

“Lights . . . Cameras . . . Faith?!”

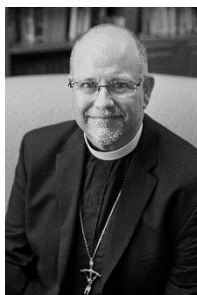
Christian Interaction with the Culture as It is Shared in Cinema

Jeffrey E. Skopak

In the beginning . . .

We do not recognize this date with a holiday or remember it with great fanfare. In fact, the very industry that was born on this date hardly gives it notice. On June 19, 1905, in the city of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, the culture was forever changed and challenged with the grand opening of The Nickelodeon—America’s first public movie theater. Moving pictures marched into society for the price of a nickel a seat—a bargain for this new technology when you consider a nickel in 1905 was equivalent to \$1.75 today. Like most cultural shifts, cinemas and movies took a little while to catch on with the public. Pictures that move—who would have ever thought?! Yet, the intrigue and curiosity of the public needed to be fed and grown.

By 1915, movies had become an “industry,” growing from short films (ten to thirty minutes long) to feature films (120 minutes or more). Then something powerful happened: a movie broke through the veil of curiosity and into mainstream society. It wasn’t a science fiction flick or a super-hero extravaganza. Rather, it was a movie set against the backdrop of “recent” American history. The movie? *The Birth of a Nation*. Originally called *The Clansman*, this 1915 movie, directed by D.W. Griffith, was controversial even before it found its way to the theaters. The film chronicles the assassination of President Abraham Lincoln and then follows the relationship of two families from the Civil War and the days after during the Reconstruction.



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The Birth of a Nation is generally considered one of the most racist films ever made. African Americans were played by white actors in blackface and are portrayed as intellectually inferior and as predators of white women. Meanwhile, the Ku Klux Klan is depicted as a force standing for American values, the protection of white women, and all things patriotic. It is said that this movie had the societal impact of revitalizing the Klan in America. Important to remember is that the film was produced in 1915 America—a country only fifty years removed from the Civil War. Reconstruction and the identity of “one nation” was still an ideal but not a reality.

At a staggering cost of \$100,000 (roughly \$3,026,000 today) the movie made an estimated \$100 million (\$3.26 billion today). How culturally relevant was *The Birth of a Nation*? In 1992, the Library of Congress deemed the film culturally, historically, and esthetically significant and selected it for preservation in the National Film Registry. In other words, regardless of how the public reacted to the film’s message, there is no denying that the movie had a major impact on American culture.

Before I go any further, I must clarify what I mean by “culture.” Culture is the characteristics and expanding knowledge of a people. The United States Constitution begins, “we the people.” Culture is the “we” and the “people” are the many individuals that make up the society. Culture encompasses the language (including words and phrases), food, social habits and norms, music, art, sports, entertainment, *movies*, and just about everything and anything else you can think of. Culture is the “we” in which the “people” live. And culture is expressed, pushed, prodded, challenged, and expanded by what is played out in motion pictures.

Other forms of entertainment also have a profound impact on culture. Just consider music and sports with their exponential growth in both popularity and gross income over the last century. Artists like Taylor Swift and Justin Bieber easily sell out venues in a few short hours, and tickets to events like the Super Bowl and the World Series can cost thousands of dollars for a single seat. But movies are unique because they incorporate all types of entertainment into one medium—music, dance, sports, and art to name a few. And let’s not forget that cinema liberally and generously uses the backdrop of contemporary issues and history while exploring the role and impact of influential people in society. All of this comes to life on a big screen, complete with comfortable chairs and popcorn.

A Reflection on the Screen

Although it may sound ridiculous, most, if not all, movies reflect the society in which we live. Wrapped in a variety of packages, such as superheroes, space adventures, love stories, and comedic romps, there is a line running through movies that calls the audience to see the world through the eyes of another person—whether that be the writer, the director, or the actors playing their respective roles. Some movies affirm our beliefs and convictions, while others challenge, appall, or even horrify us. A single movie can broaden our worldview by exposing us to different cultures and languages or provide us the comfort we needed as we see a character endure hardships that reflect our own experiences.

Once we get beyond the genre of a particular film, the real stories of living in society can be found—life and death, pain and suffering, joy and blessings, healing and wholeness, peace and happiness. A simple animated movie can address the challenging life issue of losing one’s spouse, while a movie about wizards and witches can open our hearts to the hardships of adoption and personal belonging. Meanwhile, a superhero can test our understanding of justice, while a slapstick comedy can make us laugh about the dysfunctions of a blended family. All this to say—movies reflect and reiterate the shared values of society and thus help to shape culture.

But therein lies the Christian conundrum: How do we navigate our way through a culture that seems all too often at odds with Christian faith? How do we, in good conscience, engage with cinema if so much of it seems antithetical to the Christian message? Much of the tension Christians face is due to a few verses found in Jesus’s High Priestly Prayer in John’s gospel. Jesus says,

I do not ask that you take them out of the world, but that you keep them from the evil one. They are not of the world, just as I am not of the world. Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth. As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world. (John 17:15–18)

Culture and its grand amplifier, cinema, are “of the world.” And Jesus starts this portion of the prayer by reminding us that His faithful followers are “*not* of the world.” If Jesus concluded the prayer with these words, it would be safe to say that Christians should build the walls higher, tighten up the defenses, never step foot into a movie theater, and by no means subscribe to any streaming services!

But Jesus continues, “As you sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world” (John 17:18). As Christ was sent into the world by the Father, now Jesus declares that He has sent the disciples into the same world. And, by virtue of our faith in Jesus, we too are being sent into the world. If God’s work is to be done, it will be done by God’s people amid the cultural maelstrom known as “today.” Like the disciples, we are sent to engage and live in society. Which brings me back to the cultural amplifier, cinema.

The Cultural Amplifier

Movies are everywhere. In the past, if you did not catch a certain movie in theaters you had to wait for what seemed like an eternity for the movie to find its way onto network television. To function in a television format, the film had to be modified and space had to be created for advertisements. And, because it took so long to make it to television, some of the movie's cultural relevance may have been diluted or lost altogether over the period of months (and in most cases years) before arriving in your living room.

But such delays are no longer an issue. Today, we are barraged by movies; they are *everywhere*. They are still in theaters, of course, but are now released quickly and nimbly to streaming services that we can access on our phones, tablets, or computers. Moreover, massive flat screen monitors and sound bars are now affordable for most people, which means we can bring the cinematic experience into our homes. The cultural amplifier no longer costs a ticket to the theater; no, the cultural amplifier

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known as cinema can now be engaged in the comfort of our living rooms—or anywhere we take our smart phones. What does that mean? No matter how tall you build your walls against this incredible tool of culture, and no matter how secure you think you have locked the gates, movies are swirling all around you.

As the variety of cinematic experiences populate the screens at our disposal, we need to be cognizant of the fact that these movies have something to say—whether we want to experience them or not. These movies feature narratives, predicaments, and characters that we see in everyday life and are filled with the prevailing attitudes and beliefs that are integral to society. The characters are relatable and address struggles and challenges that we face in our culture. More often than not, movies that amplify cultural realities rocket in ticket sales and reach the rarified air of “blockbuster.”

Look no further than the blockbuster movie *Barbie* that was released on July 21, 2023. With a budget of \$145 million, who would have ever thought a movie based on a popular girl's toy would have such a cultural impact? As of the writing of this paper, *Barbie* has topped \$1.3 billion in global ticket sales—that's *billion* with a “b”—making it the biggest ever box office success in the genre of comedy. But *Barbie* is more than a comedy. It dares to dabble in feminism, women's rights, and the challenges of womanhood in twenty-first century America. And let's not leave out themes like purpose, happiness, and contentment that are woven into the movie.

Bouncing between Barbie Land and real-world California, the film is about much more than toys coming to life and living in society. Viewers are prodded to consider existential questions. During a climactic moment when Barbie Land is in abject chaos, it is Gloria, the “real-world” mother of a teenage daughter who puts it all into perspective. Marie Le Conte, in an article for *New Humanist*, sums up Gloria's soliloquy thusly:

It is impossible to be a woman . . . the female experience in a patriarchal society is so full of contradictions that no woman can go through it without

going mad. We must be assertive without being bossy; we must have money but never ask for it; we must look good but not so good that we draw too much attention to ourselves; we must run things without telling anyone what to do, and so on. In Kenland, as in any other society ruled by men, women can never win.¹

Why are these words culturally important? Because people living in our culture resonate with them. It’s not a question of whether you agree or disagree with what Gloria says—this is what she feels, and she is having an existential crisis right in front of our eyes. But don’t forget about the husbands and fathers who are watching this movie! *Barbie* dares to broaden the cultural net and reach for more. In the film, the Kens turn to “patriarchy” as the means to run Barbie Land, but it fails miserably. As Le Conte puts it,

Stripped of their power, the Kens begin lashing out then eventually demure. Running stuff is hard, it turns out! That’s what Gosling’s Ken tearfully tells Barbie. Because she is not in love with him, she tells him to find out who he is if he is not defined by his relationship with her. In the end, it feels worth noting that few people—or dolls—are truly happy, eschewing what would or should have been the conclusion of a more traditional storyline.²

What makes *Barbie* so culturally relevant is that, though packaged as a comedy, it challenges us to think soberly about who we are and what our place is in this world. Reinhold Niebuhr is known to have once said, “What is funny about us is precisely that we take ourselves too seriously.”³ *Barbie* allows us to laugh while being introspective. Sometimes it’s important to take a step back, laugh a little, search a lot, and find comfort in who God created us to be.

This is where Christians can miss the mark. All too often, Christians focus on what is *wrong* with a movie while missing what is *right*. To engage society and provide the transformative message of the Gospel of Jesus Christ does not mean that Christians must have an opinion or contrarian word on *everything*. Apostle Paul puts it this way:

And he made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place, that they should seek God, and perhaps feel their way toward him and find him. Yet he is actually not far from each one of us. (Acts 17:26–27)

Mind you, Paul is standing in the Areopagus—the high court of justice in ancient Athens—and *not* a Jewish synagogue. He is respectful of the culture and holds out hope that “they should seek God” and “perhaps feel their way toward him and find him.” When the cultural amplifier is turned to “high” and a movie crosses the \$1 billion

mark in box office sales, maybe, just maybe, this is a place where the Church should take notice, listen, and learn. The voice of the Church has a place even in Barbie Land.

Silencing the Amplifier

But other movies flow against the current of the time to push the boundaries of our societal understandings and spiritual beliefs. These films challenge social norms, speak against the status quo, and advance ideals and beliefs that are counter to the culture. In so doing, these films create a buzz and typically cause sub-groups of the culture to rise in opposition to the message of the movie.

Look no further for a sub-culture war on a film than Martin Scorsese's 1988 film *The Last Temptation of Christ*. The screenplay was based on Nikos Kazantzakis's novel of the same name and was adapted by Paul Schrader for the big screen. The gist of the story—and remember, it is based on a *novel* and not the *Bible*—portrays Jesus Christ grappling with human desires such as having a wife and children. Well, for many within the scope of Christendom this was unacceptable because it was incongruent with the “perfect” image of Jesus presented in Scripture. And how did the sub-set of the culture respond to the film? Roman Catholic nuns called the movie blasphemous. Martin Scorsese received death threats. A cinema in Paris was set on fire while the movie was playing. In Singapore, Nikos Kazantzakis's novel was banned from bookstores where it had previously sold for thirty years. The culture had spoken, and the movie by financial measures was a flop, only clearing \$1 million more than production costs.

Martin Scorsese, an Italian-American and Roman Catholic has been “working out” his faith on the silver screen for his entire career and has continually woven symbols and themes of faith into his movies. During an interview about *The Last Temptation of Christ*, Harlan Jacobson asked Scorsese, “Is Jesus God, or a man who thinks he's God?” Scorsese had this to say:

He's God. He's not deluded. I think Kazantzakis thought that, I think the movie says that, and I know I believe that. The beauty of Kazantzakis' concept is that Jesus has to put up with everything we go through, all the doubts and fears and anger. He made me *feel* like he's sinning—but he's not sinning, he's just human. As well as divine. And he has to deal with all this double, triple guilt on the cross. That's the way I directed it, and that's what I wanted, because my own religious feelings are the same. I do a lot of thinking about it, a lot of questioning, a lot of doubting, and then some good feeling. A lot of good feeling. And then a lot more questioning, thinking, doubting!⁴

Of course, Scorsese had a lot more to say—much of which most Christians would agree. However, many within the framework of the Christian community did not want to hear anymore. The movie created a reaction—not necessarily one the director wanted, but a reaction nonetheless. This intersection of culture, cinema, and faith caused a seismic uproar. And that’s okay. The cinematic amplifier projected a director’s personal struggle with faith and people reacted—I am sure some were comforted and affirmed in their faith challenges, while most were abhorred by the portrayal of a very human Jesus. Regardless of what you may personally think about the film, if you engage with it, you see the heart and faith of the man telling you the story—the director Martin Scorsese. Do you have to agree with him? Not at all! But it was his interpretation of Kazantzakis’s story, and he was willing to put that perspective on the screen for the public’s consumption.

The question for the Church in such a moment is this: what opportunity does this film present? Simply reacting against it doesn’t allow the voice of the Gospel to be presented amid the cultural conundrum. Certainly, there are moments when a swift and distancing word needs to be spoken—such as when faith, Scriptural truth and integrity, values, and morality are tossed to the winds. But a film like *The Last Temptation of Christ* gives the Church an opportunity to gently but firmly teach what the truth of Scripture has to say about the salvific story of Jesus. In a very real way, the cultural amplifier invites Christians to the conversation while daring to address subject matter that wholly belongs to the Church. So here is the question: does the Church seize the teachable moment in the culture, or does it simply build higher walls and more secure doors as it reacts to the false teachings?

In a very real way, the cultural amplifier invites Christians to the conversation while daring to address subject matter that wholly belongs to the Church. So here is the question: does the Church seize the teachable moment in the culture, or does it simply build higher walls and more secure doors as it reacts to the false teachings?

BUT It’s Not That Simple . . .

Ideas presented in the world of cinema are a direct reflection of the chaos being unleashed in and on a postmodern society. There is an overarching societal denial of *any* ultimate principles. In other words, postmodern society generally doesn’t trust that there is a source where definitive answers can be found—whether that be science, philosophy, or religion. A paper produced by the Issue Group at the Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization’s 2004 Forum puts it this way:

In the Modern world there was a belief in an overarching truth—whether informed by a Christian world-view or even a secular belief in progress and in the perfectibility of humanity. Lyotard argued that Modern societies maintained (or even produced) order and stability by generating what he called “grand narratives” or “master narratives.”⁵

All this to say that the Judeo-Christian worldview and principles no longer hold the mantle of directing, guiding, and influencing American society. When we sit down to consume cinema, we must understand that the writers, directors, actors, producers, *and audiences* may all hold very different and competing worldviews. If you are a Christian consuming (or participating in) the movie, your faith, principles, and worldview may be in the minority. The irony is that society still clamors for a grand narrative that answers the “big life questions” even though postmodernity dismisses such a notion that grand narratives with absolute truth even exist. But Hollywood sees an opportunity and is not afraid to jump into the fray and try to answer those questions amid the postmodern storm.

This form of cinema has been given the moniker “existentialist cinema.” These are films that transcend your typical emotional responses while watching—reactions like laughing, crying, and sitting on the edge of your seat in fear and anticipation. Existential films are the rare few that cause you to think deeply about life and your place in the world. These types of films have existed for almost as long as talking pictures have been around. But in recent years, amid the postmodern cultural crisis, existential films seem to be finding their way onto our screens in every sort of genre.

One recent movie that captivated audiences with its existential reach was the 2022 film *Everything, Everywhere, All at Once*. This movie was relatively unknown until the announcements for the Academy Awards, when it received eleven Oscar nominations and went on to win seven Oscars (Best Picture, Best Actress, Best Supporting Actor, Best Supporting Actress, Best Director, Best Original Screenplay, and Best Film Edit). In the world of motion pictures, this was one of the biggest nights of all time for a movie that only made \$141.2 million. So why was this film so highly regarded by Hollywood?

Set in the backdrop of a multiverse (a hypothetical set of alternate universes that share a universal and similar hierarchy), *Everything, Everywhere, All at Once* presents a middle-aged Chinese immigrant woman on a mission to save the whole of reality by connecting with the lives she could have lived in other universes. Hannah Saab and Diego Pineda Pacheco observed,

The film tackles countless intricate themes like nihilism, love, generational trauma, and parenthood, to name but a few. It's hilarious, it's incredibly emotional, and it's profoundly thought-provoking. The movie argues that if we're already here in this massive and senseless world, we might as well face it with kindness and positivity.⁶

All this to say, this comedic sci-fi drama causes audiences to think—and think deeply. It is more than martial arts meets science fiction meets comedy. It is a movie that causes us to ponder existential questions: What is the purpose of life? Why am I

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here? Is there meaning to my life? What happens when I die? Is there more than the here and now? Many who simply experience the film on the surface fail to understand the acclaim the movie received. But those who experience the film on an existential level witness and receive so much more. After experiencing such a film, the viewer is filled with thoughts and questions not easily answered.

I believe conversations about films are where the Church has its greatest opportunity in the postmodern construct of society. The postmodern person is driven by images that convey the experience of the here and now and desire to be connected to something greater than self. And there is no greater contemporary image than what is played out on the silver screen. Within this current existential crisis, the Church has an opportunity to speak and serve. Erwin Raphael McManus writes,

Relevance is . . . about embracing the principle that we are to value the one lost sheep even more than the 99 that are found. It is waking up to the realization that the church isn't here for we who believe, but rather that we in fact are the church, and we are here for a world drowning in disbelief . . . Relevance is not about having everyone agree with you. It is about speaking the truth of Christ honestly and credibly into a person's life. When we speak relevantly to the world we live in, there is a resonance of reality and authenticity.⁷

When writers, directors, and producers of movies are willing to jump into relevant existential conversations, why is the Church so hesitant? Existential movies are not afraid to challenge the audience to think and respond. Movies like *Birdman*, *Sideways*, *The Truman Show*, *Apocalypse Now*, *Fight Club*, and just about any Wes Anderson directed movie (such as *Moonrise Kingdom*, *The Grande Budapest Hotel*, and *Asteroid City*) are more than willing to raise and attempt to answer larger-than-life questions. Why are these movies successful? Because they are relevant to the existential crisis society is experiencing.

Now is the time for the Church to cast off its hesitancy and be willing to wade into the postmodern societal mess and speak—with *truth and in love*—into the crisis demonstrated, mimicked, and masked through Hollywood productions. The Church is ideally situated to engage in these cinematic conversations with answers that have depth and width regarding existential questions. Remember the words from Jesus in His High Priestly Prayer: “As you sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world” (John 17:18). Consider yourself “sent” to engage the conversation. This means listening carefully, loving deeply, and speaking gently.

The purpose of the Church in postmodern culture is to reflect Christ to the people *in the culture*. This is an evangelistic reflection of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. It is relevant to the point that it conveys the comforting message of sins forgiven and a life that has deeper purpose and meaning than the culture can provide. The answers are not found within oneself—nor are they found in the images and voices found on the “big screen” (or on the smaller screens in our homes). The answers that society seeks are found in Christ alone—and it is our job to be the amplifiers of that message to a world caught in the cultural maelstrom of postmodernity.

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Roll the Credits . . .

As God’s children, we live in a culture. We cannot avoid or run from it. We live where God has placed us—and in that place the culture surrounds us. The apostle Paul was keenly aware of the challenges posed at intersections of Christ and culture. Paul writes to the Ephesians, Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children. . . . for at one time you were darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Walk as children of light (for the fruit of light is found in all that is good and right and true), and try to discern what is pleasing to the Lord. Take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness, but instead expose them. (Eph 5:1, 8–11)

Be Christ-like in your culture. Love people wonderfully and sacrificially. Reflect the light of the Gospel to those you encounter, and illuminate the darkness of sin that pervades humankind. Interact with the culture, understand the culture, challenge the culture with the truth that is Jesus Christ.

And then the three—cinema, culture, and faith—converge. Cinema is the vehicle by which cultural expression finds its artistic release in a way that the widest breath of humankind can receive it. Cinema evokes a powerful personal expression. We love it or we hate it. We cry, we laugh, we ponder, we get angry, and we even mourn. We are drawn to it or repelled by it. And the funny thing about cinema is that we are willing to pay for it so that our cultural boundaries can be pushed, prodded, stretched, and challenged.

As we sit in that darkened theater (or in front of our personal screens), there is this echoing voice speaking into our heart and soul—the voice of faith. The voice of faith projects into the stories on the big screen and says “yes” or “no.” The voice of faith recognizes the needs of the hurting, the wanderings of the sinful and broken, and the work of the devil who is desperately trying to corrupt and co-opt the culture. As lifelike narratives play out on this amazing medium, God’s Word anchors us in His eternal truth and reminds us that we are His witnesses in and to the culture. So we shed light—the light of Jesus—into the darkness of culture as depicted on the big screen.

Endnotes

¹ Marie Le Conte, “The Barbie Movie: Is Everything Worthy of Cultural Critique?” *New Humanist*, July 25, 2023, <https://newhumanist.org.uk/articles/6151/the-barbie-movie-is-everything-worthy-of-cultural-critique>.

² Le Conte, “The Barbie Movie.”

³ “Reinhold Niebuhr Quotes,” Quote Fancy, <https://quotefancy.com/quote/1344673/Reinhold-Niebuhr-What-is-funny-about-us-is-precisely-that-we-take-ourselves-too-seriously>.

⁴ Harlan Jacobson, “Interview: Martin Scorsese The Director of the Last Temptation of Christ,” *Film Comment* (September-October 1988), <https://www.filmcomment.com/article/interview-martin-scorsese-the-last-temptation-of-christ/>.

⁵ The Issue Group, “Lausanne Occasional Paper: The Uniqueness of Christ in a Postmodern World and the Challenge of World Religions,” Lausanne Occasional Paper 31, *Lausanne Movement* (2004), <https://lausanne.org/content/uniqueness-christ-postmodern-world-challenge-world-religions-lop-31>.

⁶ Hannah Saab and Diego Pineda Pacheco, “20 Best Existentialist Movies That Will Make You Reevaluate Life,” *Collider*, March 18, 2023, <https://collider.com/existentialist-films-that-will-make-you-reevaluate-life/#39-synecdoche-new-york-39-2008>.

⁷ Erwin Raphael McManus, “The Global Intersection,” in *The Church in Emerging Culture: Five Perspectives*, ed. Leonard Sweet (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 240–241.