

Almost Religion: The Persuasive Power of the Movies *Eric Christianson*



If you have not seen 'Titanic' (1997) I hope I am not spoiling things by informing you that the star of the film sinks, but also that the male lead, Jack (Leonardo DiCaprio), fares no better. Amid the aftermath of the disaster, Jack and his sweetheart, Rose (Kate Winslet), are struggling to stay afloat on a piece of wood, Jack still immersed in the icy waters as Rose lies atop it.

Jack can no longer hold on and before he sinks he declares his love and makes her a promise worthy of the best Hallmark greeting cards ('...you must...you must do me this honour...you must promise me that you'll survive... that you won't give up... no matter what happens...'). When I saw the film at the cinema, something startling happened. As we watched Jack sink into the dark abyss, a sound arose, the sound of sobbing twelve-year old girls. You see, my wife and I attended the matinee Saturday show, and I am not exaggerating when I write that a chorus of lamentations surrounded us. But even more astonishing was what a girl somewhere behind me, between desperate sobs, proclaimed: '...I was going to marry him!' So powerful was the rhetoric of 'Titanic' that those girls were entirely lost in its story world. But how?

Every year I show that scene to my students in a course on religion and culture, and I ask them, "What is it in the film that enables such powerful viewer empathy to take place?" When they think about it, it begins to sink in (sorry!): framing (we only see Jack and Rose - no one else in the whole suffering world around them matters); visual signals (the blue lighting and the frost from their breath make us feel the cold); editing (there are impossible views, from directly above them, mixed liberally with 'point-of-view' shots from the character's perspectives - and it was the shot from Rose's 'pov' of Jack sinking that had the greatest audience impact, placing female viewers right there); music (students are almost always unaware of the fact that an instrumental version of the film's main theme - the truly awful 'My Heart Will Go On' - is struck up at the key emotional moment). All of this (and more - even the overall structure of the film aligns the fate of Jack and Rose to that of the ship itself) somehow gets under the skin, and if we are of the right age and predilection, we may even be prepared to give over our earthly love and commitment for the remainder of our lives! For students the exercise is without exception empowering. The fact is, we are all literate in the language of cinema, but we rarely read it. If we want to begin to understand the most powerful and influential form of storytelling in our world, we need to know something of how films manipulate us. This is not the place to get into that discussion, but get started with, say, James Monaco's 'How to Read a Film' or

Martin Baker's 'From Antz to Titanic', and get hold of a good review guide, such as 'Time Out' or 'Halliwells'.

The rhetorical power of film is integrally related to its religious dimensions. In a recent BBC documentary, 'How Art Changed the World', Nigel Spivey argues that it is cinema that has taken up the mantle of Christianity through a combination of sound and imagery that, particularly in Europe, used to be mainly controlled by religious authorities: from the passion plays to the story-telling of cathedral stained-glass. And a number of scholars in recent years have reflected on the way in which the cinema-going experience has religious dimensions. For the very committed film-goer (who might say, 'I go to the cinema every week'), cinema is a 'binding commitment' - and we are touching on the literal meaning of religion. Film-going is also still usually a communal - that is, a shared - experience. We go with friends, we talk about films and their meaning as we might talk about what a sermon means. (The meaning of films is, I would suggest, always different when viewed in a group than when viewed alone.) As Clive Marsh asks in his recent 'Cinema and Sentiment', "What are today's modern cathedrals?" He suggests that malls and multiplexes are close contenders for the title - structures that provide a place for people to come together from different contexts and hear and experience a shared story. The analogy could even continue on down to the 'side sanctuaries' of the individual screens-but that is pushing it!

We might also reflect on the religious dimensions of the viewing experience itself. Do we come to the cinema with heightened expectations, desiring an experience not unlike transcendence? Audience studies are showing that we have a remarkable capacity for empathy and involvement, not unlike the 'Titanic' example I offered above. Christopher Deacy (in 'Faith and Film' and also his earlier 'Screen Christologies') sees the act of movie-watching as potentially redemptive. Recognizing film as both a bearer and locus of religious meaning and reflection, Deacy develops the idea that films provide viewers the opportunity to examine the human condition as 'privileged witnesses'. Film-going is 'magical', promising a transcendent experience. The spectator, suggests Deacy, comfortably seated in the dark, has their outer perceptions minimized while the screen comes to life and the sound wraps around. Liberty and consciousness are lulled because of our fascination with the shadows, the lights, the rhythm, the actions or the passions presented.

There is a case for being cautious about the degree to which we give ourselves over to such a powerful sensory and emotional experience without reflection. I would not dream of delineating the sort of film we should reflect on (though I might say, what sort shouldn't we?), and I am sure we can all think of a startling array of films that have raised significant questions for our sense of spirituality, or ethical views, or even deeply held theological convictions. However, in some cases the case for understanding what is happening to us as viewers is paramount. Mel Gibson's 'The Passion of the Christ' is a recent case in point. When we combine all the 'rhetorical' elements of film-viewing with the fundamental power that the Jesus story has long enjoyed in Western culture, the result can be overwhelming. Whatever we think of Gibson's pre-Vatican II take on the passion story (and my own

objections to the film are substantial - but again, this is not the place!), there is no denying its force as a cultural phenomenon. As New Testament scholar Marc Goodacre has pointed out, the film is the first of the Christ-film genre to dare to tell the story mainly from the point of view of Jesus. We 'see' flashbacks that are, as it were, in the mind of Jesus. We hear what happens to Jesus 'close-up' on the cross, in gruesome detail. If we watch 'The Passion' with an uncritical eye, without reflecting on the implications of how the story is presented, we are courting an odd sort of ideological danger. This is a film that must be read, not just experienced.

In the end I think we have something to be thankful for in the movies. The best of them are forever surprising us with fresh questions, offering sites for reflection. We can watch 'Whale Rider' (2002) and ask what it means to take our mythology at something more than a figurative level. We can watch 'Magnolia' (1999) and wonder at the delicate balance between fate and decision that fills our daily lives. We can watch 'Master and Commander' (2003) and reflect on the costs of the ever-forward momentum of technology. Whatever the film-going experience, the religious and just plain persuasive power of the movies demands the attention of the mind as much as the spirit.

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