A poor reflection as in a mirror?

Film as both window and mirror for theology

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The presentation of two-dimensional moving images on a screen gives the appearance of solidity. Viewers of film undertake to suspend disbelief and embrace a sequence of visual and auditory stimuli, which they expect to be presenting a coherent meaning. More than the sum of its parts, the film communicates a story, and something more compelling than mere story. Film elicits emotion, and is attributed meaning and significance. Is this attribution of meaning the investment of the artist (or artists)? A meaning to be observed, as through a window? Or is the meaning found by the viewer more like a reflection? Does an audience see in movies the ideas and meaning that they wish to be there? As Paul Coates comments on the use of mirrors within a film,

> the doubling of reality within the frame alludes to the process of reproduction underlying cinema itself, so rendering this one image the key image of all film—with realistic film's preference for transparency (the window metaphor) concealing the deeper truth of the mirror.[1]

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This question about establishing meaning—as through either a mirror or a window—can inform the nature of theological engagement with film.[2] For some viewers of film there are theological meanings embedded in the film by the creators, and, by looking through the window, the viewer can observe meaning being made and report on it. For others the movie is reflecting back to the viewer what they want to see, and thus the movie says more about the audience. When film and theology meet, is it the window or the mirror we are looking at?

It is important to note that film is not a settled and static art form, any more than theology is a settled and static articulation of God acting in, and for, God's creation. There is a dynamic interaction within film and within theology; they are like active conversations in which multiple voices speak to one another (and sometimes over the top of one another!). The intersection where the two conversations meet can be a fruitful place to consider the structured and socialised creation of meaning. Clive Marsh seeks to detail something of the dialogue between film and theology in his assertion that '[t]heological engagement with the film watching experience demands, in short, a very astute form of cultural theology.'[3] This conversation requires both parties to be open to hearing the other, while acknowledging the dynamic nature of their own positions. Marsh is right to draw out the need for both film and theology to be better informed about the other.[4]

Tensions within film: is it art or business?

It can feel very much that film, as a medium, has its two feet firmly planted in two very different places. On the one hand, film represents a towering member of the entertainment business. As a business it has been enormously profitable, with the success of movies often measured in ticket sales. The 'blockbuster' or 'feel-good-summer-movie' generates massive income for movie studios, which is designed to offset the expenses of the movie and to enable other projects to be financed.

In this world of business, films are shown to a test audience for refinement and improvement based on the responses of this sample group and their preferences. Films are commonly assessed on their opening weekend takings, for a projection of their overall success as a money-making enterprise. The presence of sequels and formulaic movie plots can all be explained by this foot that film plants in the business world.

The business concerns of film push the medium to act as a mirror. To ensure the financial success of a film, the studio will want to give the viewers something they clearly wish to see. Close market analysis will shape a film, its characters and story to best reflect back to the patrons a story they want to watch. The mirror is being turned toward the audience with the goal of achieving the best business return by keeping the customer satisfied.

Yet film also has one foot in the art world. The film medium does present an art form, sharing feature of the other art forms. There is the two-dimensional visual component that film shares with painting. Film also has a performative dimension because the work exists when it is projected, just as a symphony is experienced when it is performed. In addition, film has also developed its own artistic conventions, such as editing and montage, by which it speaks artistically.

Film theory and cult cinema point to the power of film beyond the business model, such that it is something much more than a smart invest-ment. The presence of directors and the 'auteur', who retain independent financing, make final decisions on editing and attract the actors they want at a price they can afford, shows that film can exist for art's sake.[5] The medium of film does much more than make money for people—it connects and speaks to viewers, as images, music and sequences provide access to truth.

The artistic concerns of film push the medium to act as a window. The truth that is said to reside in the film emerges from the vision of the creator. The audience is looking through the window, into the heart of the creative force behind the medium. This is why the films of a certain director (or, in a previous era, a particular producer) might be studied together. Through the film there is a glimpse of the artist.

This first tension within film will forever remain unresolved. The forces that drive toward business ensure that the finances are present for the filmmaking to continue. At the same time the forces that drive toward art keeps the language of film alive and growing. Even though each of the two poles may dismiss the other, in truth they need each other. This is a healthy tension in film.

Tensions within film: is it documentary or imaginative?

Since the earliest attempts at capturing and projecting the moving image there has existed a tension in relation to its content. VF Perkins contrasts the Lumiere brothers with Georges *Méliès* to highlight this tension.[6] Whereas

Lumiere films captured moments in time, documenting the people around them, *Méliès* sought to portray invented stories. Is film for documentation or imagination?

Louis and August Lumiere are routinely invoked as key figures for the birth of film, although inventions such as cinema typically have more complex origins.[7] Charging one franc per person, in a rented basement room, the brothers Lumiere projected their collection of films totalling twenty minutes. The entry into film, for the Lumiere's, was through working in their father's photography factory.[8] From this foundation they brought technological knowledge and business acumen. Within a few years, short films were accepted items on music hall programs.[9] A printed program from 1897 reads: 'THE LUMIERE CINEMATOGRAPH: The Most Perfect Device Invented for the Photographic Portrayal of Life in Motion.'[10] Putting aside the hyperbole of showmanship, this description captures well the common expectation that film might serve as a mirror—it shows us ourselves. Common Lumiere films included 'Workers leaving a factory' and 'A Gondola Scene in Venice', and were continuous shots from a camera in a fixed position. The audiences marvelled at the capturing of life on film. There was no expectation of artistic representation or story-telling. Cinema was a novelty act, capturing moving photographs of life as it happened.

George Méliès was a magician who emerged from the world of theatre.[11] His contribution to film was the marked transition to narrative structures and the introduction of camera trickery.[12] Foundational to Méliès' approach was the entertaining deception, the magic of the illusionist. Méliès opened up the curtains of a window onto a fantastical world in which people could fly a rocket to the moon or watch the fairytale, Cinderella, unfold. Many others experimented with camera angles, trick shots and scene changes, quickly developing the 'language' of cinema as we know it today. The goal was to present a window into a world of imagination, to take the audience to incredible places.

This second tension within film is more subtle than the first. Many narrative films tell stories of every-day people, without any magical elements. These films may feel very much like ordinary life. However, narrative carries a very strong structure (orientation, complication, resolution), which is ordered and contained with the world of the movie, and as such does not accurately reflect actual life. In the same vein, successful documentaries do not merely replay all the events, as if the viewer had simply been present

themselves. 'Nanook of the North', a well known early documentary, sought to tell a story, and even staged events to be filmed.[13]

Perhaps the tension over whether film is documentation or imagination really highlights a more basic question: What does a film mean? Whether capturing life as it is, or imagining fantastical worlds that could never be, this story-telling through film is about making meaning. And it is to the topic of meaning we turn as we consider film as mirror, film as window, and finally film and theology.

Film as window: revealing the heart of the artist(s)

Marsh presents a case study of the films of Joel and Ethan Coen to explore the significance of a viewer's response to the work of particular artists.[14] He argues that

> directors do have intentions [when making a film], and sometimes these remain evident in and through a film and cohere with theological interests and purposes, even if those interests are very diverse and not overtly religious or theological.[15]

It almost goes without saying that the artist behind a film intends to convey something, perhaps even something of themselves, in their film. This is the idea of film as a window, where the projected images are a portal to what matters in the heart of the artist.

In his influential early study, *Film as Film, Judging and Understanding Movies*, Perkins provides a sustained argument for the collaborative approach to film-making, arguing that: 'Films are 'accidental' to the extent that they evolve unpredictably under the impact of different, often opposed, personalities.'[16] Yet even as Perkins argues that the director of a film is unlikely to be the sole author (recalling that he/she is assisted by producers, writers, editors, cinematographers and actors), he still affirms a central place for the director in drawing together the many artists of the film in a coordinated act.[17] Perkins concludes that '[t]he most telling argument for a critical belief in the "director's cinema" is that it has provided the richest base for useful analyses of the styles and meaning of particular films.'[18]

Perkin's conclusion is borne out by the common practice of attributing films to the director, and considering together films by the same director, even when the other significant roles in framing and creating the work have

by undertaken by various groupings of people. Whoever the 'author' or 'artist' of a film might be, there is a prevailing understanding that when watching a film we are seeing, as through a window, something of the creative heart of that artist.

André Bazin, a leading film writer within the post-war Realist Film Theory movement, looked forward to film's evolution toward more personal and varied forms of expression.[19] For Bazin this goal of engaging more deeply with the artistic vision of the director was the purpose of film and an expression of more fully evolved filmmaking. JD Andrew observes that with the arrival of the French New Wave (a loosely affiliated movement of experimental French filmmakers during the 1950s and 60s), something of Bazin's goal was beginning to be realized: 'We can experience through their films both the reality [that these directors] address and their own inner realities more intimately than was ever possible in the classic age of film.'[20] Bazin's vision of pure, realist filmmaking remains only partially fulfilled. However, as a major stream of artistic expression on film, it does represent a window into the creative talent behind the film.

By way of a specific example we may consider the book, *Cinema, Religion and the Romantic Legacy*, in which Paul Coates provides his rationale for the approach of his study, which is 'a desire to highlight works in which the intelligence and feelings of the filmmakers, and hence of the audience, are most fully engaged.'[21] Of note here is the priority he gives to filmmakers over the audience. His foundation for study is the consideration of the artist and their act of self-revelation in the film. Coates pays particular attention to Polish director Krzysztof Kieslowski, whose films feature prominently throughout the book.[22] Again, Coates understands the images and art of Kieslowski's films to be revealing of the director himself.

Are we looking through a window, when we watch a film, catching a glimpse of the artist behind the work? Isn't it reasonable for film critics to observe recurring themes and motifs across the body of a filmmaker's work, and be able to comment on the concerns or purpose of the creative vision who produced the film? While it is possible for a story to stand alone, our consistent inclination is to notice *who* tells the story, aware that something of the story-teller has been invested into the story. Film is a window into the heart of the artist.

Film as mirror: revealing the heart of the viewer

Christopher Deacy laments the absence of significant, academic work on the place of the audience, in film studies.[23] If we agree with Deacy that the meaning of a film is transitory, and is determined when the film is screened before an audience, then film becomes a mirror, showing truths to the audience about themselves. Deacy is especially troubled by the lack of attention to audiences because, as he puts it:

> a number of scholars have purported to *speak on behalf* of the audience, without citing, or having assembled, any empirical evidence to corroborate their claims. Thus, we have the bizarre situation where it is implicitly recognized that audience interpretation matters, yet at the same time no serious attempt is made to find out *wha*t an audience is actually thinking vis-à-vis a given film.[24]

Deacy presents an interesting response to the challenge of collecting hard data on audience responses to film. He draws extensively from the 'user comments' of visitors to the Internet Movie Database (IMDb) website. Deacy argues that 'the web affords—even invites—a unique freedom of expression, the fruits of which should not be discarded when examining the manner in which audiences engage with film texts.'[25] Deacy demonstrates that film has a significant mirror-like function, where viewers are affected by the experience of watching the film, even to the point of publicly commenting on it at film-related websites such as the IMDb.

Clive Marsh has also written extensively on this mirror aspect of film, and in his writing aims to elucidate something of the emotional power of film.[26] While acknowledging the difficulties of assessing the varieties of emotional responses and the challenge of measuring what, if any, lasting impact they create, Marsh still argues for a positive escapism through the emotional engagement with film.[27] Marsh is aware that in audience response there is a complex interplay of factors at work in the viewer: 'The emotional arousal will be unhealthily escapist when not integrated within a cognitive framework capable of grasping a person's life-structure.'[28] There is no doubt that filmgoers do something with the films they see. Furthermore, it may be argued that more goes on, subconsciously even, than the filmgoer may be aware of and able to report on. While 'entertainment' may be the primary

reason filmgoers give for their visit to the cinema or for downloading a film, this mirror reflects back to them much more about themselves.

Marsh and Deacy both represent significant voices in the conversation about film and theology, and their point of contact helps to turn attention to the powerful role of the viewer in constructing (or perhaps even completing) the meaning of the film. Taken together in this way, both Marsh and Deacy provide ways in which the film and theology discussion might most closely resemble the mirror, reflecting back the audience the self-revelation that film can engender. Marsh concludes that '[a]t its simplest an audience reception agenda is asking whether, and if so how, the practice of film-watching fits into people's patterns of meaning making. "[29] It is to this significant idea of meaning-making that we now turn.

Making meaning: the shared ground of Film and Theology

In both film and theology, human beings are engaged in that fundamental human work of making meaning out of disparate parts. Marsh describes it in this way:

> Religion and the cinema are ... in the same business as far as their practices are concerned ... They provide locations and rituals in and through which participants in their practice can clarify what is and is not illusory ... their ritual focus is on the evocation of an experience which moves, provokes and gets people thinking.[30]

Theology provides a framework and a language through which meaning can be made. Tradition and narrative, two elements strongly associated with theology, create a point of reference and a language for people to understand and evaluate the purpose and course of their life. Again, in film, tradition and narrative feature as structures that can bear the weight of meaning-making activity central to human experience. Marsh contends that 'the way in which use of media and the arts features as part of explicit religious practice, or of meaning-making practices which are religion-like, is difficult to dispute.'[31]

It is on this common ground of meaning-making that film and theology might speak to one another. Both the window and the mirror of film are about meaning. Does the film project the meanings of the artist? Yes, whether explicitly or implicitly, the script writer, producer, director, actors and editors (among many others) have brought their understanding of what binds

the parts of life in to a coherent, meaningful whole. Does the film awaken meaning in the audience? Yes, whether explicitly or implicitly, viewers engage their process of making meaning with the emotional impact of film. Perkins agrees when he observes that '[w]e can translate the meaning of a movie in two ways, on the basis of its form and on the basis of our experience.'[32] Marsh argues for a stronger relationship: 'given that any theology worthy of the name will address human concerns at the deepest possible level, it cannot but be keen to respond to and dialogue with an art-form which at its best has the potential to expose human experience at its rawest.'[33] Thus film and theology are already in conversation and, if both alert to the common ground, must own the implications of window-watching and mirror-looking.

When theology looks through the window of film, it can sometimes do so fearfully. Much of Christian response to the beginnings of popular film was withdrawal and condemnation, except where 'Christian films' were being made.[34] However a more robust doctrine of common grace, coupled with an emphasis on creative aspects of the *imago Dei* enables theology to look into the window of film and see the meaning placed there. It need not even be the conscious meaning of the artists with which theology engages. As the Apostle James wrote, 'Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of heavenly lights' (James 1:17). Film, with its flickering lights, can be a window onto creativity and the organisation of meaning.

The first significant step that film took towards becoming more than 'moving photography' was awareness of the power of aspect—the place from which the camera observes.[35] The second step was the process of editing, and juxtaposing images to create meaning through bringing together disparate parts and saying something about the whole.[36] There is a fundamental assumption here that there is a whole, and that something can be coherently said about the whole. Theology supplies exactly the grounds for this assumption in the character of the Creator God. The self-communication of the artist behind the film is a reflection of the grand self-communication undertaken by God. Given the parts of God's own self-revelation, which cohere in the study of theology, film can confidently operate within a world of meaning, and communication of meaning, among those creatures who engage in this conversation.

When theology looks at the mirror of film, it does so open to acting as responder to another's initiative. At its foundation, theology is a responsive activity, meeting the revelation of God with both faith and desire to

understand. A self-aware theology will even take note of the assumptions it brings to find voice in the language used to speak of God's character and works. Whether theology is learning how others see film (by observing how it is portrayed), or reflecting on shared or contrasting meanings evoked by a film, there is a willing participation in emotional power of film. As Marsh notes, 'theology helps in the task of critical reflection upon the emotional life and is itself challenged as to its purpose in the process.'[37]

A proper anthropology will take account of heart, soul, mind and strength in response to God and also in response to film. Thus the cognitive, emotive and embodied aspects of our being will be brought together in theological engagement, just as they are brought together in film. It is precisely in the joining up of these aspects of ourselves that meaning is established—meaning that will be stable enough to embrace new ideas and new forms of understanding. Engaging with film-as-a-mirror enables theology to broaden its sense of how truth might be told, receiving the text and living in it, rather than dissecting and thereby eviscerating it of its power.

The title sequence of *Breakfast at Tiffany's* opens on to an empty street with a single car approaching. A stylishly dressed woman emerges and walks to the nearest building. She eats a pastry while looking through the windows of Tiffany and Co. The viewer is not shown what she is looking at, but is kept focused on her and her reflection in the glass, as the shop window acts like a mirror. Holly Golightly is having her titular breakfast at Tiffany's. This film image gives us some way of acknowledging the simultaneous window and mirror effect that may be obtained when theology looks at film. Just as the viewer watches Holly, even as she is looking at something else, so theology views the film, its creators and its impact on those who watch it. This dialogue is about the shared ground of constructing meaning and bringing disparate elements—of film and theology—into a coherent whole.

Endnotes

1. Paul Coates, *Cinema, Religion and the Romantic Legacy*, Farnham, Surrey, Ashgate , 2003, p. 67.
2. See Thomas Elsaesser and Malte Hagener, *Film Theory: an Introduction Through the Senses*, Routledge, New York, 2010, for their discussion of the image of a window and mirror, *inter alia*, in relation to film theory.

3.   Clive Marsh, *Cinema and Sentiment Film's Challenge to Theology*, Paternoster, Milton Keynes, 2004.

4.   Marsh, *Cinema and Sentiment*, pp. 143–44.

5.   Peter Biskind, *Easy Riders, Raging Bulls: How the Sex 'n' Drugs 'n' Rock 'n' Roll Generation Saved Hollywood*, Bloomsbury, London, 1998, p. 17: 'The auteur theory was an invention of French critics who maintained that directors are to movies what poets are to poems'.

6.   VF Perkins, *Film as Film Understanding and Judging Movies*, Penguin, London, 1972, pp. 60–61. See also John R May and Michael S Bird, *Religion in Film*, Knoxville, University of Tennessee Press, 1982, pp. 88–89.

7.   David Robinson, *World Cinema A Short History*, Methuen, London, 1973, p. 1.

8.   Robinson, *World Cinema*, p. 17.

9.   Robinson, *World Cinema*, p. 23.

10.   Reproduced as an illustration in Robinson, *World Cinema*, p. 22.

11.   Robinson, *World Cinema*, p. 22.

12.   Perkins, *Film as Film*, pp. 60–61.

13.   Scott Carrier, *A Brief History of Documentary Forms http://transom. org/2014/brief-history-of-documentary-forms/*(accessed 4 November 2015)

14.   Marsh, *Cinema and Sentiment*, pp. 105–8.

15.   Marsh, *Cinema and Sentiment*, p. 107.

16.   Perkins, *Film as Film*, p. 175.

17.   Perkins, *Film as Film*, pp. 158–86.

18.   Perkins, *Film as Film*, p. 185.

19.   J Dudley Andrew, *The Major Film Theories: An Introduction*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1976, p. 177.

20.   Andrew, *The Major Film Theories*, p. 177.

21.   Coates, *Romantic Legacy*, p. 8.

22.   Coates, *Romantic Legacy,* pp. 9–11.

23.   Christopher Deacy, *Faith in Film Religious Themes in Contemporary Cinema*, Ashgate Publishing, England, 2005, pp. 5–6.

24.   Deacy, *Faith in Film*, p. 6 (original emphasis).

25.   Deacy, *Faith in Film*, p. 10.

26.   Marsh, *Cinema and Sentiment.* See also his chapter in John Lyden, *The Routledge Companion to Religion and Film*, Routledge, Abingdon, 2009, pp. 255–74.

27. Marsh, *Cinema and Sentiment*, p. 89, for his description of 'empowered escapism'.
28. Marsh, *Cinema and Sentiment*, p. 89.
29. Lyden, *Religion and Film*, p. 257.
30. Marsh, *Cinema and Sentiment*, p. 87
31. Lyden, *Religion and Film*, p. 263.
32. Perkins, *Film as Film*, p. 174.
33. Marsh, *Cinema and Sentiment*, p. 94.
34. Lyden, *Religion and Film*, pp. 2–3.
35. Perkins, *Film as Film*, p. 18.
36. Perkins, *Film as Film*, pp. 19–21.
37. Marsh, *Cinema and Sentiment*, p. 39.