

# Theology at the Theater

## *Watching Film as a Communal Spiritual Discipline*

### Introduction

I remember sitting down with a Christian friend of mine recently. He had just finished his MDiv at Fuller. He was working as a teacher, active in church and engaging in meaningful fellowship. Yet he found himself in a funk in which it was hard for him to escape. As we sat at the coffee shop he told me about a film he had recently watched that awoke his spirit freshly to the Divine. He said, “I felt more connected to God during that film than any ‘sermon’ over the last six months.”

While some films are designed to be escapist entertainment, film has become one of the most powerful forms of art in our day, and has the ability to “disturb and enlighten, to make us more aware of both who we are and what our relationship with others could be. It can even usher us into the presence of the holy” (Johnston 2000:87). Good films awaken us to be more present to ourselves, to our world and to the One behind all of creation. Good films have the potential to help form us to be more fully human.

So what has Hollywood to do with Jerusalem? And what has Sundance to do with spiritual formation? In this essay I would like to suggest that watching films could help form us to become more like Jesus, if done thoughtfully. Film watching can be a profound communal spiritual discipline because the experience has the potential to reshape our desires as the Spirit “uses beauty (art) to lead us to goodness (ethics) and truth. (Detweiler 2008:161).

Here is the road map for our journey. First, we will gain an understanding of what a spiritual discipline and rhythm of life (multiple spiritual disciplines) looks like. Next we will examine what theology looks like in the theater, followed by a practical approach to film watching as a spiritual discipline. Then I will take that method and look at a couple of films that I saw at Sundance, so serve as an example of this practice. I will conclude with some encouragement on why communities of faith should engage in this practice.

### What is a Spiritual Discipline?

One of the most exciting things about our future is what kind of people we will meet and what type of people we will become. We were made in the image of God, but through the fall that image has been shattered. We all need to experience restoration in our life in order to more fully share in God’s image, and be capable of a greater sense of love, joy, peace and wisdom. At the end of the day, we need much help if we are to become who God originally created us to be – fully human. To be fully human is to be more like Jesus.

Phillip Kenneson gives a great picture of what it means to be a fully mature human being. He uses the fruit of the Spirit that Paul mentions in Galatians to give us this picture. He describes a mature person like this: Someone who cultivates a lifestyle of love in the midst of market-style exchanges; someone who cultivates a lifestyle of joy in the midst of manufactured desire; someone who cultivates peace in the midst of fragmentation; patience in the midst of productivity, kindness in the midst of self-sufficiency; goodness in the midst of self-help; faithfulness in the midst of

impermanence; gentleness in the midst of aggression; and self-control in the midst of addiction (Kenneson 1999).

Jacob Needleman in *Lost Christianity* makes this keen observation, “The lost element in Christianity is the specific methods and ideas that can first show us the subhuman level at which we actually exist, and second, lead us towards the level at which the teachings of Christ can be followed in fact, rather than in imagination” (Needleman 2003:155). If we have any hope of being more like Jesus, it is not going to come through a self-help program or by trying harder. It will happen as we embrace the work of the Spirit in our lives. Becoming more like Jesus is not a matter a trying, but yielding, setting the sails of our lives to catch the wind of God’s Spirit. So how do we do this?

By developing a rhythm of life where we engage in spiritual disciplines, which enable us to live more like Jesus. Dallas Willard defines spiritual disciplines as, “activities in our power that we engage in to enable us to do what we cannot do by direct effort alone” (Willard 2006:52). People throughout the ages have engaged in the spiritual disciplines. If we want to experience transformation, we need to develop a number of spiritual disciplines or a rule/rhythm of life that allow us to catch the wind of the Spirit, a rhythm of life whereby we learn the “unforced rhythm’s of grace”. I love how Eugene Peterson puts Jesus’ words in *The Message*,

“Are you tired? Worn out? Burned out on religion? Come to me. Get away with me and you’ll recover your life. I’ll show you how to take real rest. Walk with me and work with me - watch how I do it. Learn the unforced rhythms of grace. I won’t lay anything heavy or ill-fitting on you. Keep company with me and you’ll learn to live freely and lightly” (Matthew 11:28-30).

Ultimately, the spiritual disciplines enable us to experience transformation. Marjorie Thompson puts it this way,

“The caterpillar must yield up the life it knows and submit to the mystery of interior transformation. It emerges from the process transfigured, with wings that give it freedom to fly. A rule of life gives us a way to enter into the life-long process of personal transformation. Its disciplines help us to shed the familiar but constricting old self and allow our new self in Christ to be formed - the true self that is naturally attracted to the light of God” (Thompson 2005:147).

So why is the theater a good place to do theology? Can everyone do theology in the theater, or does one need formal training to do so? What does film watching as a spiritual discipline look like?

### **Theology at the Theater**

Philosopher and theologian James K.A. Smith in his book *Desiring the Kingdom* helps us understand that at a gut level, we are creatures who love and desire. Thus we need liturgies, rituals and routines that reshape our desires. While he focuses on how worship gatherings could be better designed to shape our desires toward the kingdom, Craig Detweiler in *Into the Dark: Seeing the Sacred in the Top Films of the 21st Century* makes the case that our faith can be revitalized by going to movies. He talks about film as a form of mass, a common grace in which God can speak to us. Detweiler follows the path of Hans Urs von Balthasar by reversing the common approach to hermeneutics.

Instead of starting with theology and special revelation, he starts with the creative (film), general revelation, and then moves toward special revelation. He is confident that the Spirit is able to “guide us from art (beauty) to ethics (goodness) and then to theology (truth)” (Detweiler 2008:31) since God first acts in creation, then in history (the exodus) and finally in Christ, the living word (Detweiler 2008:40).

In the same vein, Walter Brueggemann in his book *The Prophetic Imagination* quotes Asals book about Flannery O’Conner, reminding us of the power of the imagination.

“The imagination, O’Conner discovered, might accomplish much more; it might become the channel of visionary awareness... For O’Conner, as for Aquinas, it is the imagination, with its roots deep in the human unconscious, that is the link between the depths of the self and the unseen reaches of the universe, that can reveal to finite man his apocalyptic destiny... the imagination for her is as dangerous a force as any named by Freud, for what it opens up to, in those shattering climaxes when it achieves release, are the unwanted visions that ravage the lives of her protagonist” (Brueggemann 2001:xiv).

Since the average American sees just over 40 films a year, and our desires are shaped deeply by our imaginations, it seems wise to do theology in the theater.

The fact of the matter is everyone is a theologian, and according to Moltmann, we can do theology wherever we happen to be. For Moltmann, “theology comes into being wherever men and women come to the knowledge of God and, in the praxis of their lives, their happiness and their suffering, perceive God’s presence with all their senses” (Moltmann 2000:xvi). He also reminds us that theology is not just an inner-church activity, but it is public theology, and it ought to be done in light of the horizon of God’s coming kingdom. So what does film watching as a spiritual discipline look like?

Obviously there is no set way that one needs to go about this. Here is one possible approach. Having been involved in an Ignatius group over the last six months, I have become familiar with the practice of *lectio divina*. And because God not only speaks through the stars in the sky, but also communicates through the stars in Hollywood, one way to approach film watching as a spiritual discipline is to engage in what I call *cinematographeum divina* - finding the sacred in film.

Just as there are six basic movements with *lectio divina*, so it is with *cinematographeum divina*. Let me briefly walk you through the six steps then I will explore a couple films I saw at Sundance to demonstrate how to engage this spiritual discipline. While one could practice this spiritual discipline alone, the experience will be much richer if done with a group of people. As Moltmann has said,

“Theology is like a network of rivers, with reciprocal influences and mutual challenges. It is certainly not a desert in which every individual is alone with himself or herself, and with his or her God. For me, theological access to the truth of the triune God is through dialogue. It is communitarian and co-operative (Moltmann 2000:xvii).

So what are the six movements?

**Step One: *Silencio* (Preparation)**

Take a moment of silence in order to be fully present at the film, receiving the film on its own ground with a critical openness.

**Step Two: *Specto* (Watch)**

When watching the film it is important to pay attention to where you have meaningful connection with the film, be it with the plot, a particular character, a dialogue, a music score, a song or an image. What stands out to you?

**Step Three: *Meditatio* (Reflect)**

Now take some time to focus in on what struck you. If it was the plot, what was it about the plot that caught your attention? If a theme, what was it about the theme that resonated with you or that shocked you? If it was a character, in what way did you identify or not identify with the character? If it was a song or a symbol, what was it about the song that caused it to stand out to you?

**Step Four: *Oratio* (Respond)**

What is God saying to you through this? Perhaps you were touched in a place of pain, frustration or anger. This is a time to pour out these feelings to God. Perhaps there is a flash of self-knowledge and you were convicted of a sin. Take a moment to confess it. Maybe God is calling you to a new adventure. This is a time to respond to what God is doing.

**Step Five: *Contemplatio* (Rest)**

After giving your response its full expression, take a moment to release and return to a place of rest in God.

**Step Six: *Incarnatio* (Resolve)**

As you emerge from this place of encounter, take time to contemplate how God has used this film to touch you and ask him how he might want you to en flesh this word in the concrete spaces of your life. Resolve to take what God has shown you and live it out in the context of your daily life.

The way this would happen with a group, is you give each person a copy of these six movements prior to going to the theater or watching a DVD at your home. Then before watching the film, take some time to quiet yourself so that you might be fully present to the film. Then after watching the film, someone could lead people through the rest of the steps. After step three, depending on the size of the group (if it is large group, you may want to break it up into small groups for more vibrant discussion), you could have each person share what stood out to them. There could also be a time for discussion after steps four and six.

The beauty of art is that it has the power to reshape our desires and our imaginations. Films are stories, which shape us. As Detweiler says, the “most timely, relevant, and haunting films resonate with the shaping story of scripture: from beauty of creation, through the tragedy of self-destruction, to the wonder of restoration” (257), and both general and special revelation “are complementary gifts for navigating the complexities of life, for fueling our dreams, and for enduring our disappointments” (263). So what does this look like in practice?

## Experiencing the Sacred at Sundance

While this idea wasn't fully developed until after my trip to Sundance, I had the opportunity to work through most of the steps, because I approach much of my life in this way. Let's look at a couple of films that deeply touched me at Sundance, and how they have continued to shape my life since that time.

### Higher Ground

**Step One: *Silencio* (Preparation)** I arrived early to get a good seat for the film, and sought to center myself so that I would be fully present before the film started.

**Step Two: *Specto* (Watch)** The storyline and the acting sustained my attention the entire film. I totally identified with and sympathized with Corrine throughout the film, because her experience of Christian community mirrored my first Christian community after coming to faith in college. I could fully understand the nature of the church she was a part of and felt that the film gave an honest interpretation of a more fundamentalist kind of Christian community. The songs brought back memories, as did how the community corrected one another and held each other "accountable."

**Step Three: *Meditatio* (Reflect)** The reason I identified with Corrine so much is because I saw that she had a genuine yearning for God in an environment where there was not a lot of room for honest questioning about certain doctrines, like the role of women and why bad things happen to "good" people. While she was willing to challenge the written and unwritten rules of the community, she seemed to always have a sense of humility in the process. It was extremely difficult to see her leave her husband, family and church, even though she may have suffocated if she remained.

**Step Four: *Oratio* (Respond)** God was speaking to me throughout the film about the importance of good hermeneutics. Our approach to how we interpret the scripture builds a particular culture in our communities that either stifles the work of the Spirit or allows the Spirit the ability to fully work in our communities. In this case, I was saddened as I thought about how this approach to interpreting the scripture not only affected the life of Corrine, but it continues to affect a number of communities of faith that I know. I know a number of people who love their community, but are unable to be real and honest in those communities. I wish I could have stepped into the film, and become part of the community with the hopes of helping them move toward a more generous orthodoxy.

**Step Five: *Contemplatio* (Rest)** While many different emotions were running through me, I considered the many ways that God has worked through my own weaknesses in the past. I was reminded of the many things that I have taught in the past that I would change, had I know better. This pause helped me to remember to walk in humility, for we all see in a mirror dimly.

**Step Six: *Incarnatio* (Resolve)** My hope is that God would somehow use me to help others consider how their approach to epistemology and hermeneutics can shape the culture of their faith communities in profound ways. One concrete action that has come from watching this film is that I am writing about this film as it relates to hermeneutics in my upcoming book for InterVarsity Press. Besides writing about it, I plan to take various opportunities that I have to speak publically and privately to engage people on this issue, especially as it relates to women in ministry.

## Abraxas

**Step One: *Silencio* (Preparation)** I had time to center myself before the film started.

**Step Two: *Specto* (Watch)** We meet Jonen the punk-rocker slashing his guitar and rolling around on the ground. Then we see him in quiet meditation as a monk. Which is his true calling? Can he do both? The overwhelming theme that popped out to me in this film directed by Naoki Kato was how important it is for us to discover and live out our calling in life. This theme was most evident in our main character Jonen, who finally discovers a way to intertwine his calling as a monk and heavy punk-rocker, despite the issues it created in the lives of those around him. This idea of calling was also seen in the character of another man in town who took on his dad's business out of a sense of duty instead of calling. In a strange turn of events, he commits suicide. It seems life was not worth living, if one could not live out their calling.

**Step Three: *Meditatio* (Reflect)** As person who lives to help people discover and live out their calling in life, I found this film amazing. It reminded me that finding our voice and understanding our sense of calling is what life is about. If we miss our calling, we end our life early even if we don't take our life.

Yet to discover and live out our calling in life has a cost. For Jonen it involved a couple of things. First, Jonen practiced moments of silence regularly in his life, which is probably one of the reasons he hears his calling. For when we sit in silence we no longer get lost in the noise of the various voices calling us; we are able to find our true calling and live it out. The other cost is that often living out our calling costs those around us. For example, Genshu, the resident temple priest made some decisions on behalf of Jonen, which didn't stand well for him. Many questioned his ability to live out his calling as a priest because of his support for Jonen. In addition, Jonen's wife seemed to have major issues with him being a heavy punk-rocker. This was something Jonen had to work out on a daily basis. In time she came around. Additionally, many people in the town had certain expectations of how a Buddhist monk ought to live his life, and being a heavy metal punk rocker didn't quite fit their expectations. Yet in spite of all these social pressures, Jonen decided to live out his calling, and became a hero for me.

**Step Four: *Oratio* (Respond)** My initial response to this film was one of great joy. One of my biggest passions in life is that people would have the courage and wisdom to discover and live out their calling, whatever the cost might be. For the cost of not discovering and living out our calling is undoubtedly greater, as shown in the man who committed suicide years before he took his life. Also, as a pastor for the last twenty years, I like most pastors recognize that the people I serve have certain expectations for me, some which are healthy, some that are not. Often different people have contradictory expectations, which means that it is impossible to please everyone. Thus I have found it best to live for an audience of One in a humble way. Another reason I identified with Jonen was because I'm at a cross roads in my own life as it relates to my calling. I'm seeking discernment and I've realized the important practice of silence in this time. Yet I often find it a struggle to slow down with deadlines crushing in all around me.

**Step Five: *Contemplatio* (Rest)** I took some time in the evening after the film to sit in silence and give my life freshly to God.

**Step Six: *Incarnatio* (Resolve)** This film reminded me of two quotes that I think about often. This first one is by an unknown source. “You can’t make footprints in the sands of time with your butt, and who wants to make butt prints in the sands of time?” The second one comes from the pen of Fredrick Buechner where he says, “Calling is where your deep hunger meets the world’s deepest needs.” Through this film I’m reminded of the fact that every human being on this earth has a calling, and the moments where we are most fully alive are not when we are on vacation, but when we are striving and stretching to discover and live out our calling.

After watching this film, I was stirred freshly to take more moments of silence, especially in my current time of discernment. I was also encouraged to strengthen my resolve to take the sabbatical that I’ve been planning to take this summer. The world is noisy and sometimes screaming with needs, but I realize that if I’m going to hear my calling, it requires paying attention to God, being fully present with who I am, and how God wants to uniquely use me to meet needs in the world.

Secondly, this film strengthened my resolve to continue to learn how to help others discover and live out their calling in life. I’m committed to continue to acquire tools that enable me to do this with passion and wisdom. Mark Twain said, “Most men die at 27, we just bury them at 72.” I hope to change that. My mission in life is to awaken people to join God in the renewal of all things, according to how God has made them.

## Conclusion

Good filmmakers are the poets and prophets of our day, for they freshly awaken our imaginations through life shaping stories. The tens of thousands of hours that are invested in creating films have the potential to touch people’s lives in ways that reshape their desires and enable them to be fully human. Films are powerful. But if we are going to capture the full power of films, we need to find ways in which film watching becomes a communal spiritual discipline. One such way is through cinematographeum divina. But there are other ways to do this as well. The Windrider forum that took place during the Sundance festival was another way that we were able to get the maximum benefit from Sundance. Through the group discussions, the interviews and many conversations, we were all encouraged to be fully present at each of the films we watched. This increased awareness allowed us to pay attention to both the details and the big picture. The group discussions each morning allowed us to process what God was showing each of us, making the encounter with the films even richer.

My plans are to post this paper on my blog, in hopes that people would be encouraged to watch film as a communal spiritual discipline. For we are all theologians, and we can do theology everywhere, including the theater.

## Sources

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