

INTERPRETATIVE NARRATIVE FORMS

Allegory and Analogy

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Using film as entertainment can easily lead to a misapplication of interpretative narrative form. Two interpretive narratives forms typically used for film, within a religious paradigm, are film as allegory and films as analogy. One of the interpretive forms reads meaning into the film, “meaning” which viewers want to see and believe. This form is eisegetical. The other interpretative form allows the film to speak to us, so we might see the film ‘text’ as a primary text speaking its own truth. This form is exegetical.

Allegory, meaning, “to speak figuratively,” is a narrative or an expression made by assigning symbolic meaning to figures and objects. For example, a typical allegorical viewing method applied to film is to look for a ‘Christ figure’ in every film. I have heard some people say the re-programmed once-Terminator-now-savior (Arnold Schwarzenegger) in *Terminator 2: Judgment Day* (1991), is a ‘Christ Figure’. The new Terminator becomes an allegorical (symbolic) re-presentation of Christ.¹ The terminator sacrifices his life as a Machine for the future salvation of the world. While this allegorical understanding may ‘work’ for some viewers, it may be laying upon the film our expected interpretation

¹ Symbolic re-presentations participate in the thing they re-present. They are signifiers that participate with the signified. For further study, see Roland Barthes, *Elements of Semiotics* (Hill & Wang Publishers, 1977).

(eisegesis). If we expect to find a Christ Figure, we will find a Christ Figure, even if he is female, even if she is not there.²

To interpret *Chariots of Fire* (1981) allegorically, the Prince of Wales, HRH Edward, and his royal court of Lords symbolically re-present the multi-allegiant institutional church.³ They pressure the Christian runner, Eric Liddell, to run his Olympic heat on the Christian Sabbath for the prestige of winning for the British Empire. The Jewish runner, Harold Abrahams, allegorically re-presents the oppressed Jewish people to whom God has promised victory and gold. Harold's devotion to his coach, Sam Mussabini, would allegorically make Harold a devote and observant Jew. Eric Liddell, the Christian minister whose gift of running pleases and glorifies God, allegorically, would be Jesus, or even the Spirit of God.

Interpreting film allegorically fails to honor the visual art form of film as authoritative, authentic text. This method assumes that film cannot be an art form/text with religious integrity unto itself. This is similar to treating Van Gogh's dimensional painting technique allegorically, seen as possibly the Holy Spirit in his work. Vincent van Gogh's *Sunflowers* (1888) could allegorically be creation.⁴

² *Dead Man Walking*, DVD, directed by Tim Robbins (1995; Polygram Video, 2000). *Terminator 2: Judgment Day*, DVD, directed by James Cameron (1991; Le Studio Canal+, 1997).

³ *Chariots of Fire*, DVD, directed by Hugh Hudson (1981; Warner Home Video, 2005).

⁴ Vincent van Gogh, *Sunflowers*, 1888.
http://www.bbc.co.uk/bbcfour/paintingflowers/full_res/sunflowers_van_gogh.shtml. (accessed September 4, 2007)

A Starry Night (1889) could allegorically be the stars and angels invisible-made-visible whirling above us in the night sky.⁵ These ulterior allegorical interpretations of the religious dimensions of Van Gogh's art disrespect the interior art's authentic religious and spiritual dimensions.

Allegorically interpreting any art form places the viewer as the eisegete over the art form's vision, rather than allowing the art to reveal its authentic realities to the viewer. When congregations entertain by searching film's allegorical meaning, an opportunity is lost for viewers to encounter film as religious art; an opportunity is foregone for viewers to experience the religious vitality in film and engage in theological inquiry. Eisegesis constrains our theological imagination from ranging beyond known themes and doctrines. We see what we want to see in a film. The film does not reveal God's new truth, for our eisegetical ears stopped what we need to hear. This is to use film not only as entertainment, but possibly as doctrinal enforcement.

I am leery of some films produced by religious production film companies. Some films are attempts are biblical narratives 'literally' rendered in film. As good as film production can be, attempting to render biblical narratives cast in the time of the biblical event strips the biblical text of nuance and renders a monolithic interpretation. I understand that these films as theologically shallow. They are merely re-enactments of biblical narrative in visual form. As a literary medium,

⁵ Vincent van Gogh, *Starry Night*, 1889. <http://www.poster.net/van-gogh-vincent/van-gogh-vincent-starry-night-7900683.jpg> (accessed September 4, 2007)

biblical narratives use the subtleties of language and structure as means to communicate beyond literal enactment. These aspects of the biblical text are lost in a visual rendering of the narrative, even if the wording of the text is the same as an authorized biblical text. This makes the language of the film text awkward and not in keeping with the speech patterns of the day, for biblical texts are linguistically shaved to the minimal and most expressive words to tell the force of the story.

Religious film productions can reinforce rather than explore theological premises or doctrines. These films are teaching tools—teaching what is to be known as the only right and true belief. Questions are answered, doubt is scurried away, and certainty of faith is promised in a demanding, complex life. Even commercial television has enjoyed this form of teaching with series such as *To Touch an Angel*. Nothing is inherently wrong with this use of film. It is a choice, however, to use film as a means of doctrinal re-enforcement or as a means of generating questions relevant to living a life of faith in a chaotic world.

Another way to interpret film as religious art is through analogy. Analogy is a resemblance of some particulars between things otherwise unrelated or unlike. An analogue notes similarities and likeness. Analogy uses metaphors and interpretative signs. An analogy, as a sign, does not participate in what it signifies; it does not symbolically point to or re-present to something other than what it is. For instance, in a film, a large book is a book, not the Bible. A table is a

table, not the Table of Eucharist. Stars are stars, not seraphim and cherubim.

Filmic signs ground us in the reality of the film text.

Analogically, however, a book can be a source of insight for characters in the film. A table can be a place of community, or where the family breaks bread together regardless of conflict and trial. A starry night can evoke awe and wonder, a questioning about one's place within the cosmos. We query the film with questions about what is similar in our life, the life of a community, and the life in the world. How does/does not the story in film, as cinematically presented, expand and re-arrange our view of God and ourselves?

Dead Man Walking, as discussed before, is a story based on the life of Sr. Helen Prejean. As a screenplay, the story is a combination of Sr. Helen's experiences working with prisoners on death row. Interpretative claims on this film range from it being an anti-death penalty film to a religious tract on the importance of salvation before death. All viewers have a right to an interpretation given substantiation. One interpretative claim may be that the film is speaking about the nature of ministry. Analogically, Sr. Helen's experiences in the film lead us to examine the dilemmas in the ministry of accompaniment (lay or ordained) and power of relentless unconditional love.

To work analogically, instead of allegorically, the religious and spiritual dimensions of *Dead Man Walking* are im-mediate (not mediated by symbols) and pertinent to living out the vocation to which God calls us. Matthew Poncelet is not a figure dying for our sins. He is a man, dying for *his* sins. Sr. Prejean's persistent

love is her enactment of God's love for Matthew. Through the ministry of Sr. Prejean, Matthew comes to know the healing of God's love in the last thirty minutes of his life.

Theologically, the film raises questions about the nature of 'salvation'. Is salvation earned by confession? Does salvation mean escaping the wrath of a hell? Is thirty minutes of salvation – knowing the healing love of God – worth Sr. Prejean's efforts? Does the Church have to qualify Matthew's salvation? Why salvation at all, if only for thirty minutes? What if Matthew had failed to know God's love through Sr. Prejean; would she have failed?

The film focuses on Sr. Prejean's ministry. Whether ordained or lay, all baptized Christians are called to be Christ's hands and heart on earth in this time and place. How could we use this difficult film to ask parishioners about the nature of their ministry in the world? It need not be a ministry like St. Prejean, but how do they minister to the people in their lives, despite the difficulty and work it entails? Who are they willing to accompany? For what end? These are questions, as examples, rising from a film narrative interpreted as a analogy.

In *Chariots of Fire*, the Prince of Wales (in the year of 1924) has immense power. Eric Liddell, however, a mere missionary Christian has convictions of faith that are more powerful than the Prince of Wales' power and aspiration to win the Olympic Gold Medal for the United Kingdom. Liddell is similar to someone whose faith convictions (ethical, moral, theological) will not bend to the pressures of society to break with their belief system.

Harold Abrahams is uncertain about his place in the world as a “newly rich Jew . . . in Cambridge Society,” given the stereotyping of Jewish people.⁶ To prove his ethnicity as a Jew and as a member of the British upper crust, he needs to prove to that he, as a Jew, is equally as colonialistic and snobbish as any British Anglo-Saxon, if not more so. This is analogous to the ‘Other’ (determined by differences in ethnicity, race, gender, and age in a dominant culture) who must acculturate to the dominant group’s ethics and ideologies of power and prejudice to eliminate differences that designate the ‘Other’. Then as a member of the dominant culture, s/he who was once the ‘Other’, lords power and bias against new ‘Others’.⁷ The film judiciously reveals the machinations of acculturation and assimilation as old differences become erased to make room for ‘other’ differences that then become the next objects of scorn. The system always demands subjugation and scorn, a ‘lower people’ to absorb the culture’s insecurity of status. This system defies that all human beings are created in God's image, *Imago Dei* (Genesis 1:27).

If taken allegorically, Eric Liddell in *Chariots of Fire* is a disciple of Jesus, tempted to betray his convictions. The Prince of Wales is Pontius Pilate swayed by crowds to maintain power and status. Harold Abraham is the conspiring

⁶ The Internet Movie Database: IMDB, <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0082158/plotsummary> (accessed June 7, 2007).

⁷ For a study of this acculturation of prejudices, see Noel Ignatiev, *How the Irish Became White* (New York, NY: Routledge, 1995.)

Jewish hierarchy with the Roman Empire.⁸ Is this the message of the film?

Indeed, it is quite a stretch of imagination to believe so. Honor the text as a story, an analogy, about the struggles between faith, fame, and power.

To see film as religious art, the film group has the beginning interpretative tasks of discerning the film as analogy rather than allegory.

⁸ This understanding of the Jewish community leaders as portrayed in the bible is a biased understanding made for the purposes of argument. The best book on understanding unintentional anti-Judaism in our interpretations of the gospels, see Marilyn J. Salmon, *Preaching without Contempt: Overcoming Unintended Anti-Judaism* (Fortress Resources for Preaching) (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006).