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Finding Christ in Cinema: Examining Secular Film Theologically

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SENIOR THESIS APPROVAL

This Honors thesis entitled

“Finding Christ in Cinema: Engaging Secular Film Theologically”

written by

Evan Wheatley

From Sundance to Senior Thesis

I step out of the Salt Lake City airport terminal into the thin, dry air and I see them: towering mounds of earth, with wintry peaks shrouded in a dense morning fog. Mountains. I had never seen mountains so big.

Wisps of white caress the windshield of our van. Snow flurries soon surround us on all sides as our driver spots a pair of moose creeping in a brush to the right. He provides fascinating tales about conversations with Harrison Ford and an unpleasant trek to the airport with Rod Stewart.

We stand in front of our condos, overwhelmed with excitement. Some of us grab plastic sleds from the garage and plunge head-on into the waist-deep snow, while others step out onto the balcony, breathing in the frigid wonderland. For all of us, however, one thing is apparent: we're not in Arkansas anymore.

For the past few years, Dr. Rebecca Jones and Dr. Doug Sonheim have had the privilege of taking groups of Ouachita Baptist University (OBU) students to the Sundance Film Festival in Park City, Utah as part of the OBU at Sundance course. Following the trip, students engage in weekly meetings, write film analysis papers and deliver group presentations that capture their experiences at the festival. I was among a lucky group of 12 students in 2016 that enjoyed a diverse set of films and engaged in a foreign culture.

The cultural bubble of Sundance is much different than that of Ouachita's. It is comprised of filmmakers, film critics and cinephiles alike, who come to interact with independent movies and independent people, most of whose worldviews radically differ from that of a Southern Baptist. We had to recognize as a group that we were far from home. While many films shown at Sundance pose philosophical questions about God and the nature of reality, to me, Christ seemed

to be merely a topic of discussion in Park City, rather than its cultural center. But he was there. During our time at Sundance, I encountered his Spirit while walking down Main Street and in several of the films I attended. His presence was also evident at the Windrider sessions we attended at the start of each day.

Founded in 2004, the Windrider Institute uses Sundance as a venue “to promote the presentation and exploration of the human story through film and visual media.” In 2005, Windrider boasted the largest student group at the festival, and has since grown to be Sundance’s largest ticket-purchasing block (Windrider Institute). During our time at Windrider, we visited with professors from Fuller Theological Seminary, viewed a selection of award-winning short films inside of a Mormon stake center and even attended Q-and-A’s with filmmakers such as Abigail Disney (Walt Disney’s grandniece) and Henry Hughes, director and co-writer of the Academy Award nominated short, “Day One.”

Above all, we learned to listen. Stereotypical representations of Christians, particularly those from rural areas, point to assertiveness in opinions and a desire to speak more than listen. The majority of the filmmakers and guest speakers at Windrider were not Christians. Their films did not have a Christian agenda. Were we still able to learn from their viewpoints and experiences? Yes. Could messages of love and redemption still be found in their films? Absolutely, and the fact that this notion was so radical to me at the time – and will likely appear radical to some Christians reading this – is precisely why I am writing it.

Engaging Film Theologically

For me as a teenager, films were merely a form of entertainment. A trip to the movies meant the chance to escape to a “galaxy far, far away,” to stand alongside Harry Potter in his

latest confrontation with Lord Voldemort. At the time, I did not notice parallels between the Force in *Star Wars* and the Christian God, or ponder how Harry and Voldemort's cinematic struggle can be seen as an allegory for the fight between good and evil.

My interest in engaging film theologically began at a fall film retreat with OBU assistant professor of Christian theology Dr. Brandon O'Brien at OBU in 2015. He stressed that four questions should be posed when attempting to interact with a film on a theological level: (1) Does this film warrant or inspire theological reflection? (2) Does it affirm or illustrate a theological conviction that I hold? (3) Does it challenge or undermine a theological conviction that I hold? and (4) What does this film say (or imply) about God, humanity or the world we live in (O'Brien)?

As mentioned previously, I loved movies growing up, but I attended a church that made a clear distinction between secular and Christian film: a Pixar movie is entertaining, but *Facing the Giants* is entertaining and God-breathed. After attending Sundance, I found this line of thought troubling. *War Room* (2015), directed by the Kendrick brothers, was one of my favorite cinematic experiences of 2015 and a surprising box office success, but its message, like most "Christian" films, is surface-level. Tony Jordan (T.C. Stallings), a pharmaceutical salesman, has become self-obsessed, often neglecting his wife and daughter to pursue his work. When his wife, Elizabeth (Priscilla C. Shirer), becomes suspicious that Tony is cheating on her, she begins to meet with the elderly Miss Clara (Karen Abercrombie), who suggests that to fight the enemy, Elizabeth must start by getting down on her knees and praying (*War Room*).

One might compare this to a film trilogy like *The Lord of the Rings* (2001-3). Amidst the intense violence of this visually stunning fantasy epic, there are several examples of religious symbolism that surface amid reflection, such as Gandalf the Grey (Ian McKellen) returning from

the dead as Gandalf the White, Aragorn's (Viggo Mortensen) ascension from wild ranger to king of Middle Earth and Frodo's (Elijah Wood) struggle carrying ring of power, which mirrors our own daily struggle with temptation and sin (*The Lord of the Rings*).

Both *War Room* and *The Lord of the Rings* have valuable messages to communicate. The literary source of the same name that inspired *The Lord of the Rings* was authored by J.R.R. Tolkien, a Roman Catholic who placed religious symbolism and biblical themes in his novels. Interestingly, however, interviews with the film's director, Peter Jackson, indicate that evoking a spiritually nourishing cinematic experience was not his first priority when creating the adaptation. And yet, for me at least, God was still able to speak powerfully through it.

In his book, *Reel Spirituality: Theology and Film in Dialogue*, Dr. Robert Johnston, Christian author and professor of theology and culture school of theology at Fuller Theological Seminary, recounts a personal experience from one of his students who led a film discussion with a small group at his church. Prior to their discussion of *Italian for Beginners* (2002), the group's attempts to develop an authentic Christian community had been largely unsuccessful. The film deals with loss, acceptance and self-doubt, themes that became a catalyst for those discussing the film to share from the heart, show grace to one another and foster a healthier small group dynamic (Johnston 52-3).

Johnston's group film discussion and the recent emergence of the OBU at Sundance course are but small examples of a larger movement of dialogue between the church and Hollywood. Other examples include the addition of theology and film courses to the curriculums of Christian colleges and seminaries; film festivals such as The City of Angels Film Festival and The Damah Film Festival, which seek to promote discussion about film from a spiritual perspective; and prominent church and ministry organizations adopting film as a resource for

ministry. Websites like “Movie Theology: Movie Reviews and Resources” and *Christianity Today’s* “Film Forum” serve as two of many examples (Johnston 52). *Time* magazine film critic Richard Corliss summarizes this development:

For decades America has embraced a baffling contradiction. The majority of its people are churchgoing Christians, many of them evangelical. Yet, its mainstream pop culture, especially film, is secular at best, often raw and irreligious. It’s hard to see these two vibrant strains of society ever coexisting, learning from each other. Yet, the two are not only meeting, they’re also sitting down and breaking bread together. (Corliss 70-72)

At Sundance, I was able to learn from secular film. Attending each screening with an analytical eye, I sought to look past the face value of a film and search for theological truths and challenges presented in its narrative. Coupled with reflection and film analysis papers I wrote following our stay in Park City, this experience left me with a thirst for continued dialogue that has yet to be quenched.

Unfortunately, there are pockets of the church that are still hesitant to break bread with Hollywood, or even refuse to do so altogether. Through this thesis, I advocate that we abandon the notion that secular film cannot be spiritually nourishing, and instead embrace film’s potential to communicate truth, reveal, redeem and even change lives (Johnston 34). I will approach this by analyzing five secular films from different genres and eras of cinema, and I will argue that they have messages about God, humanity and the world we live in, which can be considered theologically. Before doing this, however, I will begin with a few insights from Johnston and Christian author/filmmaker Dr. Craig Detweiler.

Insights from Johnston and Detweiler

The same God who spoke through dreams and visions in the Bible is still communicating through our celluloid dreams – the movies. As the Spirit of God raised up unexpected sources of wisdom during biblical times, so the same creative Spirit is inspiring actors, screen writers and directors today. The relative faith or righteousness of the artists has no bearing on their ability to become a conduit for revelatory insights...When horror-meister Stephen King serves as the source of inspiring films like *The Shawshank Redemption* and *The Green Mile*, we must question our assumptions about who God chooses and how the Spirit moves. (Detweiler 29)

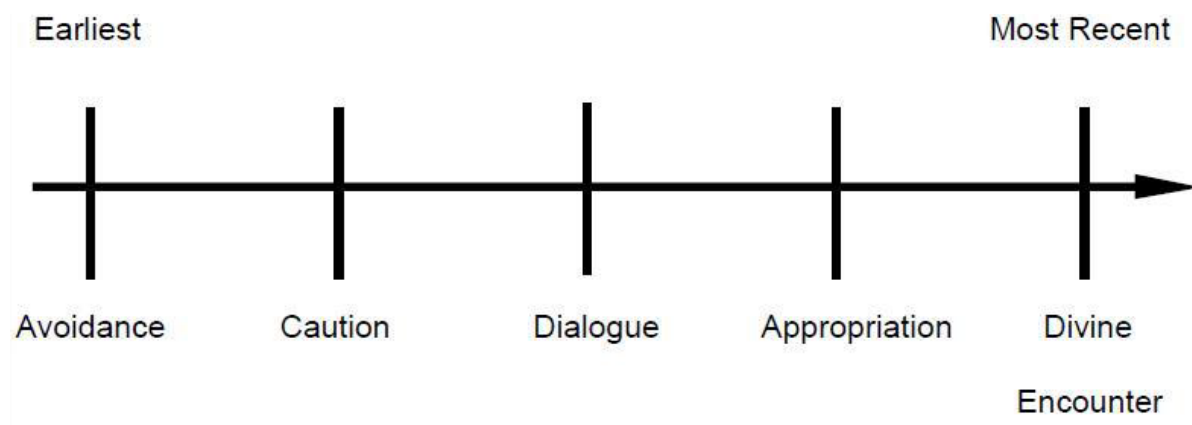


Figure 1: Theological Approaches to Film Criticism (Johnston 55)

In *Reel Spirituality*, Johnston identifies five primary theological approaches to film criticism: avoidance, caution, dialogue, appropriation and divine encounter, with avoidance being the predominant approach in the early years of the film industry, and appropriation and divine encounter emerging as the popular viewpoints today (Johnston 55).

There are those who have expressed the view of avoidance to a harsh extreme, such as politician and Christian author Herbert Miles, who wrote in 1947, “They [movies] are the organ

of the devil, the idol of sinners, the sink of infamy, the stumbling block to human progress, the moral cancer of civilization, the Number One Enemy of Jesus Christ” (Miles 20), but most who choose to adopt this posture may do so from an ethical standpoint. They desire to follow Christ by thinking about “whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable” (New International Version, Phil. 4:8). Dr. Ted Baehr, media critic and chairman of the Christian Film and Television Commission, is a good example of this. In 1997, he wrote to those organizing the City of Angels Film Festival, who chose to show Peter Weir’s *The Year of Living Dangerously* (1982) and Martin Scorsese’s *Taxi Driver* (1976), which Baehr strongly opposed due to the violent and sexual content of both films, and the profanity in *Taxi Driver*. A great divide exists between the majority of Hollywood and the church in Baehr’s eyes. He stresses that the religion portrayed in most movies does not reflect Christianity, but “materialism, consumerism, eroticism, hedonism, . . . humanism, . . . the cult of violence” (Baehr 117). According to Baehr, many films should either not be shown or Christians should protest them by abstaining from the theater and waiting for them to be released on DVD and Blu-Ray, where they can then be viewed selectively (Johnston 58).

In spite of some still clinging to this posture, avoidance of cinema and mainstream media altogether in today’s world is impractical. A more common attitude among conservative Christ followers is that of caution. While most Christians recognize that complete abstinence from the entertainment industry is not an effective approach, there are still many who worry about the industry’s influence on themselves, their children and those around them. However, they also recognize, as evangelical Christian leader Chuck Colson did, that, “there are good [films] too. Films we can use to teach our kids and our neighbors good lessons” (Colson). While Johnston asserts that “viewer discrimination is obviously necessary for Christians of all ages . . . so too is

sensitivity and maturity in film viewing” (Johnston 61). And that’s why, in my opinion, we must move past these first two approaches and enter into a dialogue with film.

“Christian moviegoers should first view a movie on its own terms before entering into a theological dialogue with it” (Johnston 64). In saying this, Johnston simply means that when entering the movie theater, it is vital to leave the issues of the outside world at the door in order to fully immerse oneself in the movie experience and a potential theological dialogue. To be clear, Johnston is not purporting that theology is secondary to watching movies, rather he is suggesting that a theological analysis should always come after the film’s aesthetic experience (Johnston 64-5).

The last two theological approaches, appropriation and divine encounter, are based in dialogue, but expound upon its concept. Those who adhere to appropriation believe that film is capable of shaping the lives of its viewers, and thus a critic should first turn to a film itself, rather than theology, when entering into a dialogue with it. Author Gareth Higgins emphasizes that, “Film should be treated with the same respect as church or poison, for it can change your life” (Higgins xix). In contrast to church sermons, which Higgins believes are too direct, filmmakers are unaware of the viewer’s identity, but “communicate to him or her those messages that the viewer needs to hear” (Campolo x-xi). Johnston, who also adheres closely to this view, states that appropriation is inevitable, and that for people to appropriate a movie’s insights, the beliefs and values present in a film don’t even have to be “Christian” or “religious” (Johnston 73).

Finally, Johnston discusses divine encounter, which he claims to have experienced with two films over the course of his life. The Catholic Church upholds the sacramentality of creation, meaning that they believe that God can be encountered through the people, objects and experiences with which we interact on a daily basis, including film (Johnston 74-5). Christian

author Edward McNulty equates a divine encounter to an “aha!” moment, when the Holy Spirit grabs our attention or makes us aware of something significant in a film, which often results in a life change or spiritual growth (McNulty 13).

In his book, Johnston details a divine encounter one of his students experienced with the film *Magnolia* (1999):

I see a lot of myself in Claudia’s character and a lot of Jesus in Jim. The fact that Anderson kept Jim out of the frame for much of this scene while his voice bestowed grace from off camera was simply brilliant. This enabled the scene to transcend the film and become a conversation between me and Jesus. This film served as a catalyst for my return to faith after a decade of apostasy. (Allen 1)

Divine encounter falls in line with the idea of general revelation, which Detweiler discusses heavily in the “Methodology” section of his book, *Into the Dark: Seeing the Sacred in the Top Films of the 21st Century*. Whether through a thought, a word, a vision, etc., general revelation describes the experience of God that is accessible to all. These divine encounters awaken us, shock us and provide assurance that we are not alone (Detweiler 33).

However, with a divine encounter can come conviction, a theological/moral revelation that unsettles viewers in a way that points to God or the Gospel. For example, through Johnston’s theological encounter with the film *Becket* (1964), he felt the call to Christian ministry, a calling to which he felt unworthy:

My struggle with accepting the call to become a minister was with my image of the pastor as needing *first* to be a holy person. My Young Life leader, who ministered to me during high school, was such a person, as was my church counselor. I knew I was no saint. In the film, however, I heard God saying to me through his Spirit, “You need not be holy... You only have to be obedient to my call.” (Johnston 38)

While accepting the call to ministry is no easy task, the Spirit’s working through a film can be even more discomfoting. Detweiler points to this experience through his exploration of the film *Donnie Darko* (2001):

We all struggle with Donnie’s tension of how much to reveal versus how much to conceal. Everyday we consider how much of ourselves to disclose in the classroom, at work, on awkward first dates. We have aspects of our lives that we bracket, hold back, and protect. How much we reveal or conceal is often rooted in issues of trust. Are we willing to be exposed? Do we have faith that our trust will be honored, our secrets and selves appreciated rather than exploited? We may choose to reveal ourselves in our words, our actions, our art, our appearance. It is almost always a risk, but removing the veils on our past, our present, and our future dreams is an essential part of communication and community. (Detweiler 54)

I had an unsettling experience myself at Sundance 2016 with the short film *This Way Up*. The film tells the story of a hardworking middle-aged man living in a Los Angeles storm drain, who finds out that his daughter is coming to visit him. In an effort to conceal what’s become of

his life, he enlists the help of a homeless teen named Luke and bonds with him. I shook my head initially at the father's decision to not ask help from his daughter, only to later realize that I am just as prideful as he is. Rather than seeking assistance when enduring a spiritual or emotional struggle, I often mask the pain from those around me and try to hide it from God, foolishly thinking I can overcome it on my own. However, the truth is that if I had sought the Lord's help from the beginning, he would have sustained and strengthened me, just as the daughter would have helped her father if he had asked (*This Way Up*).

I have been reminded of this truth recently in the midst of a frustrating season of life. On April 3, 2017, I was diagnosed with mitral valve prolapse. For several weeks prior, I dealt with chest/stomach tightness and pain, and shortness of breath when lying down for bed, which was worsened when paired with two part-time jobs and a hectic final semester. At first, I once again turned to my pride. I specialize in overloading my schedule, and I have always multitasked well. So, why should this situation be any different? However, after an emergency room visit, multiple spells of not being able to breathe at night and constant discomfort, the Lord reminded me of my experience with *This Way Up* at Sundance. Relinquishing my pride was difficult to say the least, but by fully trusting my God, I have found a peace that surpasses all understanding.

Deitweiler draws on biblical examples for his argument that secular film may convey divine truth. He notes that the book of Proverbs is made up of sayings that originated in cultures outside of that favored by God and that a narrative that includes prostitution is part of the Old Testament. Deitweiler parallels these examples with stories presented in contemporary film to argue for the theological significance of material displayed in film. (Deitweiler 29) Through the brief analyses of *Toy Story* (1995), *Casablanca* (1942), *Inception* (2010), *The Breakfast Club* (1985) and *Forrest Gump* (1994), I, too, will make this argument and attempt to illustrate its

validity. I have chosen these films in particular because millennials and baby boomers alike can relate to at least one of these impactful stories. It is a diverse set of films, ranging from talking toys to a timeless classic, and each one has made a significant contribution to the industry, whether that be *Inception* further cementing Christopher Nolan's legacy as an imaginative director or *The Breakfast Club* setting the standard for every "coming of age" drama to follow.

In the vein of Peter Malone and Rose Pacatte's *Lights, Camera...Faith!: A Movie Lover's Guide to Scripture*, each analysis will be linked to a different spiritual theme and accompanying scripture related to that theme. Additionally, lyrics from some of the films' key songs will be incorporated as a way to preface or enhance the discussions. The films are ordered in such a way that, with each one, the themes become less neat and tidy, and more unsettling. Like my experience with *This Way Up*, you, too, may have had an uncomfortable encounter with the Lord through one of these films. Instead of turning away from this, however, I implore you to embrace the truth he communicates, and use it as a way to challenge your theological convictions and strengthen your faith.

Toy Story (1995): Overcoming Pride and Jealousy

When pride comes, then comes disgrace, but with humility comes wisdom. (New

International Version, Prov. 11:2)

I was on top of the world.

It was right in my pocket.

I was living the life.

Things were just the way they should be.

When from out of the sky like a bomb comes some little punk in a rocket.

Now all of a sudden, some strange things are happening to me. (Newman)

The films of Pixar, as for many millennials, were an integral part of my childhood, and the original *Toy Story* holds a special place in my heart. As the first feature-length film in history to be made entirely with computer-generated imagery (CGI), this Oscar-nominated and award-winning film set the bar in film animation for years to come (Callaway 19).

Toy Story chronicles the lives of the toys of a young boy named Andy (John Morris), particularly the everyday life of Woody (Tom Hanks), a suave, cowboy-like sheriff with an ego. Heralded as Andy's favorite toy, Woody is admired and respected by the other toys, many of whom view him as an authority figure. All is well with Woody until one day Andy receives a Buzz Lightyear action figure (Tim Allen), a space ranger unaware of the fact that he is a toy. As Buzz grows in popularity with Andy and the other toys, Woody's world is turned upside down (*Toy Story*).

Beneath the groundbreaking animation, humorous antics and excellent performances of Hanks and Allen is the story of a sheriff struggling with pride and jealousy in the face of a

newer, shinier and cooler space ranger. His overcoming of this, however, leads to the establishment of a lifelong friendship.

Woody's importance in Andy's eyes is evident from the film's initial sequence. As part of Andy's playtime, Sheriff Woody defeats the evil "One-Eyed Bart" (Mr. Potato Head) and throws him in prison, which is the crib of Andy's younger sister. The opening credits roll as Andy's sister drools on Mr. Potato Head (Don Rickles) and beats his body repeatedly into the edge of the crib. Mr. Potato Head's limbs scatter across the floor around Woody, who lies at a safe distance from the chaos. The framing of these shots and the accompanying music highlight the contrast between Woody and his dismembered friend: Woody and Andy have a secure bond, whereas Mr. Potato Head is just another toy (Callaway 19-20). Woody leads toy gatherings (which humorously resemble human board meetings), corresponds directly with the toy soldiers as they spy on Andy's birthday party in search of potential new toys and when Rex the dinosaur (Wallace Shawn) attempts to scare him with his ferocious roar, rather than pretend to be scared to help improve Rex's confidence, he stands unfazed, much to the chagrin of Rex (*Toy Story*).

The downward spiral of Woody from hero to zero happens in one quick sequence. Overjoyed about his new Buzz Lightyear, Andy darts to his bedroom and plops Buzz's cardboard spaceship onto his bed, knocking Woody onto the floor in the process (*Toy Story*).

"Andy must have made a mistake," Woody proclaims when asked why he was knocked off of "his spot" (*Toy Story*).

It was no mistake. Within a two-minute segment of Randy Newman's "Strange Things," Buzz becomes a role model to the other toys, Andy changes the theme of his room to Buzz Lightyear and he starts sleeping next to Buzz at night instead of Woody, forcing the sheriff to sleep in the chest with all of the other toys (*Toy Story*).

No matter who you are, there is always someone more skilled, fortunate or talented than you. While this is an easy truth to remind yourself when you encounter failure, it's far more difficult to embrace when the success you're pursuing is personified in front of you. And yet, God calls us to rise above pride and jealousy when faced with this. However, as human beings we are stubborn, and Woody, even as a toy, is no different.

Woody attempts to get rid of Buzz as soon as the opportunity arises by using the remote-control car, RC, to push him out of Andy's two-story window. The other toys quickly catch on to Woody's ploy, however, and turn against him, pushing him out of the window as well. Upon landing in the bushes, he finds Buzz alive and well. This excites him, not because he cares that Buzz is alive, but because him being alive means that he can reason with the other toys and save his own skin (*Toy Story*).

After various conundrums and a run-in with "The Claw" at Pizza Planet, Buzz and Woody wind up as captives of Sid (Erik von Detten), a malevolent child with a love of blowing up toys and experimenting with them in odd ways. With Buzz strapped to a rocket and Woody trapped under a blue box, the toys have truly hit rock bottom at the beginning of the third act, but it is precisely this predicament that causes Woody to see the error of his ways (*Toy Story*).

"Buzz, I can't do this without you. I need your help," Woody admits.

"I can't help. I can't help anyone...why would Andy want me?" Buzz replies somberly.

"Why would Andy want you? Look at you! You're a Buzz Lightyear. Any other toy would give up his moving parts just to be you. You've got wings, you glow in the dark, you talk! Your helmet does that 'whoosh' thing. You are a cool toy! As a matter of fact, you're too cool...I mean, what chance does a toy like me have against a Buzz Lightyear action figure? I'm the one that should be strapped to that rocket" (*Toy Story*).

Buzz then proceeds to look at the “Andy” written on his right foot, the same writing that is inscribed on Woody’s foot. It’s the one thing they have in common. Buzz then proceeds to help his newfound friend escape from Sid’s, and return home to their owner (*Toy Story*).

Whether we’re jealous of others’ success, refuse to allow others and God to help us or simply hold ourselves in higher regard than everyone else, we’d do well to take a note or two from Woody and his journey from sheriff on his high horse to humble leader and friend. Regardless of your circumstance, your life has value. You are loved by the king. And in the enduring words of Randy Newman:

Some other folks might be
a little bit smarter than I am.
Bigger and stronger too, maybe.
But none of them will ever love you
the way I do, it's me and you, boy.
And as the years go by,
our friendship will never die.
You're gonna see it's our destiny.
You've got a friend in me. (Newman)

***Casablanca* (1942): True Love Requires Sacrifice**

My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends. (New International Version, John 15:12-14)

Directed by Michael Curtiz, adapted from the unproduced stage play, *Everybody Comes to Rick's*, and starring Humphrey Bogart and Ingrid Bergman, *Casablanca* (1942) is widely revered as a cinematic masterpiece, but it was not made with this intention. In fact, *Casablanca* was but one of hundreds of films produced by Hollywood in 1942, and its creators did not believe it would become anything extraordinary. What granted the film its initial success was a timely release, which coincided with the Allied invasion of North Africa and capture of Casablanca a few weeks before its world premiere. What places the Academy award-winning film among the all-time greats, however, are Bogart and Bergman's performances, an excellent script and a theme song ("As Time Goes By") that puts "City of Stars" to shame. Sorry *La La Land*.

Set during World War II, the film centers around American expatriate and nightclub owner Rick Blaine (Bogart), who, when given two letters of transit, must decide whether to reunite with his former lover, Ilsa Lund (Bergman), or help her Czech Resistance leader husband escape Casablanca to continue fighting against the Nazis (*Casablanca*).

When Ilsa walks into Rick's bar toward the beginning of the film, she spots the house pianist, Sam (Arthur "Dooley" Wilson), and casually approaches him. It is clear that the two know each other, and she makes a request for "As Time Goes By." While first insisting that he does not remember how to play the song, upon her coercion, Sam hesitantly tickles the ivories to the allure of Ilsa and the fury of Rick, who scolds Sam for playing the song. Sam motions to his

right. Rick and Ilsa lock eyes. For a moment, time stands still as a dissonant chord resonates in the background. A mixture of pain and amusement seeps through Rick's face, while a teary-eyed Ilsa sits transfixed at the sight of her past love (*Casablanca*).

Through flashbacks later in the film, we see that Rick's bitterness toward Ilsa stems from her seemingly abandoning him after their stay in Paris in 1940. She was supposed to meet him at a train station to leave Paris due to the impending occupation of the city by German forces. When she did not show, Rick was forced to board a train with Sam to avoid being sent to a concentration camp. Ilsa confronts Rick in present day, revealing that when she fell in love with him in Paris, she believed her husband, Victor Laszlo (Paul Henreid), to have been killed while trying to escape from a concentration camp. However, prior to their departure from Paris, Ilsa was alerted that her husband is alive and in hiding. In order to attend to her ill husband, she left Rick without an explanation. She also purposefully withheld an explanation to protect Rick, who would have surely followed her and risked capture by the Germans (*Casablanca*). In doing so, she showed him sacrificial love, a type of love that Christ calls us to show to one another.

This type of love is exhibited in several stories throughout scripture. One example is the love that Jonathan showed his friend David in 1 Samuel 20. David, suspicious that Saul, Jonathan's father, plans to murder him, asks Jonathan to confirm this for him. Jonathan attempts to do so at the New Moon Festival. Saul thinks nothing of it when David is missing from the festival, but when he is absent again the following day, he questions Jonathan about David's whereabouts. After lying to his father, Jonathan is furiously accused of being a traitor by Saul, who demands that Jonathan turn over David to him. When he refuses, Saul hurls a spear with the intent of killing his own son. Jonathan then returns to David and weeps with him, as they are forced to part ways for David's safety (New International Version, 1 Sam. 20).

Jonathan's sacrificial love for his friend has no bounds. He risks his relationship with his father and even his own life to protect David, bidding him farewell to ensure his safety, much like Ilsa had to do with Rick. While stories such as this serve as great biblical models of sacrificial love, there are none greater than the love shown to us by Christ Jesus through his death on the cross and resurrection, which paid the price for the sin of the world.

Rick is able to return the favor at the film's conclusion. He leads Ilsa to believe that they will stay together once Victor has used the letters of transit to board a plane to America, but at the last moment, in one of the most iconic scenes in cinematic history, Rick convinces Ilsa to board the plane with her husband, stressing that if she stays with him she will regret it – “Maybe not today, maybe not tomorrow, but soon and for the rest of your life.” Rick is still able to smile as he parts ways once more with his beloved. “We'll always have Paris,” he assures her. And whether he goes on to live a long life or is later captured by the Germans, his love for Ilsa will endure (*Casablanca*).

***Inception* (2010): The Destructive Power of the Mind**

Those who live according to the flesh have their minds set on what the flesh desires; but those who live in accordance with the Spirit have their minds set on what the Spirit desires. The mind governed by the flesh is death, but the mind governed by the Spirit is life and peace. (New International Version, Rom. 8:5-6)

“An idea is like a virus. Resilient. Highly contagious. And even the smallest seed of an idea can grow. It can grow to define or destroy you.” (*Inception*)

Boasting a star-studded cast and helmed by *The Dark Knight* trilogy director Christopher Nolan, *Inception* takes place in the not too distant future, where experimental military technology exists to infiltrate dreams. Hired by powerful individuals for the purpose of corporate espionage, highly skilled thieves known as “extractors” make use of this technology to acquire valuable information from the minds of others. The film opens with extractors Dominic “Dom” Cobb (Leonardo DiCaprio) and Arthur (Joseph Gordon-Levitt) as they attempt to extract information from Japanese businessman Saito (Ken Watanabe). Upon their failure, Saito reveals that he himself organized their mission to test Dom for what appears to be an impossible task: instead of extracting an idea from someone’s subconscious, Saito wants him to plant an idea, known as “inception.” If Dom succeeds, Saito will make arrangements with the American authorities – who are convinced that Dom murdered his wife, Mal – for him to legally return home to see his children (*Inception*).

The film’s opening minutes make it clear that Dom’s mental state is deteriorating. He has spent so much time in the minds of others and his own subconscious that the lines between dream and reality are beginning to blur. In the dream world, extractors have what are called

totems that help them tell the difference between dream and reality. Dom's totem is a spinning top. While in reality, the top will eventually tip to its side, it spins indefinitely in the dream world. In one scene, Dom spins the top on a coffee table and places a gun to his head, prepared to kill himself (one of the ways to exit the dream world) if the top continues to spin. Dom's mental state can also be attributed to the guilt he feels for Mal's death. He knows inception is possible because he's done it before. While he did not kill his wife, by planting the seed of an idea in her mind, he ensured her eventual destruction (*Inception*).

Like *Casablanca*, *Inception* tells the love story of Dom and Mal through flashbacks. Prior to Dom's work as an extractor, he and his wife used the dream technology to trek further and further into their minds, and, as the film explains, the further one goes into a dream, the slower time passes. They eventually arrive at the shores of their subconscious, where time is virtually endless. After building an imaginary world and living a long, full life together, Dom desires to return to reality. Their time in the dream world has taken its toll on Mal, however. No longer knowing what is real and what is not, she refuses to leave. For the sake of his children, who will eventually need their parents to wake up, Dom plants the idea in Mal's subconscious that her world isn't real, and that to escape, she must kill herself. After successfully returning to their real home, however, this idea continues to linger resiliently in Mal's mind, like a parasite. On the evening of their anniversary, Dom witnesses his wife commit suicide, plunging from the room of their hotel to her death. Prior to that evening, she also filed a letter to her lawyer detailing how she was fearful for her safety and the safety of her children, in an attempt to convince Dom to jump with her, which is why Dom cannot return home to see his children (*Inception*).

How we choose to spend our time and what we think about as a result can come to define us, and, if we're not careful, destroy us. There are people today who, like the characters in

Inception, choose to escape into their minds through lucid dreaming, the process of learning how to control one's dreams and reside in them for long periods of time. With the advent of role playing video games such as *Skyrim* and *The Legend of Zelda*, gamers can immerse themselves for hours, or even days into a world of fantasy and adventure, or, through games like *The Sims*, live a false life. Even film, which I am currently advocating as a tool for spiritual nourishment, when abused, can serve as a similar escape from reality. The internet has also unfortunately provided easy access to endless types of pornography. Aside from pornography, none of these practices are inherently bad, but when we allow them to consume every aspect of our day-to-day lives, we become enslaved to an addiction, stagnant in our faith and unproductive in following God's will.

Similarly, Dom and Mal had the best of intentions when they embarked on their journey into the dream world, but by diving head-on into uncharted waters without caution, Mal eventually lost herself, and her children paid the price. As the film nears its conclusion, Dom is faced with a choice to stay with Mal in his subconscious or complete the mission, which will allow him to return home to his kids in reality. Realizing that his projection of Mal is but a shade of his real wife, he rightly chooses to let go of her, and is eventually reunited with his children (*Inception*).

Whether we need to seek Christian help to break an addiction, quit dwelling on past failures or simply need to spend less time on Xbox Live, like Dom, we, too, can choose to let go of impure, unproductive or negative thoughts that have a grip on our lives and take hold of what the Spirit desires. In doing so, we can allow our thoughts and ideas to “transform the world and rewrite all the rules” (*Inception*).

The Breakfast Club (1985): Don't Judge a Book by Its Cover

But the Lord said to Samuel, “Do not consider his appearance or his height, for I have rejected him. The Lord does not look at the things people look at. People look at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart.” (New International Version, 1 Sam. 16:7)

A brain. A beauty. A jock. A rebel. And a recluse, all trapped in a library for nine hours during Saturday detention, each tasked with writing a 1,000-word essay on who they think they are. How could a group of high school students with this composition coexist for even a few minutes, let alone nine hours? While the students are initially standoffish, they eventually let go of their preconceived notions about one another and opt for transparency (*The Breakfast Club*).

“You see us as you want to see us – in the simplest terms, in the most convenient definitions,” Brain Johnson (Anthony Hall) writes to assistant principal Richard Vernon (Paul Gleason). “You see us as a brain, an athlete, a basket case, a princess and a criminal. Correct? That’s the way we saw each other at 7:00 this morning. We were brainwashed” (*The Breakfast Club*).

Unlike the spiritual themes of the other four films, the message of this 1980s classic is not hard to decipher. A group of teenagers with nothing in common are put in a situation where they have to interact with one another. Upon doing so, they learn that maybe they aren’t so different after all. Add in a pinch of social commentary and you have *The Breakfast Club*, a film promoting a timeless message: don’t judge a book by its cover. My reasoning for discussing this film is not to give profound insight, but to show that an R-rated dramedy with a fair amount of cursing and occasional innuendo can still warrant theological reflection (*The Breakfast Club*).

We are not alone.

Find out when your cover's blown.

There'll be somebody there to break your fall.

We are not alone.

Cause when you cut down to the bone,

we're really not so different after all.

After all,

We are not alone. (DeVito)

These lyrics by Karla DeVito that the students dance to in glorious 80s fashion midway through the film perfectly captures the essence of its message. As John Bender (Judd Nelson) props himself on top of a statue and head bangs to DeVito's rock song, you may see a rebellious delinquent with no respect for himself or those around him. What you cannot see, however, are the bruises underneath his sleeves and emotional scars from years of verbal and physical abuse from his father. Meanwhile, Claire Standish (Molly Ringwald) dances near the stairs and Andrew Clark plays air guitar on the ground floor. At first glance, you see an attractive, pampered, spoiled rich girl and a jock with an ego goofing off. Look again. Dancing on the staircase is a young lady who wishes she didn't have to put up a facade to be liked by the popular crowd. By jamming on the air guitar and bonding with his newfound friends, Andrew has thought for himself for the first time in a while. He is constantly trying to impress his dad, who expects him to excel in sports and be "cool" in school, meaning that Andrew needs to be as big of a jerk as his father was when he was Andrew's age. Brian ("the brain"), who turned on DeVito's song in the first place, may appear to be having a great time, and he is. The euphoria of

the moment overshadows a recent dip in self-esteem stemming from a “F” he made on his Woodshop test. And as you do a double take at Allison Reynolds (Ally Sheedy), the recluse, ridiculously crumple to the floor at the end of the song, you realize that she didn’t do anything wrong to end up in Saturday detention. She came simply because she has no friends and had nothing better to do (*The Breakfast Club*).

These intimate details are revealed by the characters to each other in a 25-minute segment near the film’s end. As they sit in a circle on the second floor of the library, they laugh, cry and yell at one another. They reveal deep secrets, share hidden talents and comment on the absurdity of society (*The Breakfast Club*).

“What’s gonna happen to us on Monday? When we’re all together again? I mean I consider you guys my friends, I’m not wrong, am I?” Brian asks.

“Do you want the truth?” Claire replies. “I don’t think so.”

“That’s a real nice attitude, Claire!” Andrew remarks sarcastically.

“Oh, be honest, Andy...if Brian came walking up to you in the hall on Monday what would you do? I mean picture this, you’re there with all the sports. I know exactly what you’d do, you’d say hi to him and when he left, you’d cut him all up so your friends wouldn’t think you really liked him!”

And when Bender degrades Claire for making these statements, she responds with: “OK, what about you, you hypocrite! Why don’t you take Allison to one of your heavy metal vomit parties? Or take Brian out to the parking lot at lunch to get high? What about Andy for that matter? What about me?” (*The Breakfast Club*)

While this unlikely band of five is able to overcome this seemingly inevitable truth, Claire’s right. Most of us, even after bonding with those outside of our social class, would just as

quickly pretend that they didn't exist the following Monday. Why is this? Why do we care so much about how the world views us? Jesus didn't. He broke bread with prostitutes and tax collectors and touched the untouchable. People who were completely unlike him were drawn to his presence, and if we can't say the same about ourselves then what does that say about our walk with the Lord?

Yes, there is a reasonable amount of foul language in *The Breakfast Club*. Sex is talked about more than once and each of the students gets high on screen. This is not a film for children, young teenagers or the spiritually immature, and Christians should carefully discern whether or not to view films such as this. However, I believe that the overall message of *The Breakfast Club* and the theological truths gleaned from it far outweigh its negative aspects. It is a film that has challenged me to live a life characterized by genuine faith and unconditional love.

Dear Mr. Vernon,

We accept the fact that we had to sacrifice a whole Saturday in detention for whatever it was we did wrong. But we think you're crazy to make us write an essay telling you who we think we are. You see us as you want to see us – in the simplest terms, in the most convenient definitions. But what we found out is that each one of us is a brain, and an athlete, and a basket case, a princess and a criminal. Does that answer your question?

Sincerely yours,

The Breakfast Club. (*The Breakfast Club*)

***Forrest Gump* (1994): Forrest and Jenny, Christ and the Church**

Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence? If I go up to the heavens, you are there; if I make my bed in the depths, you are there. (New International Version, Psalm 139: 7-8)

Momma knows best, but Forrest Gump's momma knows better. With "life is like a box of chocolates" and "stupid is as stupid does" among many of her wise sayings, I'm sure the film's screenwriters knew they had a commercial success in *Forrest Gump*. Little did they know that the film would also become an instant classic.

Directed by Robert Zemeckis, starring Tom Hanks and adapted from the novel of the same name, *Forrest Gump* earned more than \$667 million worldwide and brought home Academy Awards for Best Picture, Best Director, Best Actor (Tom Hanks), Best Adapted Screenplay, Best Visual Effects and Best Film Editing, in addition to numerous awards and nominations at other award ceremonies.

Clocking in at two hours and 42 minutes, there are undoubtedly several ways one could approach a theological analysis of *Forrest Gump*. When I revisited this film during my research, I began watching it with a particular theme in mind: "love God, love others." It fits perfectly. Forrest's mental impairment allows him to see the world through rose-colored glasses. Free from the bondage of our society's social norms, Forrest shows kindness to those who sit next to him at a bus stop, Lieutenant Dan Taylor (Gary Sinise) in Vietnam and especially to his childhood sweetheart, Jenny Curran (Robin Wright) (*Forrest Gump*). As I studied his many interactions with Jenny, however, God nudged my analysis in a different direction.

"Me and Jenny goes together like peas and carrots" (*Forrest Gump*).

To me, Forrest and Jenny's relationship reflects Christ's unconditional love for his church. At the beginning of creation, God intended for us to be the peas to his carrots, living in perfect harmony with him and his creation. Forrest and Jenny have this sort of bond as children. They sit by each other on the school bus, play together and often watch the stars at night from the branch of their favorite tree. However, as Jenny grows older and moves to college, she forgets all about Forrest and her rebellious nature kicks in. She has premarital sex and begins to explore alcohol and drug use – gateway experiences that lead her down an even darker path as the story progresses. Even after Adam and Eve sinned in the Garden, God immediately set in motion his grand plan to redeem all of creation, and even after Jenny scolds Forrest for beating up a boy she was parking with because he thought the boy was hurting her, there Forrest still stands in the pouring rain with a box of chocolates. He has her best interests at heart, as God always has ours (*Forrest Gump*).

No matter how many times we depart from his presence, Jesus is always there to welcome us with open arms. He is intentional in his pursuit, beckoning us to turn around and come back to him. Forrest does the same with Jenny. He writes to her daily during his service in Vietnam, and while he is overseas risking his life so that she may have freedom, she is using that same freedom to destroy her body with experimental drugs and chase the pleasures of this world (*Forest Gump*). Through his death and resurrection, Jesus paid the price for not only our past sins, but also for sins we will commit in the future. He paid the price for the freedom that we have abused in the past and will abuse in the future. As Forrest makes good work of anyone who treats Jenny wrongly, so, too, does Jesus fight our battles for us. And when we come before him and ask for forgiveness, he not only welcomes us, but like the father in the parable of the

prodigal son and Forrest in front of the Washington Monument, Christ joyfully runs out to embrace and forgive us (*Forrest Gump*).

“You died on a Saturday morning. And I had you placed here under our tree...Momma always said dyin' was a part of life. I sure wish it wasn't” (*Forrest Gump*).

Sin and death were not a part of God’s original plan for his people. As Forrest weeps for Jenny following her passing, so, too, does Jesus weep for Lazarus in John’s Gospel and for the deaths of those belonging to his church today. However, because of Jesus’ unconditional love for us displayed through his death and resurrection, there is hope for all who call upon his name.

“Why are you so good to me?” Jenny asks Forrest.

“You’re my girl,” Forrest says, almost surprised.

“I’ll always be your girl” (*Forrest Gump*).

And we will always belong to Christ.

Finding Christ in Cinema

Late film critic Roger Ebert once said, “We live in a box of space and time. Movies are windows in its walls. They allow us to enter other minds, not simply in the sense of identifying with the characters, although that is an important part of it, but by seeing the world as another person sees it.”

Through the brief analyses of five secular films, we’ve seen how God can use talking toys to remind us to let go of haughtiness and envy, how through a thought-provoking visual spectacle such as *Inception*, he can uniquely and effectively reveal the destructive power of the mind, or, through the love story of a mentally handicapped Southern boy and a broken drug addict, evoke a captivating portrait of his love for the church.

Perhaps, up to this point, you have not considered interacting with film theologically. Like me prior to taking the OBU at Sundance course, to you the idea that God could use *Star Wars* to provide spiritual nourishment, or that *Harry Potter*, a saga entirely based around magic, could enrich your faith is foreign, or even ludicrous. Perhaps you still feel this way. If that is the case, consider this proposition: put Ebert's quote into practice. Take one of your favorite films and act like you're watching it for the first time. Try to see the world as the film's characters see it. God may just have something to say through it.

However, for those interested in further exploring this concept, remember to ask these four questions when preparing to engage a film theologically: (1) Does this film warrant or inspire theological reflection? (2) Does it affirm or illustrate a theological conviction that I hold? (3) Does it challenge or undermine a theological conviction that I hold? and (4) What does this film say (or imply) about God, humanity or the world we live in (O'Brien)?

Fortunately, the five films discussed and the resources cited in this paper do not form an exhaustive list on the subject. The past holds hidden cinematic gems just waiting to be unearthed, and new films are released every week, so I implore you to keep watching and talking about movies. A divine encounter may be in store, all you have to do is press play.

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