- Counterfeiters
- Crash
- Dark Knight
- Divergent
- Elysium
- Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind

- Gravity
- Groundhog Day
- Heaven
- Hunger Games
- Inception
- Iron Man 3
- Juno
- Mandela
- Noah
- Shawshank Redemption
- Skyfall
- Slumdog Millionaire
- Stranger than Fiction
- The Bourne Supremacy
- The Hunger Games

- The Island
- The Kings Speech
- The Truman Show
- To The Wonder
- The Batman
- A Hidden Life
- Wonder Woman
- Arrival
- Into the Wild
- Lord of the Rings
- The Passion of the Christ
- Alfie
- Collateral
- Avatar
- Transcendence