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**FILM AND THEOLOGICAL
REFLECTION**

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I grew up in two worlds. One world filled with books that, fired my imagination, stirred my soul, and invited me to ponder deeply the meaning of life. The other world was filled with movies - fantastic moving images dancing in the darkness that captured my imagination and dragged me off to galaxies “far, far, away” (Star Wars) or to the edges of life and death (The Sixth Sense).

In my work with seminarians, I have found images a helpful pedagogical tool. While no educational technology is in itself the “magic cure” for engaging students in the subject matter, films can quickly engage both the mind and heart through the language of images.

My thesis for this paper is really quite modest and, perhaps, painfully obvious: we can stimulate theological reflection, develop pastoral skills, examine pastoral roles, and explore pastoral identity by using film in our pastoral field education programs. The substance of pastoral field education is the student learning from his or her experiences in ministry through a relationship with a supervisor. Perhaps images from films can be the salt in the stew that helps bring the flavor of those experiences out into the light of day.

1. Beginnings

My love affair with images really began with poetry. I began to write poetry myself when I was in high school. It provided a vehicle for me to express - as well as explore - the barrage of emotions we normally call adolescence. In college I found the poetry of e.e. cummings. His poetry could put into words not only raw human emotion but also the hopes, dreams, uncertainties, and longings of a generation. John Shea, and his religious poetry and stories, captured my heart and soul during my years in graduate school.

Growing up in the fifties and the sixties, I was very much a part of the emerging media generation. I remember being frightened by the mystery stories aired on television. The movie version of the life of Saint Francis had such an impact on me when I was around ten years old that I choose Francis as my confirmation name. But films were also dangerous and could corrupt my tender soul. Going with my high school English teachers to see Midnight Cowboy was akin to Apollo stealing fire from the gods. The possibility of film being a vehicle for the sacred did not return for me until Star Wars hit the scenes with its incredible blend of bravado, mysticism, and romance.

Of course, I attempted to use poetry, story, and film in my ministry. At first, it was creating prayer cards by combining clip art and prayer poems. Then, with Powerpoint presentation, I could blend text and images - even animated images - into my classroom presentations. It was the Matrix that helped me see the possibility of using film as a means of engaging students in theological reflection.

2. A Perspective on Theological Reflection

All theological reflection begins with the experience of the person or persons involved with the experience. Given this starting point, there are two popular approaches to theological reflection; Robert Kinast and Killen & de Beer. Robert Kinast, coming out the Catholic tradition and influenced by both Lonergan and process theology, analyzes the experience in an effort to

identify its component parts before engaging the tradition for a theological assessment and insight into the experience.

Patricia O'Connell Killen, who taught at the Pacific Lutheran University, and John de Beer who oversaw the Education for Ministry Program sponsored by the University of the South, attempt to capture the experience in an image or a story - rather than through an analysis of its parts - and then engage a variety of voices (personal positions, culture, and our religious traditions) concerning that image.

Both approaches attempt to glean some insight from this type of reflection on the nature of the experience itself, the action of the individual involved in the experience, and some assessment on how the individual could be more effective and faithful in other situations.

These two approaches are both valuable and, in many ways, are two sides of the same coin. Theological reflection is a disciplined way of seeing experience so experience itself can become either a mirror or an icon. As a mirror, it reflects back to the individuals involved their assumptions and their filters. They can see more clearly how they approached the situation and what they did to shape the outcome. As an icon, theological reflection opens the eyes of the individuals involved into the deeper workings of God in the lives of ordinary people. The paschal mystery becomes alive and tangible in surprising and poignant ways.

3. Liminal Moments

A liminal moment is when we are at the edge of the world as we know it and suddenly everything is charged with a grandeur and presence that our previous world could not hold. I believe these are sacred moments when conversion happens and we are immersed in grace that is tangible and tasty. I also believe - as Elizabeth Barrett Browning suggested - that every moment would be a burning bush if we but had the eyes to see and the ears to hear.

Birth is a liminal moment. This was painted on film for me by Robin Williams and Robert DeNiro in their Oscar nominated film *Awakenings* (Columbia, 1990). Williams, who plays real life Dr. Malcolm Sayer, works with patients stricken with a serious and rare disease of the nervous system that renders them catatonic. The "awakening" happens not only for Sayer's patients through his research and persistence but also for him as he learns that he must stretch himself if he is going to help his patients. Many scenes come to mind where Sayer, or Leonard (played by DeNiro), awaken to new insights about the disease or life itself. Perhaps one of the more poignant scenes is when the whole ward, after receiving an experimental drug discovered by Sayer, "wakes up."

American Beauty (1999) - in many ways a depressing and tragic film - invites the viewer to examine the edges of his or her own sense of perception by raising the question of beauty itself. Kevin Spacey plays a middle aged man caught in the doldrums of a dead end career and a passionless marriage. He must confront his own demons, the infidelity of his wife, and the angst of his teenage daughter on his road to personal integrity and wholeness. The neighbor boy next door introduces him to the perception changing effects of marijuana and introduces his daughter to the omnipresence of beauty in the world. In one incredible scene this young man, as he is playing a video of a bag dancing with the wind, talks about beauty in language laced with mysticism and romance. The theme of beauty - even in the face of death - is carried through the film. Beauty demands our attention and erases many of the cubicles were we stuff our lives.

Science and faith inhabit the land of the liminal. These two approaches to life as lived by us humans in the first days of the twenty-second century are graphically portrayed in the film *Contact* (1997) starring Jodi Foster as Ellie Arroway and Matthew McConaughey as Palmer Joss.

Written by Carl Sagen, the story is about Ellie, a bright young astronomer and her search for life on other planets and Palmer, an emerging spiritual leader who questions the great promises of science and technology. In a dramatic interlacing of the value of science and technology, the persistence of scientific research, and the suddenness of discovery, Ellie and Palmer must face their basic assumptions about life and about each other.

According to Margaret Miles (*Seeing & Believing*), “media images are one of the most pervasive means by which Americans receive representations of identity and diversity, relationships, and social arrangements and institutions.” The movies are one of the places - novels, theater, and other art forms being others - where society looks into the mirror to see who it is and what it has become, or is becoming. It is also an icon - a window if you will - into the soul of society where both the demonic and the angelic can be revealed, resolved, and celebrated. Films is one way culture reflects on itself and the religious traditions can affirm, or challenge, the values films advance. By engaging film, the Christian community can bless and condemn and in doing either proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ.

4. Pastoral Skill Development

I believe one skill needed by anyone in ministry is the ability to hold a pastoral conversation. Here the minister welcomes the other in faith and listens to their story so he or she can know what they have experienced, what emotions the experience roused, and what meaning they give to the experience. With this understanding, the minister can discern a response, respond, and bring the conversation to close with a sense of direction and the support of the community of faith.

The ability to conduct a pastoral conversation requires a “skill set” that involves asking questions, searching for meaning, and, at times, confronting. Film is often a “safe place” to introduce these skills and provide students of some images of how this type of listening takes place. In the *General’s Daughter* (Paramount, 1999), John Travolta plays Paul Brenner, a detective for the Army, who is investigating a murder. In one scene, Brenner has to interview a Colonel in Psychological Operations. The exchange shows the subtlety, and the missed steps, of interviewing someone.

Another essential skill is confrontation - where the minister can be completely honest with the other and cut through any posturing they bring to the conversation. Robin Williams, as Sean, in the film *Good Will Hunting* (Miramax, 1997), must quickly cut through the persona and defenses Will has erected around himself. Over the course of several scenes, Sean interacts with Will, confronts Will, ponders the experience, and confronts Will again in terms and language that he can understand.

Finally, ministers help people discern meaning and direction for their lives. This is dramatically captured in a scene between Gandolf and Frodo in the *Fellowship of the Rings* (New Line Production, 2001). In a remarkable exchange Gandolf challenges Frodo’s despair and judgments as they attempt to discern which direction to take in the dwarf caves.

5. Pastoral Roles

I believe the minister holds a public role in society. Most Christian denominations recognize, in some way, the three offices of Christ as priest, prophet, and king. In Roman Catholic teaching, the priest is to teach, sanctify, and govern. Further, I believe that the role of the minister is a composite of roles that involve teaching, preaching, leading, pastoral care, and

worship. Henri Nouwen developed these ideas in the early 70's and published them in a book (Creative Ministry).

The pastoral care giver role can be explored in some depth through the film *Dead Man Walking* (1995). It is the story of Sr. Helen, played by Susan Sarandon, and Matthew (Sean Penn), a death row inmate. Sr. Helen is seen by her supervisor, and even by Matthew, as a compassionate “do gooder.” In a very revealing scene, Sr. Helen confronts Matthew - not only with his possible death but also the lies he continues to tell himself.

Nouwen dates himself in many ways when he talks about the minister as an organizer and yet the image of what this means for the minister in society lingers through films like *On the Waterfront* (1954) starring Marlon Brando who plays a dock worker trying to deal with the injustices of a corrupt union boss. Karl Malden plays a Roman Catholic priest who reaches out to the dock workers, tries to organize them to confront the corrupt union boss, and challenges Brando to take the road less traveled.

A number of films deal with what it means to be a teacher. Robin Williams played John Keating, a dynamic English teacher, in *Dead Poets Society* (1999). Mel Gibson, who directed as well as starred as Justin McLoed, provides a remarkable portrayal of the relationship between a teacher and a student in *The Man Without A Face* (1993). Kevin Kline provides a moving performance in *The Emperor’s Club* (2002) as a teacher and his 30 year relationship with his students. Meryl Streep, in *Music of the Heart* (1999), depicts the commitment and conflict involved in being an inner city violin teacher.

Babette’s Feast (Orion, 1987) stands out as a classic film about the beauty and power of the meal fellowship Jesus made central to his own ministry. Even *The Lion King* (1994) has a priest, if you will, in the character of Rafiki who baptizes, and crowns, Simba as king. The preacher role is, in many ways, captured by Morpheus (Laurence Fishburne) in the *Matrix* series. First, Morpheus has an unflinching belief in Neo as “the one” who will save humanity from the oppression of the *Matrix*. Second, in *Matrix Reloaded* (2003), Morpheus addresses the citizens of Zion as part of the concluding prayer. His brief homily speaks to their past, their present situation, and their future.

Being a pastor is a role in our society although the role itself is a composite of many roles. Films such as the ones named here, and there are many more, can provide both a mirror and an icon into the various faces of the pastoral role. Of course, we have to bring our own imagination, and the imaginings of our students, to the experience of engaging the film. “Like other artistic media, movies do not function iconically unless viewers deliberately augment the visible with imagination.” (Miles).

6. Pastoral Identity

In many ways, pastoral identity, what Don Beisswenger has called embodiment, is the *telos* (final cause) of our work as pastoral field educators. We can describe the pastoral role in society. We can break that role down into its various component parts. We can examine the myriad of skills required by each component part. But if we never explore how a person integrates all the aspects of his or her formation, we will not know whether or not he or she will embody - will be - the minister the church desires, society expects, and the gospel demands. Once again, film can provide a mirror as well as an icon to the question of identity.

The *Matrix* trilogy is, in many ways, the journey of Mr. Anderson (Keanu Reeves) into his true identity - not only as Neo but as “the one.” Some of this journey into his identity can be found in the conversations he has with the Oracle. In *Matrix Reloaded*, Neo not only comes to

understand his own identity, but he begins to see more clearly who the Oracle is and what she is asking of him.

Identity and identity confusion are often subtle issues that the minister must face throughout life of service. In *The Third Miracle* (1999), Fr. Frank Shore (Ed Harris) confronts his doubts about his vocation and about God as he advocates sainthood for a woman from Chicago. This is a deeply mature movie that explores the question of call, vocation, and identity given the fragility of life and the elusiveness of faith.

With the question of identity, comes the question of motivation and integrity. *The Messenger - The Story of Joan of Arc* (1999) is a bloody depiction of the life and times of Joan as she, faithful to her “voices,” leads France to victory over the English. For the viewers who can stomach all the violence for the first hour and a half, there is a remarkable exchange between Joan, aptly portrayed by Milla Jovovich, and her conscience (expertly played by Dustin Hoffman). After her arrest by the English, Joan is tried in an ecclesiastical court. Her prison time becomes a time of critical self examination where she questions her motives, her mission, and her relationship with God.

7. Assessment

Once again, using film to stimulate theological reflection can help students explore their experiences, break open liminal moments, develop pastoral skills, explore the pastoral role, and appropriate their pastoral identity. Using film has both advantages and disadvantages.

- Film is accessible. Students know and engage films all the time. Films, however, are human creations. As a mirror, it is a fabrication so the reflection is not perfectly clear. As an icon, the window is tainted so what is seen is not a pure representation - a pure image - of what it is real.
- Film provides a common reference point for our students. It also provides a common experience which they can project their own experiences onto (mirror) or through which they can explore their own questions or issues (icon). The problem, of course, is it gives an external image for students to engage rather than a lived experience.
- Film encourages students to engage their imagination (right brain) rather than their rationale mind (left brain). In this way, it may evoke a false gestalt and overlook the complexities of doctrine. *American Beauty*, for example, is a partial conversion story - it depicts people turning away from limiting and oppressive lives but only hints at the goodness they might be turning towards.
- Film can stimulate creativity. It engages students in many of the issues that our culture is trying to understand. In this way, however, it takes the student away from the faith community they serve.

8. Film and the Theological Field Educator

I encourage the theological field educators to step back and ask himself or herself what film reflects (mirrors) or captures (icon) their own work. If you had to describe what you do using a film, what film would you select?

In reflecting on my own experience as a theological field educator, three films came to mind. First, *Chariots of Fire* (1981) where a running coach tells Harold Abrahams (Ben Cross) that he can “take two seconds off your time.” The second image came from *Shine* (1996), the story of the Australian pianist David Helfgott (Geoffrey Rush) masters the seemingly impossible Rachmaninoff Piano Concerto No. 3. Sir John Gielgud plays Helfgott's tutor who, in one

particularly memorable scene, tells him to “play all the notes but to forget all the notes.” The last image comes from Hook (1991) where one of the “lost boys” approaches Peter Banning (Robin Williams), begins to pull back the wrinkles and years from his face to eventually exclaim, “There you are, Peter!”

“And while He was praying, the appearance of His face became different, and his clothing became white and gleaming.” (Luke 9:29). I believe those of us who are privileged to participate in the pastoral formation of our students seek a total transformation of the self; from one who follows to one who embodies. Ultimately, of course, it is not us who forms our students but God working through the experiences they have and through our ability to help them find themselves within those experiences. Sometimes the difference we make is simply to awaken them to their gifts or help them become better at what they can already do. At other times, we help them overcome challenges we ourselves can not face. Perhaps the best we can do is provide those mirrors and icons where they can “see for themselves” who God is calling them to be in and through their ministry.