Bringing Eyes of Faith to Film: Using Popular Movies to Cultivate a Sacramental Imagination and Improve Media Literacy in Adolescents

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Adolescents are bombarded during most of their waking hours by images on various screens: computer, television, and film. As so-called digital natives, they are aware that these images are manufactured and manipulated to elicit certain responses. But while they acknowledge the artificiality of those images, they allow the same mediated messages virtually unfettered access to their hearts and minds with sad or even chilling results. Catholic educators and pastoral workers are charged with helping young people navigate the terrain created by popular media for at least two reasons: to nurture a more sophisticated approach to reading media, and to leverage Catholicism's long history of employing art to illuminate aspects of God and the transcendent. The endeavor described in this article posits that the Great Commandment (Matthew 12:28-31), to love God and love one's neighbor as oneself, provides an intellectual and pastoral framework for using recent popular films to sharpen media literacy skills on the one hand and to cultivate a sacramental imagination on the other, using tools that are portable to multiple disciplines and to most new films.

This article describes the development and impact of a co-curricular monthly movie series entitled "Bringing Eyes of Faith to Film" at a medium-sized, comprehensive Catholic university in the Pacific Northwest. Over the course of 3 years, more than 700 students across academic disciplines have participated as viewers in the series. These are 700 students who, due to the size and mission of their institution, would not otherwise have access in their regular courses to exploring systematically the potential of popular films to inform and, indeed, even to *form* their notions of what it means to be a thoughtful Catholic human being in this media-saturated 21st century.

From the soaring metaphorical poetry of the Hebrew Scriptures to Jesus' use of parables, even up to the exhortations of the Second Vatican Council (1965) to "read the signs of the times," those charged with inculcating and nurturing faith have tapped into sensory images to teach who God is and how

people of faith are to relate to God. But it would be all too easy to drown in what Avgerinou (2009) has called the "*bain d'images*" ("image bath") in which educators and students alike find themselves drenched daily. In the Gospels, Jesus usually takes the time to unpack the stories and images he uses when his audiences absorb them with more enthusiasm than insight (e.g., Matthew 21:31; Mark 10:29). St. Paul pleaded with the early Christians to approach God "in a manner worthy of thinking beings" (Romans 21:1). Thus, the film series presented in this article equips young adult viewers to see themes of grace, redemption, and transcendence in movies as disparate—and as far from explicitly religious—as *Kung Fu Panda* (Cobb, Stevenson, & Osborne, 2008), *The Dark Knight* (Nolan, Roven, & Thomas, 2008), and *Scott Pilgrim vs. The World* (Wright, Platt, Gitter, & Park, 2010).

An endeavor such as the "Bringing Eyes of Faith to Film" series affords even teachers and catechists who may not have a substantial academic background in film criticism the intellectual means to cultivate an orientation to movies in young people that is both cognitively rigorous and sacramental. Adopting the pedagogical stance of meeting people where they are, this model suggests an unexpected starting place for religious formation: movies students already love and tend to watch with an intriguing amalgam of naïveté and cynicism. Even nonfilm scholars can draw upon such accessible texts as Bordwell and Thompson (2004) and Corrigan and White (2008) for ample vocabulary to introduce to students common cinematic devices and filmmakers' artistic choices. Connecting these to elements of Scripture and Church doctrine provides students who enter the series as uncritical consumers a set of tools for future viewing that boosts their sophistication and cultivates a sacramental imagination, two worthy outcomes of any endeavor in a Catholic institution. As one of our students muttered while surreptitiously wiping his eyes on his way out of our screening of *Up* (Rivera, Lasseter, Stanton, Docter, & Peterson, 2009), "Great; now I will never be able to 'veg out' in front of a screen and just *watch* a movie again!" Once he had been taught to behold the grace and redemption at the heart of *Up*, and learned that the colors, music, and animation style were deliberately orchestrated by the filmmakers to evoke particular emotions in the viewer, he realized that most of the movies he had always just received as light entertainment had the potential to move him in unexpected ways. His comment acknowledged that his approach to viewing movies was changed; consciously or otherwise, he will be on the lookout for substantive meanings the next time he places himself in front of a screen.

This article proceeds with a literature review that provides definitions of

art, as the term is employed in this piece, and film as art. It then illuminates the need for (the why) and potentially fruitful broad strategies (the how) for increasing students' critical viewing capacities, from educational and pastoral perspectives. The piece moves on to a description of the logistics of running a co-curricular film series of this modest scope, including the strategic practicalities of linking it to the broader institutional mission and documenting its effectiveness. We then describe the model used to identify films that are likely candidates for inclusion, and posit a flexible set of questions we have developed to spotlight transcendent, religious, and sacramental themes for students, a pedagogical device that is portable to other educational and pastoral contexts. These questions derive from our own professional backgrounds as systematic theologian (first author) and educational psychologist (second author), and our mining of the work of other catechists and teachers we will reference shortly. To illustrate our approach, we will provide exemplars from three films we have leveraged to greatest effect: *Up* (Rivera et al., 2009), *Wall-E* (Morris, Collins, Lasseter, & Stanton, 2008), and *Despicable Me* (Cohen, Healy, Meledandri, Coffin, & Renaud, 2010). The article concludes with recommendations for replicating and extending this work in other settings.

Two final introductory comments are in order at this point in the form of caveats. First, the intended audience for this piece is not professional film scholars, but educators and catechists charged with cultivating informed, spiritually responsive capacities in their students, regardless of their specific academic disciplines. While films are virtually omnipresent in most students' and teachers' lives, not all Catholic high schools, colleges, or universities offer full courses in film studies per se. Certainly few (if any) of those that are offered are required of all students, even though most students will be watching movies all their lives. The rationale for this article, like the film series that spawned it, is to provide accessible tools for engaging the hearts, minds, and souls of young people in thoughtful—but not necessarily exhaustive—explorations of contemporary movies, equipping them to be aware of the potential for God to work through even the least expected sources.

Second, there are limitations of which readers should be aware. The data and interpretations presented here are descriptive. We acknowledge that while the project has served more than 700 college students over 3 years, there are limits to the generalizability of any study conducted at a single institution and by the people who are delivering the program under investigation (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992). To compensate for the foreseeable limitations, we have employed Stake's (1995) advice to provide sufficient detail to triangulate the assertions we

make. The inclusion of several contextual details should afford readers ample opportunities to consider how this work might be adapted for use in their own contexts.

Relevant Themes in the Literature

We must make explicit two related assumptions as we commence: (1) what makes a product a piece of "art"; and (2) what films are art within that definition. Art is a notoriously slippery concept. A broadly construed definition offered by Whitcombe (1997) helps here: "Art is the use of skill and imagination in the creation of aesthetic objects, environments, or experiences that can be shared with others" (p. 1). Films certainly fall into this category: They tend to be cultural artifacts of specific cultures. At least with new releases, we share them with others in buildings designed especially for that purpose. Films employ a distinct language to engage their audiences and convey meaning (Bordwell & Thompson, 2004). Picasso said famously that "Art is lies that tell the Truth," and so we assume that films are one way to convey important truths if we can but detangle the artistic syntaxes they employ (Corrigan & White, 2008).

Tapping into the sensual power of art in order to understand aspects of the Divine Mystery has a long history in the Catholic tradition. Catholicism's incarnational premise rests on the assumption that our senses provide raw material through which we are meant to experience and know God. Meyers (as cited in Wirz, 1913) proclaimed that "the arts vie with one another in giving life and animation to the tabernacle….The vault of heaven can scarcely contain the fullness of this great melody. All important artists raise their voices to swell this adoring song" (p. 6). The Vatican Council II (1965) affirmed that:

> Literature and arts are also, in their own way, of great importance to the life of the Church. They strive to make known the proper nature of man, his problems and his experiences...revealing man's place in history and in the world...illustrating the miseries and joys, the needs and strengths of man...foreshadowing a better life for him. Thus they are able to elevate human life. (n. 62)

Jensen (2005) argues that visual arts aim to do more than simply relate facts about external appearances. Rather, they strive to capture holistic realities far beyond mere verisimilitude: Artists attempt to portray "a touch of eternity" (p.

xii) that communicates potent truths about their subjects, and even to evoke certain feelings and responses in the viewer.

"Truth" is a hard and controversial word to use in relation to film. It perennially invites the question, "What is truth" (John 18: 38). But truth is a concept that cannot easily be dismissed by followers of the one who said "for this I have come into the world, to bear witness to the truth" (John 18: 37), and "I am the way, the truth, and the life" (John 14: 6). The process of seeking theological truths in popular movies requires knowledgeable guides who can help naïve viewers navigate the theological and cinematic terrains. There are two essential dimensions that frame this endeavor, each with its own literature base: why teachers and catechists should harness the power of films to instruct young people, and how popular films might be approached and unpacked. We now treat each in turn.

Why Use Films to Teach

Young people are constantly bombarded by images online, in film, and on television that range from relatively benign to outright destructive. Considine and Haley (1992) noted that the culture imparted by mass communication promotes endless consumption, instant gratification, and caving into impulses. The destructive staying power of inaccurate, stereotypical images from popular films is well documented from multiple perspectives (Carroll, 1985; Hyler, Gabbard, & Schneider, 1991). *Killing Us Softly* (Jhally, 2010), a documentary exploration of popular media's crippling effect on the self-images of girls and women, was grim enough in its first iteration in 1987; subsequent visits in 2002 and 2010 to the same theme prove even more corrosive as filters of what is allowed to be shown to general audiences become more porous. Females are not alone in the assault on self-image; boys and men, too, are subject to unrealistic and destructive images that too often evolve into self-fulfilling prophesies of how to be masculine in the 21st century (Faludi, 1999).

One might well ask why not use instructional films—that is, films created specifically for use in classrooms—as a tool for teachers and catechists. Entire production companies are devoted to the educational film enterprise. However, talent of any kind usually follows the money. As Paris (1997), and more recently Marcus and Stoddard (2007) note, the production quality of commercial Hollywood films is inevitably higher than those produced specifically for educational or ministerial purposes; budgets for mainstream films are almost exponentially higher than for more homely educational endeavors.

Higher budgets allow for soundtracks, locations, special effects, and actors who combine to make productions capable of creating empathy, bringing eras to life, and manipulating emotions on a scale that is simply impossible on the budgets typically available for educational films (Burroughs, Brocato, Hopper, & Sanders, 2009; Johnston, 2000).

Another dimension to note here is the centrality of art in a Catholic worldview. Film is not merely a neutral medium for presenting facts; film is art. A Catholic approach to art demands an acknowledgement of the sacramental principle that is fundamental to Catholicism (Himes, 2001). The artist labors to reveal truths that may be impossible to state adequately by more prosaic methods (Gordon, 2010; Jensen, 2005; Ziegler, 2001), even if she must, as Emily Dickinson (1890/1924) put it, "Tell all the Truth but tell it slant." The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (2008) may not have been explicit about using popular films in the catechesis of adolescents; indeed, their curriculum framework is remarkably nonprescriptive. However, the Church does exhort teachers and catechists to develop materials imaginatively, "to put people not only in touch, but in communion with Jesus Christ" (John Paul II, 1979, n. 5). Harvesting themes of transcendence, redemption, and grace from Hollywood films is certainly consistent with a Catholic worldview that privileges an analogical, sacramental imagination.

Finally, the fact that young audiences might be surprised when such themes are revealed in popular films may increase students' ability to attend to and remember what is being taught. The relatively new field of neuroscience offers compelling evidence of the links between emotions and learning. Immordino-Yang and Damasio (2008) demonstrate the neural links between emotion and learning: When a learner has an emotional reaction to new stimuli, lessons presented by that stimuli get remembered better over time. Other cognitive scientists (e.g., Bower, 1994; Heuer & Reisberg, 1992; Schacter, 1999) posit the term "hot cognition" to explain the tendency of learners to pay more attention, and therefore, remember more thoroughly new information that is presented in the context of an emotionally compelling manner; human brains are hard-wired to make connections between the rational and the emotional. In addition, novel or incongruous stimuli increase cognitive receptivity by alerting the brain's sensory register that something is going on that demands active attention (Anderson, 1995; Buehl & Alexander, 2005). Thus, surprising students by pointing out the unexpected presence of grace—in *Ferris Bueller's Day Off* (Hughes & Jacobson, 1986), for instance—is an effective strategy to provoke the attention necessary for new learning to occur. The most straight-

forward way to state this is that a learner simply must be paying attention to material if she is going to have a chance to learn it in a reliably retrievable form. Startling learners via showing them that something they previously viewed as mindless entertainment—that Ferris Bueller's taking his best friend Cameron on an illicit romp through Chicago actually has deep connections to Jesus' assertion that "I have come that you may have abundant life" (John 10:10)—sets the stage for securing the attention that is necessary for meaningful cognitive processing to occur (Reisberg, 1997).

How Films Can Be Used to Teach

While there is little doubt that media images inform and may indeed form people's senses of values, their own worth, and their interactions with others and the world around them (Carroll, 1985; Considine & Haley, 1992; Faludi, 1999; Hyler et al., 1991;), it is also increasingly clear that people in general and young people in particular bring little in the way of critical lenses to their viewings (Alexandrin, 2009; Avgerinou, 2009; Considine & Haley, 1992). Young people are ill-equipped to confront the daily assault on their senses by film and television. They require tools and strategies for comprehending the form and content of information coming at them (Burroughs et al., 2009). Young people, this generation of so-called digital natives (Prensky, 2005), pose an interesting paradox. On the one hand, they are remarkably attuned to the fact that images on a screen are not literally true but computer generated, or at least digitally enhanced. On the other hand, they apparently are also equally content to allow what is fake to have unfettered access to their minds and hearts (Bennett, Maton, & Kervin, 2008; Considine & Haley, 1992). As this complex amalgam of cynic and naïf has emerged, so have some fairly straightforward orientations and strategies that educators can employ not only for helping young people crack films' codes, but also provide principled reasons for engaging in that discipline even after class is over.

Eisner (1998) provides a cogent intellectual umbrella in this regard with his notion of developing "connoisseurship" and expanding our understanding of what it means to engage in criticism. Rather than the fairly traditional understanding of criticism as "fault-finding," he asserts that the purpose of developing a connoisseur's eye, ear, palate, or mind is to engage in an opening up of all that is present in a piece of art. A critic in this case functions more as a teacher, in helping viewers, listeners, or imbibers sharpen their awareness and consider nuances that an untrained perceiver would overlook. Indeed, Eis-

ner defines his particular brand of connoisseurship as "the art of appreciation and noticing" (p. 63). Further, such appreciation is an active, ongoing process, constantly seeking new and subtle distinctions. Corrigan and White's (2008) fleshing out of the film concept of mise-en-scene—a breakdown of all the lighting, staging, and camera angles employed to communicate a filmmaker's narrative—is a tremendous resource for helping viewers become true noticers and connoisseurs.

   With their cauldrons of music, visual effects, narratives, and ability to play with linearity, films certainly lend themselves to the development of a critical connoisseurship. Unpacking each of those elements provides opportunities for a distinct aspect of truth to emerge, and teachers have multiple models to employ to teach an array of concepts and skills. Everything from psychiatric nursing protocols (Masters, 2005) to historical analysis (Marcus & Stoddard, 2007) to mathematical wonder (Salomone, 2010) can be taught via popular films. Theologians have long used Hollywood movies to teach abstract concepts to seminarians (McCutcheon, 2003; Mercadante, 2007).

Uniqueness of this Series

Clearly, films serve many pedagogical purposes, such as those noted above. If there is a common theme in the studies that have been done to document the impact of films on young people, it is that we cannot possibly do enough education on the impact of media (Hailer, 2007). Films' potential impact on consumers and the behavior of citizens in a media-saturated society are the frequent subject of academic studies (e.g., McHugo, Smith, & Lanzetta, 1982; Ward & Friedman, 2006). Teachers in most disciplines use movies and clips to bring concepts to life. In addition to learning from films in classrooms, it is also true that high school and college students have no shortage of options for on-campus viewing of popular movies, as part of the entertainment regularly provided by campus programming boards and student governments. In the latter, attendees go as they would to any commercial film, the one difference being that the cost to attend is nominal or free, usually covered by student government fees (American College Personnel Association, 1996). On Catholic campuses, there may be some attempts to ensure that movies shown as pure entertainment to the wider campus do not violate Church teachings egregiously (Estanek & James, 2007), but by and large the movies shown for fun reflect what is popular in mainstream cinemas.

   While we have certainly benefited from the insights of media scholars

and film connoisseurs, what makes the "Bringing Eyes of Faith to Film" series unique from other teaching endeavors is its hybrid nature. On the one hand, we strive to entertain students by showing films with proven popularity among adolescents. We want a full room for each offering. On the other hand, while this is a voluntary activity for all students (and for us as the principal planners and presenters), we invest significant thought into the comments and insights we present prior to each film. We want attendees to be transformed by the experiences of being surprised by grace, sharing an activity communally, acquiring new intellectual tools, and watching their professors cross disciplinary lines—and by watching those same professors be delighted in the watching of a good movie. Few existing studies explicitly document this hybrid type of film series with its dual emphasis on deliberately cultivating sacramental imagination in young viewers and fostering media literacy skills. Most studies focus on fundamental media literacy and generally conclude with an exhortation for teachers to maintain vigilance in seeking opportunities to help young people cultivate critical viewing skills (e.g., Goldburg, 2004; Hailer, 2007). This is a contribution to that effort.

The endeavor we now move on to describe—developing a series of questions we use to probe students each time we think a popular film has the capacity to illuminate religiously relevant themes—yokes the undisputed power of popular film to the goal of cultivating a sacramental imagination in adolescents; in effect, "ruining movies forever" for students. Once they see these themes highlighted, students will never be able to avoid looking for—and therefore seeing—transcendence nearly everywhere there are movies.

The Logistics of Bringing Eyes of Faith to Film

In this section of the article, we will do three things. First, we describe the mechanics of establishing the film series and the selection process we employ to build each semester's slate of films. Second, we will offer preliminary strategies that have served to document the impact and efficacy of the film series over 3 years. From there, we move on to illustrate what this looks like via three exemplars chosen from among the 23 films we have shown in the six semesters of the series. Our intention is to provide enough detail so that readers interested in pursuing a similar endeavor receive sufficient portable strategies to replicate and refine the project in their own contexts.

Establishing the Series: Institutional Buy-in

While this film series is not terribly expensive to produce, its launch and continued success has been tied to the fact that it connects explicitly to its host institution's publicly stated core values and mission statement. What began as a friendly lunchtime conversation in which two film buffs from different departments (theology and education) discovered each other's complementary insights about recent movies quickly morphed to "Wouldn't it be fun if we could share these ideas with students and the broader community?" From there, securing modest funding and logistical support rested on this theologian and this teacher educator's ability to link the "Bringing Eyes of Faith to Film" series to the institution's publicly stated mission. We live and work in an era of limited financial and human resources, and not every good idea can get turned into practice unless it has the potential to accomplish existing university objectives. That is, the first question that any administrator at our institution compels any author of a new proposal to answer is how does this connect to and further the university's published mission to employ "Teaching and learning, faith and formation, service and leadership to make God known, loved, and served?"

Providing modest media literacy skills, cultivating sacramental imagination, and cutting across multiple academic disciplines to do so provided a compelling number of solid connections to the university mission. The authors met with the offices of Campus Ministry and Residence Life to see if the film series duplicated existing catechetical or educational efforts already under way. Not only was there no duplication of such programming, but personnel in both offices eagerly embraced the opportunity to send students to the series. A major reason for their enthusiasm was that they could derive the benefit of collaborating without having to expend too much new effort beyond posting flyers and including the series on their own public calendars.

Furthermore, the university had recently adopted a set of six "core questions" that every unit on campus, academic as well as extracurricular student life, was to address in its curricula and programming. This is an institutional effort to ensure that students from every discipline have a coherent intellectual and spiritual experience in their 4 years on campus; regardless of one's particular major, students should come to understand that we are all studying and responsible for the same universe. Any new programming should help students answer the core questions, three of which are particularly germane to the goals we expressed for the film series: (1) "Who or what is God and how can one relate to God?," (2) "What is a good life?," and (3) "What is the role of

beauty, imagination, and feeling in life?" (University of Portland Bulletin, 2011, p. 9). As will be unpacked more fully when we describe the series's conceptual framework, the Great Commandment to love God, one's neighbor, and oneself has direct applicability to those core questions. Instructors from every division were invited, via intranet announcement, to encourage their students to attend the series and extend the conversations as appropriate in their own courses. That wide outreach paid a substantial dividend in terms of institutional buy-in and, ultimately, attendance. Including Campus Ministry and Residence Life as named sponsors of a film series that is also open to every academic unit means that multiple instructional and programming objectives of the university's academic and co-curricular mission could be met via a single program.

A proposal to the provost's office and the new Center for Catholic Intellectual Life and American Culture yielded an allocation of $500 per year to purchase movie snacks (popcorn, fruit, thematic candy, and juices) for each evening. Scheduling one film per month in the evening ensured virtually no competition for prime movie-viewing spaces on the campus calendar. Collaborating with the Center for Catholic Intellectual Life results in no cost for publicity, as it folds this series into its regular public relations materials.

An Evening at One of These Movies

In the initial proposal, the two authors assumed all responsibility for choosing and delivering the series of three or four films per semester. They provided the Center for Catholic Intellectual Life with dates, times, room, and film title information at the beginning of each term. The center printed and distributed flyers throughout campus and placed ads in the campus newspaper the week of each film. The authors posted details on the campus intranet system to keep faculty and staff informed. Prior to each film, the two authors watched it multiple times to develop a set of complementary comments that focus viewers' attention to the film devices being employed in a given movie, drawing heavily on Corrigan and White (2008) and the links to the core questions and transcendent elements to be illuminated. The conceptual framework we developed to unpack each film is presented in the next section.

We schedule our films in the same large stadium-style classroom throughout each semester, allowing us to show movies on a big screen with excellent sound and tiered seating. On the evening of a film offering, the structure that has proven most effective is to welcome the 50-70 students and university community members and then to have the two of us each offer 7-10 minutes

of instructive comments prior to the screening. We found that when we spoke after a film, we would be pointing out images or film techniques that viewers may not remember; speaking prior to the film alerts them to what they should be watching for and increases their ability to spot our targets. Sometimes the two of us disagree on how a film could be "read"; those are stimulating interchanges, as students get a chance to see two people disagree civilly and each make their case for a particular interpretation. In an era of increasing and mean-spirited stridency in public discourse, we have to believe that the mutual respect we demonstrate in these instances is a worthwhile model for students. When we present our comments to series audiences, we make clear that while these are our own interpretations and there may well be alternative readings available, we will only make assertions that can be substantiated by images, sounds, and dialogue found in the film.

After our comments are concluded, students are invited to fill up a plate with movie snacks, turn off any electronic devices, and settle in for an uninterrupted viewing. After the film, we invite anyone interested to stay for a free-form discussion, but we have found that due to students' schedules they often need to move onto other study groups and commitments by the time the film concludes. Instructors who tap into the film series send us sign-in sheets to record attendance and some include a writing prompt for their students to use in a subsequent assignment. Our interest has been in providing the film series itself; therefore, our data on the myriad of ways instructors in other disciplines employ it in their assignments is anecdotal at this point.

As stated earlier, originally the two of us took sole responsibility for film selection and pre-film commentary. In the past 2 years, as the series has caught on with different stakeholders across campus, we have invited guests to take one of our places and offer their own interpretations of movies, as long as their comments contribute to the larger theme of "Bringing Eyes of Faith to Film." Thus, campus ministers and residence hall directors have spoken to the audience alongside one of us. In upcoming semesters, we have plans to have the university president and other campus personalities screen and discuss favorite films that fit under the umbrella of movies with transcendent elements.

Choosing the Films

Each evening begins with movie selection. Any popular movie released in theaters is a potential candidate for the series. Many students find it surprising that commercial fare can be treated theologically. We avoid explicitly religious

films, such as the *Chronicles of Narnia* (Johnson, Adamson, & Apted, 2010) films that are popular in religious contexts, preferring to leverage instead the novelty and incongruity engendered by linking popular films to traditional religious insights. When possible, we use films that tie into a given season; examples include our screening of the zombie movie *Shaun of the Dead* (Park & Wright, 2004) during Halloween week, and *A Christmas Story* (Clark, Dupont, & Goth, 1983) in December. Culling existing media literacy guides (Considine & Haley, 1992; Hailer, 2007) yielded helpful questions we have tailored for use in this endeavor. We adapted the work of Hailer (2007) to create the following prompts we take with us to any movie theater in our own preliminary preparation:

1. Did I find myself having an emotional reaction to what was happening onscreen, or to the music playing in the background?
2. Was one of the characters transformed in some way?
3. Were there points in the film when I wanted to catch someone else's eye or reach out for their hand?
4. Are there any parallels between the film's narrative and the great stories of the Old and New Testament?
5. Does the film focus on a character learning to love himself, his neighbor, or God?

In 3 years of providing this series, this brief list has proven invaluable in identifying films that contain transcendent elements. Working from a limited framework of questions and employing an exhortation as straightforward as the three elements of the Great Commandment has served both to streamline and substantiate our observations. In addition, the brevity of the list makes it easier for students to remember as we share this methodology with them.

The fifth question on whether the film focuses on a character learning to love himself, his neighbor, or God reflects an innovation we devised. To provide coherence in a given semester's offerings, we chose the Great Commandment (Matthew 22:36-40) as the organizing principle of our series. We sort the movies we treat into three categories based upon the commandment: Love God, love your neighbor, and love yourself. The imperative to love God maps directly onto the university's first core question: How can one relate to God? Exploring human interactions and relationships in movies sheds light on the second core question: What is a good life? This latter also ripples into the third core question that has been most salient in the development of the series, and

touches on the final part of the Great Commandment, loving oneself: What is the role of beauty, imagination, and feeling in life? While never claiming to be exhaustive treatments of either the core questions or the Great Commandment, every film we have shown has found a place in this conceptual framework and has revealed dimensions of answers to the core questions and illuminated possibilities for fulfilling the Great Commandment.

We have no qualms about choosing films that many students have seen already. Our intention is to cause them to behold the movies differently this time. It serves our purposes if they find themselves wondering afterward, "How did I miss that before?" Young people are accustomed to watching their favorite movies multiple times. Further, they have often seen older films only on television, computer, or other small screens. Seeing a movie on a large screen for the first time and in the context of a community has novelty value, which, as we have demonstrated, increases the likelihood of gaining students' attention.

Three Examples of "Bringing Eyes of Faith to Film"

This section presents how the conceptual framework described above plays out when applied to particular films, providing a compilation of our pre-show comments about one film in each category of the Great Commandment. While we have treated films from several genres throughout the series, for this discussion we have chosen three recent animated films: *Up* (Rivera et al., 2009), *WALL-E* (Morris et al., 2008), and *Despicable Me* (Cohen et al., 2010). This discussion focuses on insights specific to dimensions of the Great Commandment, the fifth question in our framework.

Love God. As noted previously, we exclude explicitly religious films from our series. That decision makes the category "love God" something of a special challenge. We have addressed that challenge by choosing films that reflect the quest for meaning and value at the limits of human aspiration. We see this as a secular analogue for the religious yearning to experience God as the transcendent mystery who is always seemingly just beyond our grasp. This approach is rooted in a natural theology that asserts that human beings are always dissatisfied with where they have arrived and with what they have attained (St. Augustine, 1991). Nothing finite can quench our yearning, because we are ordered toward the infinite—toward God. This is part of what it means to say we are made in God's image (Genesis 1:27).

One would expect a movie called *Up* (Rivera et al., 2009) to have some-

thing to say about transcendence, and it does. *The Spirit of Adventure* is the name of a great airship. Muntz, its pilot, has ordered his entire life toward the achievement of his loftiest aspirations. His example has inspired his disciple, Carl, to do the same. Unfortunately, Muntz has allowed his pursuit of adventure to isolate him from other people. As a result, he is effectively damned. Carl's quest is to bring his house to Paradise Falls in tribute to his late wife Ellie. But in the wake of Ellie's death he has become closed in on himself. When young Russell intrudes himself into Carl's life, it appears for a while that Carl might be spared Muntz's fate, but Carl relapses. Finally, however, for his new friend's sake, he discards the things that represent his quest. Ultimately, Carl's pursuit of the transcendent dimension of the spiritual life succeeds, but only in concert with people he cares about. In the end, he emerges from isolation into a new adventure. So, just as love God and love your neighbor are aspects of a single commandment, *Up* shows that caring for others is essential to the pursuit of the transcendent mystery encapsulated in the word adventure.

Love your neighbor. From one perspective, *WALL-E* (Morris et al., 2008) could be considered a reimagining of the story of Noah and the flood. The robot EVE could represent the dove that returns to the ark with an olive leaf in its bill, indicating that the world is once again habitable (Genesis 8:10-12). In the context of our organizing principle, however, EVE and WALL-E serve as the unlikely catalysts of humanity's rediscovery that loving one another marks the difference between living and merely existing (John 10:10). Humanity, having polluted Earth so badly that it is uninhabitable, has flown off in a great space ark called the *Axiom*, where they have remained for generations, awaiting the day when the planet will once again be able to sustain life. Aboard the *Axiom*, human beings have their needs met by legions of service robots. As a consequence, over time, the humans have regressed to an infantile state in which they have forgotten how to look after themselves. They even look like big, helpless babies. No longer able to walk without great difficulty, they spend their days in hover chairs. The chairs are equipped with computers and other technology that have become the sole focus of their lives. They are hardly aware of anything going on beyond their chairs. In fact, the listening devices that form part of their headrests serve like blinkers on a horse so that they can see only the display screens in front of their faces. Only when their hermetically sealed worlds are disrupted by WALL-E's devotion for EVE do the human beings rediscover what it means to love one another.

The film also offers a moving parable of the Christian understanding of

the relationship between love and law. Christianity teaches that God's law is a precious divine gift that tells us how to love God and our neighbor. As such, humans should comply faithfully with that law. However, when the law becomes an impediment to our efforts to love our neighbor, it is the law that must bend. Essentially, "The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath" (Mark 2:27). The crucial scene, in this regard, takes place in the garbage airlock, when her determination to assist the damaged WALL-E causes EVE to toss aside the precious plant, thereby allowing love to override the "directive" that has hitherto been her reason for being. Significantly, in consequence, the original directive—to restore healthy, organic life to Earth—is not thwarted, but facilitated. The audience can confirm this by sitting through the end of the film credits, to the final images onscreen: We see there the renewed, lush foliage now growing from the tiny plant EVE tossed into what had been ruined soil.

Love yourself. While the men and women depicted in *WALL-E* (Morris et al., 2008) live extraordinarily blinkered lives, they are not bad people. They are pleasant, patient folks whose personalities evince no signs of trauma. When EVE and WALL-E show them what love is, they show a strong aptitude for it. They prove well able to love their neighbors as themselves. In the third film we discuss, the case is different.

Gru, the main character in *Despicable Me* (Cohen et al., 2010), is a self-professed criminal mastermind, but, at heart, he is a good person. His meticulously planned crimes are more like elaborate pranks than evil deeds, indicating that he is a good person. A more compelling piece of evidence is that he knows each of his countless, nearly identical, little yellow minions by name. They are whole-heartedly devoted to him in return. Why has this nice fellow become a criminal genius? It is because of his appalling mother. As a child, his mother's preternatural apathy toward him convinced Gru that he was utterly despicable. So, still eager for her approval, he eventually decides to be the most despicable person he can possibly be. In pursuit of his nefarious aims, Gru adopts three little girls, who have themselves been treated as if they were despicable. He intends the girls to be pawns in one of his criminal schemes. In the course of events, they come to love him, and he becomes a loving father to them. The children's love for him teaches Gru that he is not despicable after all. His self-image healed, he can now love others. He is able to love his neighbor because he loves himself. His confession of this fact comes in his emotional reading of the new picture-puppet book he composes as a

tribute to the three girls at the film's conclusion.

Beginning to Assess Impact of the Series

Documenting the impact of the "Bringing Eyes of Faith to Film" series has been both straightforward and multifaceted. We began with simply counting heads at each screening, finding that we needed to reserve a room that can accommodate up to 70 people; the average attendance is 55 per offering. Those data sufficed to demonstrate to our funders that a very modest amount of money ($500) frugally spent on movie snacks can cover 8 months of once-monthly programming that serves close to 300 students each year. Next, instructors and Residence Life administrators also send specific sign-in sheets allowing them to track the attendees who come for extra credit and co-curricular participation. Two trends emerged from those data.

First, English, theology, and philosophy instructors comprise the largest number of faculty who consistently promote the series and give course credit to students who attend. Their academic follow-up usually takes the form of students writing brief summary and reaction papers about the evening's content. Three faculty who teach large numbers of first- and second-year students also provide structured writing prompts in which their students use the films and our comments to address salient core questions for which their courses are responsible. While grading of those papers is the purview of the faculty and beyond the scope of our project, the fact that instructors outside our own departments include this film series among their curricular repertoire suggests that it is an endeavor with the potential to address key academic objectives, such as the core questions of our university.

Second, Residence Life and Campus Ministry personnel recruit at least 20 attendees per viewing. Probing the latter finding via follow-up conversations with resident assistants (RAs) and Campus Ministry staff, we found that they too are responsible for providing resources to their constituents to be able to answer the six core questions, to which this series contributes. Further, as part of their contract, RAs are required to provide programming that utilizes faculty and clergy outside the regular classroom and chapel, and collaborating with us addresses this job requirement. They can document this via a dedicated sign-in sheet. We also provide a formal letter to each RAs' supervisor confirming attendance and individuals' contributions to logistical tasks, such as helping with set up and clean up.

As the series gained a following, we experienced an unanticipated outcome

that further demonstrates the project's emerging impact and potential. Now prior to each semester both authors receive a minimum of 15 suggestions from colleagues and students for films to show, along with rationales that highlight each writer's grasp of the mission of the project. This excerpt of an e-mail from a student to both of us is emblematic: "I think you should show *Kung Fu Panda* sometime in your series. On one level it is just an enjoyable cartoon. But it also tells us something about finding your true vocation and the power of using your gifts, even when you don't feel you are that gifted." Other colleagues have asked if they might contribute their own favorite film and provide the comments prior to the screening. This is how *The Dark Knight* (Nolan et al., 2008) and *Inglourious Basterds* (Bender & Tarantino, 2009) came to occupy places on recent film slates, widening the influence of the series.

A final indicator of the impact of the "Bringing Eyes of Faith to Film" series is the fact that the series has entered into the university's campus-wide strategic plan as a featured metric for how the institution attends to the faith and reason development of each student. Student writing about how the lessons they acquire in the film series broaden their ability to answer the six core questions will be collected and analyzed in the academic units making the assignments as part of their ongoing assessment of the department's quest to ensure it is equipping students with the tools necessary to make God "known, loved, and served."

Portable Principles and Recommendations

In this section, we present five broad principles that have contributed to the early impact of the "Bringing Eyes of Faith to Film" series, intended to scaffold efforts of others to create something similar. While the majority of our insights are positive, we will also embed in these principal challenges we have perceived in the 3 years in which we have been engaged in this project.

Address Multiple Existing Needs

The initial appeal of the project for both authors was that movies are fun and they are more fun when shared with others. However, for a venture to succeed long term, particularly one in which most of the work is done on a voluntary basis, it is important that stakeholders see some valuable, tangible outcome of their efforts. In this case, a principal reason the series has been sustainable is that it addresses multiple objectives campus-wide. Students gain intellectual

tools to answer questions and solve problems posed to them in a variety of disciplines, the core questions of the university in particular. But their hearts, which some might argue are the domain of units within student life (i.e., Campus Ministry, Residence Life), are also addressed. Students are engaged in a task they already tend to enjoy, while accomplishing several cognitive and affective objectives. Five hundred dollars per year to pay for programming that reaches more than 700 participants is a very good return on the investment made by the provost's office and the Center for Catholic Intellectual Life. As the center has sought external grants for its other work, it has been able to cite the attendance of this program as evidence of wise stewardship of resources. Anyone contemplating a similar project should reflect on the number and variety of possible stakeholders whose worthy objectives could be accomplished by way of a single coordinated effort.

Seek Cohesion

As we made clear, any movie released to the public is a potential candidate for inclusion in this series. However, it is probably less taxing for the planners, and ultimately more intellectually cohesive for participants, to embrace or create a single organizing principle for such a series. We found several academic doors open to us when we were able to link the series specifically to the university's broad mission and in particular the six core questions posed by all faculty to students in all disciplines. Our work was further streamlined when we decided to use only films that shed light on the Great Commandment. Other conceptual frameworks for organizing a film series aside from the Great Commandment are quite possible. One might choose, for example, the persons of the Trinity, the theological virtues, the deadly sins, or the sacraments as filters for choosing films. The fundamental impact on students, a portable principle worth underscoring here, is their new awareness that there is probably *no* film or other work of art, probed thoughtfully, that *cannot* reveal a dimension of God and God's work in the world.

Keep Studying

Advanced study in one area does not guarantee proficiency in another. Despite our two terminal degrees in theology and education, we brought more enthusiasm than intellectual background in film studies to this project. We were heartened initially by Deacy's (2005) stance that, for all that there is to gain

from formal film study, the study of film should not be the preserve of academics. At the same time, however, film studies have a vast and accessible literature, and we return over and over to that work (especially Bordwell & Thompson, 2004 and Corrigan & White, 2008) to ensure that our instruction, while not intended as summative, is cogent and accurate.

As we delve deeper into the field of film study, there is a daunting body of material to consider. Exploring this vast body of research will come on top of already full teaching and research loads. One response is to forge ahead, under the banner of being, as our institution proclaims we are all called to be, "lifelong learners." It is desirable for students and colleagues to witness us stepping into unfamiliar territory. Another possibility is to endeavor to find ways to connect this work to our existing responsibilities in creative ways. The two are not, of course, mutually exclusive. Students have commented that they appreciate seeing faculty members step out of their intellectual safety zones and explore something new. This leads to our next portable principle.

"De-Siloing"

Transforming adolescents from uncritical to canny consumers of films begins with unmasking common filmmaking conventions that teachers and pastoral ministers can easily point out. Deacy (2005) and Hailer (2007) have argued that all teachers, regardless of content area, should take some responsibility for fostering media literacy, not only bona fide film scholars. One of the chief delights of this series for us personally has been to cross our usual disciplinary lines, first mixing a theologian with an educational psychologist, and then using accessible pedagogical tools to offer cogent, if not exhaustive insights about films, an arena outside our formal training. Using a conceptual framework as basic as the Great Commandment, together with broad questions such as those we noted earlier, make unpacking films achievable even for educators and pastors not formally trained in cinematic scholarship. Extending the conversation to other academic departments, and moving beyond that to nonacademic units on campus has made a small but satisfying contribution to providing students with a unified model of approaching interesting, complex problems.

One "silo" that troubles us, however, is that which occasionally separates male and female viewers. We have found that females will happily attend male-oriented films, such as *The Dark Knight* (Nolan et al., 2008), but that males stay away from excellent female-oriented films, such as *The Devil Wears Prada* (Finerman, Rosenfelt, & Frankel, 2006). Because we want full audi-

ences, we have shied away from female-oriented films, but perhaps we should confront that phenomenon directly. This is likely an excellent opportunity to partner with members of the psychology or sociology departments to explore questions outside our expertise and beyond the scope of the series itself.

Johnson and Johnson (1991) have long posited that "all of us are smarter than one of us" (p. 17), and our experience with this film series has certainly borne out that assertion. Providing this opportunity for students to meet cognitive and affective goals under the guidance of people from three to four different areas of campus has been an effective strategy for getting faculty and staff to think in more interdisciplinary ways themselves.

Power of Community

A final portable principle is related to "de-siloing": the power of creating a community of learners engaged in a robust task. As we have discussed, tools for developing more sophisticated film "palates" are plentiful and not difficult to use (Bordwell & Thompson, 2004; Corrigan & White, 2008). Doing so is indeed an important first step in creating connoisseurs. But the long and venerated relationship of Catholicism to art calls us to do so much more to nourish young people's minds and hearts. The questions suggested here invite them to pay attention to their emotions and startling reactions when they watch films, and provide the intellectual and spiritual scaffolding that allows them to connect accessible language to what might otherwise remain inchoate if they were left on their own. In this era of iPods, iPhones, and other devices designed to be used individually, gathering 50-70 people together to share an experience is a unique opportunity to foster community. While we occasionally disagree with each other, our pre-film comments are amicable and provide a glimpse into how thoughtful adults might approach differences of opinions, and perhaps even be persuaded to change their minds, given enough evidence. This counters the examples of public discourse prevalent in mainstream media. There is something very special about watching a movie together and sharing snacks and impressions. Watching their professors eat popcorn and peanut M&Ms has astonished students, who, even 14 to 15 years into their education, do not always realize that teachers are normal people; this is a homely, yet powerful illustration of the potential of a series like this to help nurture a sense of community.

Conclusion

Plenty of work remains to be done, particularly in cultivating our own knowledge of films and devising more nuanced measures of the impact of this series. It began as a fun sidebar to our regular work, but the positive momentum it has gained, as more constituencies on the campus invest and seek involvement in it, brings a concomitant call for investigating not only its effects on the minds and hearts of attendees but deeper consideration of its potential.

In an era of shrinking financial resources and steady, warranted exhortations to demonstrate the "value-added" of an expensive Catholic college education, this film series offers a replicable strategy to work toward attaining that goal. Students arrive in our institutions media-saturated and will reemerge into a world that continues that bombardment. Seizing all opportunities to inculcate media literacy really is a task for every educator, and accessible tools exist to assist us in that effort. We suggest that the success of this film series affords educators in any type of institution a set of specific tools to use to help their students become more sophisticated connoisseurs of the images and narratives that occupy so much of their time. A modest budget, frugally spent, coupled with cooperation among academic, pastoral, and student life professionals sharing their own intellectual and spiritual insights has proven a powerful combination for attending to multiple institutional objectives. What is more, those goals have been accomplished by units that ordinarily are not called upon to interact in substantive ways. Such collaboration may only be the beginning of further fruitful joint endeavors.

Finally, educators in Catholic institutions have an imperative beyond merely fostering media literacy. In fact, it might more aptly be termed an opportunity. As we have noted, film is art. The long-standing, hallowed tradition between Catholicism and art invites us to harness the sensual powers of films' images, music, and narrative to help our students glimpse aspects of God that can be revealed most powerfully through art. The conceptual framework presented here is one proven strategy for assisting educators who may consider themselves neither theologians nor cinema scholars to come to see and know more about God by seeing and knowing more about films.

Presented and unpacked in the context of a caring community, the approach begun with the "Bringing Eyes of Faith to Film" series has the potential to transform most subsequent casual film viewings into opportunities for unleashing grace in strange and wonderful ways. Or as the students have said, "ruining movies for them forever, but in a good way."

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