

HOLLYWOOD HERMENEUTICS
An Argument for the Critical Viewing of
Popular American Motion Pictures

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"It's the movies that have really been running things in America ever since they were invented. They show you what to do, how to do it, when to do it, how to feel about it, and how to look how you feel about it. Everybody has their own America, and then they have the pieces of a fantasy America that they think is out there but they can't see."

Andy Warhol

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Chapter 1 – Introduction

Without confusing things we shall see that the interpretation of texts supposes the existence of another process, that of the interpretation of particular practices or events, and that the very constitution of those texts originates in an experience that is *interpreted*. ... From the hermeneutic viewpoint, text and event or praxis are already mutually conditioned.

J. Severino Croatto, *Biblical Hermeneutics*

Hermeneutics

Hermeneutics is a term almost exclusively used by Biblical scholars. Even the word's roots in the Greek language¹ seem to exclude it from lay-people, who prefer to use Latin-based words like "interpretation." While this book could just as well have been entitled "Hollywood Interpretation," I have chosen to juxtapose the words Hollywood and hermeneutics not just for the resulting catchy alliteration, but also to relate two powerful and deeply rooted narrative forces in modern American culture. "Hollywood Hermeneutics" seeks to bring together, in an interpretative framework, what in many instances has been rent asunder, or has never been brought together at all – namely, in H. Richard Niebuhr's terms, "Christ and Culture."

Hollywood movies and Biblical texts, for all their differences in context, worldview, ethical standards, spiritual understanding, etc. both utilize what I believe is a fundamental tool in the creation and modification of human awareness, understanding and behavior – the narrative. I believe the narrative quality of both movies and Biblical stories has not only the power to entertain, but more importantly

¹ *hermeneutics* <Greek *hermeneutos*, *hermeneuein*, to interpret or translate, interpretative

the power to transform. Narrative is a vicarious experiment that human beings conduct or observe in order to understand and process information, make decisions and finally act. Narrative, rightly understood and employed, is a precursor to or an impetus for action. In order to understand a narrative – whether it is a fable, a Bible story, a novel, a movie or the history of one’s own life – it must be interpreted. Once the narrative is composed, experienced, and mapped out by interpretation, a further step is to evaluate it according to some standard or goal. Finally some resultant action in response will take place, whether emulation or rejection. Many theologians agree that the question which remains after experiencing a narrative, whether religious *or* secular, is “How should we then live?”²

J. Severino Croatto, in his book *Biblical Hermeneutics* recognizes the ubiquitous use of hermeneutics in deciphering the messages of narrative:

“There is no such thing as a *biblical* hermeneutics distinct from a philosophical, a sociological, a literary hermeneutics, and so on and so on. There is but one general hermeneutics, with many “regional expressions.” The method and phenomenon coincide in all cases.³”

Croatto outlines three aspects of interpretation: a certain preunderstanding (context), the text itself (the cultural product), and an enlargement of meaning (criticism)⁴.

Accordingly, I will look at the hermeneutics of Hollywood in the context of modern America and explore a few tools which will allow us to enlarge the meaning of the

² see Francis Schaeffer’s book, *How Should we Then Live?*, the title of which is taken from Ezekiel 33:10 which implies a need for repentance from a sinful way of life. Schaeffer speaks from a conservative evangelical theological viewpoint. From another, more progressive viewpoint, Margaret Miles cites Martha Nussbaum’s comments on ancient Greek theater, see Miles pp. 7, 9.

³ Croatto, J. Severino. *Biblical Hermeneutics: Toward a Theory of Reading as the Production of Meaning*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books. 1987, p. 2

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 1

movie “texts.” Lastly, in order to offer an evaluation of the Hollywood’s answers, I will suggest the search for resonances in a study of the Bible.

Movies as “Text”

Before delving into the hermeneutics of the movies, however, it is necessary to state my reasons for believing that motion pictures can be treated simply as electronic literature, and therefore may be critically analyzed using many of the same techniques as textual literature. I am not alone in this claim. In fact, Mark Powell, in *What Is Narrative Criticism?*, has likened the experience of Biblical narrative to attendance at a motion picture. Narrative form, whether Biblical or cinematic, “enables us to translate our experience of the story world into our own situation.”⁵ Furthermore, Joseph Campbell and Vladimir Propp (amongst other structuralist critics) also have discerned a pattern of mythological and narrative structures and laws. Campbell, in fact, believes that there is a single world “monomyth,” through which all mythico-religious stories, whether the hero be Jesus or Luke Skywalker, may be described using the structural elements of the “Hero Journey.”⁶ Rudolf Arnheim, Christian Metz and Seymour Chatman, among others, have taken up motion pictures as worthy texts for critical study.

Of course, in the change of medium, some modification of technique and understanding will be necessary, but it is my claim that this does not change the potential power or effectiveness of narrative. To some extent, I do agree with Marshall McLuhan that the “Medium is the Message.” This preeminence of the form of the

⁵ Powell, Mark Allan. *What Is Narrative Criticism?* Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress. 1990, p. 90.

⁶ see Campbell’s work, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. Campbell, Joseph. *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press. 1968.

medium is especially marked when the content of the message goes unanalyzed and uninterpreted, as is the case in today's postmodern society. Notwithstanding, I do see a continuity through the ages of narrative power, regardless of whether the dominant medium is oral tradition, print or some sort of electronic medium. It is interesting, in fact, to witness the enactment of the same narrative using different vehicles for the message (as when a fairy tale from the oral tradition is given literary form by the Brothers Grimm and then cinematized by Walt Disney). What I argue here is that we need to apply our critical capacities learned from using the previous dominant media to the new electronic medium. It is my opinion that we have up until now not exercised the full extent of our critical capacity to analyze the ethical messages and suggestions and suppositions and sources of the modern vehicle of narrative — the motion picture.

Chapter 6 – Conclusion – Towards a 21st Century Apologetic

We are fast reaching an age in which the majority of Americans will get a majority of their information from non-text and even non-narrative sources. Some like Marshall McLuhan and Nicholas Negroponte welcome this cultural shift. They believe that the interaction of video with its Internet connections will be the advent of a true global village. Perhaps this is true and we do have many reasons for optimism. However the electronic medium is evolving faster than our thinking on the subject. Television, the Cinema and the Computer are merging into a complex, but affordable and common home appliance. Our understanding and critical faculties need to catch up in order to deal with even newer and unexplored vehicles for narrative. Internet chat rooms, role-playing games, Interactive CD-ROMs and various forms of Virtual Reality will soon be making even greater changes in our understanding and behavior. Doubtless these pose both new threats and new opportunities for the presentation of the Gospel.

Whatever the medium, the power of narrative, and in particular the power of the Gospel narrative, remains steady. Not only is the presentation of the Gospel story in each new media imperative, but also the Church's role as an ethical critic in modern culture must be upheld. The Church must argue for narrative understanding, for communal interpretative dialogue and for communal and individual response to the message.

As a first effort the Church needs to take movies and other evolving arts and technologies seriously and restore our own and others' critical capabilities. I believe that the fields of narrative criticism and semiotics provide techniques for critical assessment of motion pictures; Christian Metz, Rudolf Arnheim, Seymour Chatman and

others have already done work towards this goal. Liberation theologians such as Mary Ann Doane, Margaret Miles, Kathryn Tanner and others can help us to develop a “hermeneutic of suspicion” of the messages that are and are not present in the movies. They can show us how to “read against the grain” and “subvert the meaning” of movies into something liberating and edifying. Reputable secular writers like Raymond Williams, James Monaco and Nicholas Negroponte offer non-alarmist viewpoints which may help to balance and temper Christian conservatism.

Furthermore, we must view movies critically *and* communally. We should watch movies together and then make time to discuss their “gospels” and our Gospel. We must take our cues for evangelism from them – but it must not be only a personal or academic exercise. We can first learn vicariously through the movies how to deal with current issues and people, and then prepare ourselves for action and interaction. As St. Francis of Assisi is attributed to have said “preach the gospel always, use words if you have to.”

We must struggle in this postmodern, in-between time to develop a method, a technique which has the potential to be greatly rewarding in the doing of the Gospel. Ultimately the transforming of culture is in the hands of the church, as it always has been. I feel that it is now in the hands of the church of the 21st century to make sure that the Gospel makes it into cyberspace and into the narrative experience of not just Generation X or the baby busters but future myriad generations of the users of electronic media.

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