

## Film as Illumination, Not as Illustration

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As with all art, we must understand that film is not illustration. It is not an illustration of a story. It is not an illustration for a sermon topic. Film is a primary text of meaning. Film is *illumination* of religious meaning rather than illustration of a theological point. Illumination means to cast and reflect “light on the subject.” Film reveals a new interpretation, as, a new light on religious and theological possibilities. To use film, especially in the church, is to understand films as a spiritual and theological text to add meaning to biblical and sermon themes, doctrines and moral lessons, as well as social and global concerns. Reducing art or film to mere illustration is tantamount to reducing biblical texts as illustration for doctrine.

Documentary films do not illustrate a theological and/or social position. Documentary films are theological texts that illuminate new, possible realities to challenge our understanding of living as a Christian in this world. Documentary films are no truer than a fictional film. Documentary films are subjective investigations with particular perspectives determining their construction, and, thereby, delivering the meaning they intend to communicate. Documentary films are often used in churches to present educational material in line with the congregation’s concerns and theological perspectives. Churches need equally to examine documentary films that have social, political, and theological perspectives different from their own: for progressive churches, try *Jesus Camp* or *Hell House*.<sup>1</sup> The role film can play is to engage diverse

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<sup>1</sup> *Jesus Camp*, <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0486358/>; *Hell House*, <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0301235/>

perspectives to inform and enrich the theological inquiry of a congregation. To use film to justify solely liberal, evangelical, or other variations in between is to cage the congregation's theology.

The perpetual quest for a Christ figure in non-explicitly religious films (about Jesus) is to use film as illustration. To look for a Christ figure keeps the task of interpreting a film simple, as people are want to do. Trying to discern a Christ figure is the key indication that a film is being seen as an *illustration* of Jesus' life, rather than seeing the film as a text to be honored in its own right. People in films may be Christ-like, yet the quest for a Christ figure in each films tints and narrows one's theological vision. For example, when discussing *Dead Man Walking* (1996),<sup>2</sup> a Christ figure is often construed out of the moment when the soon-to-be-executed Matthew Poncelet (Sean Penn), strapped to his cross-shaped execution table, is lifted perpendicular to the floor on the execution table, displaying Poncelet as though he were literally on a cross. This visual trope does not make a Christ figure! Poncelet is guilty of murder and is not executed as a religious scapegoat.

The experiences of Sr. Helen Prejean's ministry to death row inmates are the basis for *Dead Man Walking*. Prejean is Christ-like in her ministry to the outcast, experiencing scorn from religious and social forces. This film is not a film solely about the pros and cons of the death penalty; this film is also about the nature of the ministry of accompaniment in the world. While the religious authorities in the film demand Poncelet's salvation through the sacrament of communion, Sr. Prejean, while trying to

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0112818/>

'save' Poncelet from execution, accompanies him to the moment of his death. Through this accompaniment, Poncelet finally confesses to the murder, and accepts love and forgiveness as witnessed to him by Sr. Prejean. Sr. Prejean is Christ-like.