

# Movies That Matter

Reading Film  
through the  
Lens of Faith

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LOYOLAPRESS.  
A JESUIT MINISTRY

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# Introduction

The first question to be answered in a book entitled *Movies That Matter* is, to whom do these films matter? The simple answer is—they matter to me! Each of these films has illuminated my faith, challenged, entertained, and consoled me. And I am not the only one. Many others find in cinema a rich repository of images that celebrate the human spirit and put us in touch with the divine. You will have your own list. Your favorite films may appear if we publish a sequel, in classic Hollywood style: *Movies That Matter II: The Films That Got Away!* For now, I would take it as a compliment if you argue the selections in this book. That means we are starting on the same page—taking film seriously. The multiplex is the modern market for ideas and values. It is shaping us, whether we like it or not.

In these essays you will find a method for analyzing and understanding films as they explore, reinterpret, or undermine Christian theology. Some movies will be familiar; I hope these reflections will help you see them afresh. For those titles you have not seen, may these essays encourage you to explore them. I hope this book functions as a discerning guide as well as a basis for stimulating discussions.

### **Why should Christians take movies seriously?**

When the great missionary St. Francis Xavier left Rome for the Far East, St. Ignatius of Loyola advised him: *wherever you go, learn the language*. Learning a new language is hard, especially at an advanced age, but the cultural understanding it provides amply rewards the effort. The influence of media in creating and reflecting culture means there is a new language being spoken that is well worth learning.

Given the power of media, becoming conversant with its mixed messages is an essential tool for Christian life. This involves the process of inculturation—discovering where Christ is already active within a given culture. Inculturation has traditionally been about uncovering Christian resonances in faraway places and exotic rituals. Yet the risen Christ sends us out to our media-saturated culture as well, and in it we labor with Christ to expose the signs of God’s saving love already present there. We cannot speak to a culture we do not know or one we despise. And if we don’t evangelize it, who else will? In St. Ignatius’s terms, we have to learn its language and discover how Christ has already gone ahead of us, inculturated in some of media’s values, stories, and style.

Jesus is an outstanding example of media inculturation. In Matthew 13, Jesus would not speak to the crowd without a parable. Jesus understood that our most important lessons are learned through stories—while we are laughing or crying, being confronted or consoled.

Whether we like it or not, the cinema is the place where an increasing number of people encounter a world of otherness, of

ethical systems and personal and social mythologies that transcend the everyday. This encounter leads to a new consciousness of our surroundings, ideologies, and moral imperatives. As Margaret Miles rightly argues in her book *Seeing and Believing: Religion and Values in the Movies*, “The development of popular film coincided historically and geographically with the emancipation of public life from church control and patronage. ‘Congregations’ became ‘audiences’ as film created a new public sphere in which, under the guise of ‘entertainment’ values are formulated, circulated, resisted, and negotiated” (Miles 1996, 25).

### **How do we “read” a film from a Christian point of view?**

Sadly, some Christians believe that unless a movie is about Jesus or the saints, unless it speaks of religion or wears its spirituality on its sleeve, it cannot be counted in the cinematic Christian canon. Some believers dismiss film altogether: “Only sex and violence sells at the cinema,” or “There is nothing good at the movies anymore.” These uninformed comments deny the idea that a story might be consonant with the Christian message even though it never mentions Jesus, the Bible, or the church.

To respond, let’s take the top ten grossing box office films of all time.

1. Titanic (1997): \$1.845 billion
2. The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King (2003):  
\$1.118 billion
3. Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone (2001):  
\$976.5 million

4. *The Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers* (2002):  
\$926 million
5. *Star Wars: Episode I—The Phantom Menace* (1999):  
\$924.5 million
6. *Shrek 2* (2004): \$918.7 million
7. *Jurassic Park* (1993): \$914.7 million
8. *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets* (2002):  
\$867.7 million
9. *The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring* (2001):  
\$871.1 million
10. *Finding Nemo* (2003): \$864.4 million

(Source: *Box Office Mojo*)

All of these films are family entertainment. They vary in quality and some have adult themes, but none are overly sexy or violent. With *Forrest Gump*, *The Lion King*, *Star Wars: Episode II—Attack of the Clones*, *Star Wars: Episode VI—Return of the Jedi*, *Independence Day*, *The Sixth Sense*, and *Star Wars: Episode V—The Empire Strikes Back* making up most of the top twenty, one of the things we might stop saying is that only sex and violence sell in the cinema. If filmmakers want to do well at the box office, they should make films the whole family can watch.

The second thing we should note is the dominance of science fantasy. Six of the top ten films are set in other worlds where metaphysics is of a high order, transcendence is a given, and belief in other beings is assumed. These worlds may not be Christian, but in regard to the idea of transcendent realities that are influenced by present choices they are of a similar

mind. The top ten box office films indicate a genuine thirst for the spiritual, and evidence that the younger generation does not lack the ability to imagine big stories, other worlds, and sacrificial values.

With the preponderance of films from the period 2001–2003, the above table is unfair. If, however, we adjust for inflation, then the top ten grossing box office films of all time look like this:

1. *Gone with the Wind* (1939): \$1.26 billion
2. *Star Wars* (1977): \$1.1 billion
3. *The Sound of Music* (1965): \$890 million
4. *ET the Extra-Terrestrial* (1982): \$886 million
5. *The Ten Commandments* (1956): \$818.7 million
6. *Titanic* (1997): \$802 million
7. *Jaws* (1975): \$800 million
8. *Doctor Zhivago* (1965): \$691 million
9. *The Exorcist* (1973): \$691 million
10. *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937):  
\$681.2 million

*(Source: Box Office Mojo)*

With the exception of *Jaws* and *The Exorcist*, our observations about family entertainment hold firm. Across generations more publicly religious and churchgoing, science fantasy counts for less and religious-themed films such as *The Sound of Music*, *The Ten Commandments*, and *The Exorcist* all feature. What is consistent is the bigness of the stories, the other worlds they open up, and the sacrificial values they enshrine.

Reading a film in the light of faith starts with having the eyes to see, the ears to hear, and the heart to receive what is good and enjoyable in media culture. This task is akin to Mark 16, where the young man robed in white instructs Peter and the women to meet the risen Lord in Galilee. This invitation makes them afraid. Jerusalem was the holy city, whereas Galilee was their everyday turf. And yet it is precisely there that the risen Christ wants to meet them. Galilee is now a state of mind, a belief that God can be found where we are. Given that the cinema now sells over one billion tickets a year, I am convinced this is one of the everyday patches of turf wherein Christ is revealed.

### **Virtues and Values**

St. Paul tells us the greatest virtues are faith, hope, and love. These are known as the theological virtues, which make us discernibly Christian. St. Thomas Aquinas added to these justice, fidelity, self-esteem, and prudence, now termed the cardinal virtues. Added to the virtues are their applications—mercy and hospitality, the Christian values. St. Thomas argued that wherever faith, hope, love, justice, fidelity, self-esteem, prudence, mercy, and hospitality are present, then named or not, Christ is present. The best of missionary dialogue has been conducted on this basis, recognizing and affirming the goodness in culture. What applies to non-Christian cultures equally applies to non-Christian elements in our own culture—at the multiplex.

We approach the task of inculturation by not being against everything. If a film presents virtues and values, and many do, then named or not, Christ is present in and through them. We

likely to demonstrate aggressive attitudes and behavior. By the time a U.S. child reaches the age of eighteen it is estimated he or she will have witnessed two hundred thousand acts of violence on television, including twenty thousand murders (*Joint Statement on the Impact of Entertainment Violence on Children*, Congressional Public Health Summit, July 26, 2000).

One may also wonder why we do not focus on violent realities that directly impact our children and are rarely paid media attention. Domestic abuse is the most frequent form of violence to which our children are exposed. It is no respecter of class, religion, or ethnicity. Why is there a conspiracy of silence on this issue? Would it change if we had an equal number of women making films and television programs?

Another violence we endure in the cinema today is language. Censors rate films according to the coarseness of the language in a nod to standards of “decency.” But swearing is not merely an offense against decency. It is a violent action that inflicts harm, a verbal assault as civil law now recognizes. This is further compounded by religiously violent language, as when we hear *Jesus* or *Christ* used. For us, *Jesus* and *Christ* are not simply two words in the vocabulary, but the focus of the most important relationship in our lives. Attending to the habits of our own speech is a real contribution to diminishing verbal violence as well.

Cardinal Mahony names four criteria to ponder regarding violence in film. “Is violence demanded by the story? Is it presented as a desirable way to solve problems and resolve conflict? Do we feel the pain and dehumanization it causes to the person

# Dead Man Walking

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Starring Susan Sarandon and Sean Penn. Directed by Tim Robbins.

Rated R. 122 minutes. 1995.

*Teachable moments: crime and punishment, forgiveness, social justice.*

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In rural Louisiana, Matthew Poncelet is found guilty of rape and murder. He is condemned to death and moved to death row. While exhausting all avenues for appeal, he gains the support of a Catholic nun, who accompanies him to his death by lethal injection. *Dead Man Walking* is based on the true story of Sr. Helen Prejean. She had no experience in prison chaplaincy. Yet she supported a man facing death and helped him to face himself. The heart of the matter is plain to her: “I just don’t see the sense of killing people to say that killing people’s wrong.”

*Dead Man Walking* is a study in empathy as Sr. Helen reaches out to both the perpetrator and the families of the victims.

Sr. Helen never pretends Matthew is innocent; rather, she insists he take responsibility for his crimes. Her visits to the homes of the victims are harrowing, as the bereaved attack her relationship to “that animal.” For Christians no one is an animal, a monster, because that lets us off the hook in regard to evil. We want to distance ourselves: “They are not us.” But they are. To dismiss human beings as animals betrays our own humanity. When Sr. Helen asks Matthew for respect, he sneers, “Why? ’Cause you’re a nun?” She replies, “Because I’m a person.” Good and evil are in every human heart. Some give themselves over to the most destructive elements with dire consequences for all.

Acknowledging the humanity of those who sin does not excuse what they’ve done. But it does recognize our obligation to even our most aberrant members. Maybe this was what Jesus meant by teaching us to forgive our enemies. Once we recognize humanity in the worst of our human family, then we relinquish the license to do with them what we want. Matthew’s last words are poignantly true: “I just wanna say I think killin’ is wrong, no matter who does it, whether it’s me or y’all or your government.” Can we allow a murderer the moral high ground?

The church has an uneasy relationship with capital punishment. Once, in God’s name, we presided over capital punishment ourselves. The section on capital punishment in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* was revised not long after it was published. First it claimed the state was categorically wrong to kill its citizens. The revised text allows for extraordinary situations that warrant such a measure. We betray our uncertainty.

What we do know is that as soon as we kill someone, anyone, we lose hope of growth, conversion, and love in them. In execution we say, effectively, “You are beyond God’s redemption and our ability to forgive.” Both statements are untrue; or at least I hope they are. Revenge looks satisfying, yet those who exact it do not seem to have much peace. It is a false good that reduces us to the aberrant level of the person we kill.

Matthew faces the enormity of his crime by opening himself up to unconditional love—the scariest thing he ever did, and the most worthy. He glimpsed what it was like to be a full human being in the person of Helen Prejean. In this sense, *Dead Man Walking* is the best film about Christian *ministry* I know. Sr. Helen opts for the poor, and in the name of Christ becomes a murderer’s confessor, advocate, and companion. Sometimes we ask the question, “What would Jesus do?” This film provides an answer.

## Questions

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- What personal demons does Sr. Helen have to face in herself?
- What are the ramifications of capital punishment for the Christian community?
- Why can reaching out to another as a human being be such a risky thing?

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