NEGOTIATING THEOLOGICAL MEANING IN CONTEMPORARY FILM

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Introduction

The emergence of films[1] has transformed permanently the traditional art of story-telling globally. The rise of contemporary films has gradually positioned films among the dominant cultural media alongside the oral tradition. Anthropologists[2] consider film as a vehicle for traditional storytelling forms.

Centuries of humankind's existence have seen storytelling in its diversity as an essential vehicle for the deeply cherished cultures, values, histories, and experiences of the people of the respective social groups. Story-telling wraps the human experience with the fine cover of language and passes it on to the young ones in a flowing continuum through the available

1. The history of film is traced back to the 1890s when the medium was invented. However, the study of this history is a recent development, as there are no film histories written before the 1970s as films were regarded as mere entertainment. 1895 is considered to be the birth year of cinema, with cinemas being established in most major cities in 1896. James Chapman refers to Cinema as 'the last machine of the Victorian Age.' Films started as short single-shot 'actualities', to 'scenics' (travelogue films), phantom rides (camera on vehicle), 'topicals' (newsworthy events), and later narrative films, which even further added to the 'social respectability of cinema.' See James Chapman, *Cinemas of the World: Film and Society from 1895 to the Present* (London: Reaktion Books, 2003). 15-19, 52, 54-57).

2. Carol Geddes, "The Use of Film as a Vehicle for Traditional Storytelling Forms," *Arctic Anthropology*, 40, no. 2 (2003). https://muse.jhu.edu/pub/19/article/383055/pdf. 65. ; and, Kristin Thompson, *Storytelling in Film and Television* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003), 8, 39, 56.

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media. Story-telling has been an indispensable yet adaptable social construct because, in its purpose to communicate life's realities, lessons, and myths, it accommodates new ways of communication as they emerge and evolve in society.

The lead research question for this paper is: "How do contemporary films function as social constructs that shape identity and theological meaning negotiation for young viewers?" A follow-up inquiry to that is on the effective theological and pastoral approaches to help nurture and safeguard the faith of young people who are exposed to contemporary films of all kinds. Particular focus on 'negotiation of meaning' is triggered by the scholarship of Jesuits John Pungente and Monty Williams, who appropriated the Ignatian Spirituality and particularly the Ignatian Exercises in experiencing God in the filmic realities.[3] It is worth noting that contemporary films, even when not explicitly religious, allow theological engagement through their socially rooted narratives in which young people can discover God, who loves and saves humanity even in filmic portrayals of human stories.

This paper will also explore how young Christian viewers interpret the films they watch from the Christian lens, and also seek to understand how Christian salvation is seen in films' storytelling even without them being directly or specifically Christian films. Young Gen Zs (born 1997-2012) who have grown up with later bits of contemporary films around them are influenced differently by them as compared to Gen Ys (born 1981-1996) and Gen Xs (born 1965-1980) who have more

3. John Pungente and Monty Williams. *Finding God in the Dark: Taking the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius to the Movies* (Ottawa: Novalis, 2004).

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comparative grounds regarding contemporary[4] films (from 1950s -), given their experiences. The methodology is a merger of theological hermeneutics and qualitative film analysis.

Film as Social Construct

Film as a narrative and social device

Film needs a context from which it is fashioned to be at the same time a three-fold project, which Graeme Turner explains as 'an entertainment, a narrative, and a social event.'[5] Films mirror culture in a complicated dynamic; and reflect attitudes, beliefs, trends, issues, and events.[6] The oftentimes seamless merger of fiction and non-fiction in film is an important backdrop for the multi-faceted role of film in the wider and diverse society. Multiple questions arise as storytelling navigates the narrative through delicate pathways when presented in the form of film.

A film director, Michael Roemer, writes in his book *Telling Stories* that "Story is an encounter with the non-human, the incomprehensible, the meaningless." He further adds, "In story, crises, and confrontations accelerate changes that, in life, occur gradually and almost imperceptibly, and so make

4. John C. Brown and Timothy W. Guinnane, *Scarcity and Frontiers: How Economies Have Developed Through Natural Resource Exploitation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), chap. 13, https://www.cambridge.org/core/books/abs/scarcity-and-frontiers/contemporary-era-from-1950-to-the-present/22981027870DC08AF4E01EB06BAB6496.

5. Turner, Graeme, and Michael F. Duckham, *Film as Social Practice*, 4th ed. (New York: Routledge, 2006), https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203825198, p. 2.

6. Jack Lule, *Understanding Media and Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2026), https://documents.coastline.edu/Distance%20Learning/Open-Edu-Resources/MCOM%20C100%20Understanding-Media-and-Culture.pdf, 397.

the impact of the process on our existence visible."[7] The narrative is very important as it determines what the audience sees in the film, and therefore what is communicated to them. From studies in narratology, film as a narrative features two important participants: those who see and those who speak, that is, the audience and the actors in the film. Focalization is devised as a crucial technique in ensuring that the activity of narration is not confused with the selection of information presented in the narrative.[8]

Film is a crucial societal resource as it maximizes the societal corpus in its wholeness: persons, nature, history, language, culture, tradition, props, costumes, knowledge, philosophy, spirituality, etc. are all raw materials for storytelling. Amidst the global diversity, the common element in storytelling, as Cardinal Roger Mahony notes, is that each story captures a portion of the truth about what it means to be human.[9] Film depends on society for its formation and ideological formulation, and consumption.

The ideological dimension of the film, buttressing the thought of Graeme Turner, carries a burden of social and cultural meanings.[10] Film interacts with society and its structures and institutions in seeking to portray the vision of the filmmakers as well as that of those whose lives, cultures, identities, aspirations, etc. are creatively presented in film. While literature requires an advanced level of literacy in its

7. Michael Roemer, *Telling Stories: Postmodernism and the Invalidation of Traditional Narrative* (United Kingdom: Rowman & Littlefield, 1995), 51.

8. Celestino Deleyto, "Focalisation in Film Narrative," Atlantis 13, no. 1/2 (1991): 159, 161.

9. Roger Mahony, Film Makers, *Film Viewers: Their Challenges and Opportunities* (Los Angeles, 1992), https://fliphtml5.com/kwrs/kspa/basic, 1.

10. Turner and Duckham, *Film as Social Practice*, 109.

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audience, films can be easily appreciated by everyone, as they are audio-visual.[11] This is one of the reasons film became the dominant art form of the twentieth century.[12]

Film as selling of a reality

While film is a product of a discerned mix of reality and creativity, countless films present less and less actual reality. This affects the final reception of the film, especially when people and cultures feel underrepresented by the story of the film centered in their cultures. Also, many films have actors who are unfamiliar with the actual grounds of the film's storyline, yet play important roles artistically, often for the financial impact of such films and global audience attraction. Some films portray religious scenes acted out *shabbily* by people who evidently do not practice the faiths in question. With these factors put together, films sell to the world a reality that does not exist in real life, or, nicely put, that does not do justice to the narrative that goes before the film. But still, a film must be considered as a work of (commercial) art, including religious films. Also, an aesthetic approach towards what the film represents should not be too far removed from the moral approach. This, says Peter Malone, is because the merger of the two enables the film to communicate human values and also to draw from the audience a human response.[13]

Graeme Turner says:

> Popular films have a life beyond their theatrical runs or their reruns on television: stars, genres, and key movies become part of our personal and shared culture, our identity. Film is a social practice for its makers and its

11. Guillermo C. de Vega, *Film and Freedom: Movie Censorship in the Philippines* (Manila, 1975), 49.

12. "Film," *Brittanica*, https://www.britannica.com/art/film.

13. Peter Malone, *Film and Faith* (Manila: CFA Media, 2008), 3, 18.

> audience: in its narratives and meanings, we can locate evidence of the ways in which our culture makes sense of itself.[14]

Synthesizing the understanding of film as a narrative and social device and as a selling of reality sets the platform for a contextualized approach towards contemporary films, which participate, just like other films, in such roles in society.

Audience Negotiation of Meaning in Films

For this paper, we will consider these as criteria for classifying films: themes, emotional impact, and narrative style as our criteria for the same. Major genres in film include: action, drama, adventure, comedy, thriller, horror, science fiction, romance, fantasy, crime, and documentary. Philosopher and sociologist Jürgen Habermas opines that any production of knowledge serves a certain interest: instrumental, practical, or emancipatory interest.[15] The same applies to movies. As a marriage of technique and meaning,[16] movies enchant us one day and live within us for many years.[17] There are multiple meanings in what we see in the film, depending on how much we are informed in real life about what is featured in the film. Some meanings are deliberate and consciously intended, but not all are obvious. Ryan and Lenos note that: "Some meanings come from a culture the filmmaker inhabits, and they enter the film without the filmmaker realizing it... Other meanings

14. Turner and Duckham, *Film as Social Practice*, 4.

15. Jurgen Harbemas, *Knowledge and Human Interest* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1972).

16. Michael Ryan and Melissa Lenos, *An Introduction to Film Analysis: Technique and Meaning in Narrative Film* (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing USA, 2020), 1.

17. Gaston Roberge, *Films for an Ecology of Mind: Essays on realism in the Cinema* (Calcutta: Firma, 1978), 1.

are shaped by thematic or aesthetic necessity and seem neither entirely unconscious nor entirely deliberate."[18]

Narratives resonate differently across cultures and social groups. For example, a film situated in the Filipino culture will have nuances of the Filipino culture which the Filipinos can immediately perceive, even when they are not directly acted out or verbalized. For example, in the movie *When I Met You in Tokyo* (2023)[19] the two main cast Vilma Santos and Christopher de Leon, manifest a strong sense of '*Utang na loob*.'[20] Filipino viewers have better chances of understanding the context beyond the visual, more deeply, even when it is not put in words or special scenes. This is because it is profoundly rooted in their cultural understanding of the value of gratitude. It is also practically ingrained in their daily social life.

In the same way, different aspects of a film, such as the character's persona, storyline, soundtracks, mood, etc. can strike a note in the hearts and consciousness of Christian believers based on their holistic formation as people of faith. Typical examples here are values of forgiveness, mercy, unconditional love, care, and hope amidst an uncertain future. Stephanie Sellers explains this as 'relatability,' and says: "When people identify with a character on screen in a relatable transitional phase, it opens doors for theological development."[21]

18. Ryan and Lenos, *An Introduction to Film Analysis*, 2, 3.

19. Suzette Doctolero, *When I Met You in Tokyo*, directed by Radu Peru and Rommel Penesa (Philippines: JG Productions, 2023).

20. Literary: "A debt of one's inner self". It entails reciprocity, or an obligation to appropriately repay a person who has done one a favour. Cf. Angelo Gundran, et al., "The Concept of Utang na Loob in The Philippines: Utang na Loob Scale," *Antorcha*, Vol 8, No. 1 & 2, (March 2021): 1. https://ejournals.ph/article.php?id=17184.

21. Stephanie Mullins Sellers, *How the Power of Film Inspires Christianity* (master's thesis, Liberty University, 2022), 17. https://digitalcommons.liberty.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1901&context=masters.

For Gaston Roberge the film is somehow ourselves, and any attempt at penetrating its secrets may help us to perceive our own mystery.[22]

The audience also negotiates the various meanings based on the flow of the storyline and the highlights of the narrative actualized in the film. Also, many films have polysemy (multiple meanings), a device oftentimes intentionally used for advocacy and to deliver a message, and other semantic devices. For a word, for example, there is on one hand, the literal 'physical message', and on the other hand, a message that is a 'meaningful outcome of the encounter between the word and the reader.'[23] While to some viewers a movie appears as mere entertainment, to others it can be a strong critique of society properly. Meaning is not confined to the literal or physical message.

It is 'the visual thrust' as Tim Cawkwell calls it, that distinguishes film from literary narrative, so that framing, movement, and editing are key to understanding the artifice (giving ideas form) of a film.[24] By viewing films (and going to cinemas), one actively practices curious 'meaning-making' as Clive Marsh calls it. The crucial intersection point is the meaning on the side of the audience as they interact with the film, particularly "what films do to their audiences and what audiences do with films." [25] Gaston Roberge would passionately say, "... films

22. Roberge, Films for an Ecology of Mind, 1.

23. Udo P. Ibuot, "Polysemy and Meaning-Making of Media Contents among the Audience," *International Journal of Communication Research* 14, no. 1, (January-March 2024): 6, https://www.ijcr.eu/article/662_005%20Udo%20P%20Ibuot1.pdf.

24. Tim Cawkwell, *The Filmgoer's Guide to God* (London: Darton, Longmann and Todd, 2004), 3.

25. Clive Marsh, "Theology and the Practice of Meaning-Making," *The Expository Times* 119, no. 2 (2007): 69, https://doi.org/10.1177/0014524607084086.

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gave so much to us, to which we readily gave hours of our lives otherwise unique, precious, and so brief."[26]

This intersection brings together two important players, the moviegoer (viewer) and the movie producer, who Eddie Infante says, "are intimately related, if not wholly by blood, at the very least, by inclination. They both like films; one delights in making them; the other delights in viewing them. It is like a warm relationship between the cook and the eater!"[27] One brings himself/herself in contact with a reality that will communicate something to him, making oneself vulnerable to being triggered by characters, actions, philosophies, cinematography, and even the plot.

In response to the question: "What do films do to viewers?" Roberge proposed three complementary viewpoints: First, psychological (an imaginary experience of the onlooker), Second, heuristic (film as the art and science of creating a mobile image), and third, treating film as one of the mass media.[28] Reconciling these three perspectives gives a more holistic answer to the puzzle of the impact of films on the viewers.

However, for Gianfranco Bettetini, this 'impact' hangs on another string which he calls the 'interpretive freedom.' He says, "The cinematographic work of art is complete and definitive before being projected, and it only regains an open dimension within the receptive universe of the perceiver, as a

26. Gaston Roberge, *Films for an Ecology of Mind: Essays on realism in the Cinema*, 1.

27. Eddie J. Infante, "Whatever Happened to the Filipino Moviegoer?" in *Inside Philippine Movies 1970-1990: Essays for Students of Philippine Cinema* (Manila: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 1991), 50.

28. Roberge, *Films for an Ecology of Mind*, 18.

result of his interpretive freedom."[29] But, there are also risks associated with this meaning-making adventure in films, given the irreconcilably varying viewpoints, for example, resulting from the age gap, and interpretive freedom based on learned moral and religious convictions. For example, when watching a movie from a different culture, one will often notice several things that are probably objectionable and unacceptable in one's culture, yet they are normal in another. Film viewers cannot erase all they knew before and engage with a film from a purely similar and neutral perspective.

Films in the Context of Global and Contextual Morals

Moral worldviews play a huge role in meaning-making. This is not a modern discovery. Film content censorship was raised as a concern over a century ago. In 1909, an American theatre critic, Walter Eaton, wrote: "When you reflect that in New York City alone, on a Sunday, 500,000 people go to the moving picture shows, a majority of them perhaps children ... you cannot dismiss canned drama (pre-recorded) with a shrug of contempt. Here is an industry to be controlled, an influence to be reckoned with."[30] Moral concerns like this arise from moral worldviews.

Moral worldviews are deeply rooted in the customs and values of the people and are closely connected with religious perspectives as their booster springboard. As stories are rooted in the life of the community, movies are similarly, in part or in whole, rooted in the life experiences, aspirations, and memories of that society. On this ground, films should

29. Gianfranco Bettetini, *The Language and Technique of the Film*, vol. 28 (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter GmbH & Co KG, 2018), 11.

30. James Chapman, *Cinemas of the World: Film and Society from 1895 to the Present* (London: Reaktion Books, 2003), 67.

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reflect the moral climate of the society they originate from as they are not independent self-generating realities.

Guillermo C. de Vega expounds that:

> Movies reflect the moral climate of the society, but at the same time they also influence their audience morally. Thus, the relationship can be seen as cyclical, each side interacting with and influencing the other, and viewed in this context, it is not possible to speak of the film as a product conceived in an artistic vacuum, removed from the life of the community.[31]

Despite being for entertainment, the sense of value plays an important role, particularly on the side of the film producers. De Vega calls this the "Artistic conscience," which even before specified legalities, can guide producers to self-censorship, and set boundaries of candor and shame, especially in dealing with most intimate and private confrontation of values such as lovemaking, life and death portrayals, as well as the most public moments in which values clash and are violently or peacefully negotiated.[32] An artistic conscience determines from purely artistic standards what constitutes the valid parts of the film, such that scenes are not, for example, intended for only the display of nudity, arousal of base sexual instincts, or just a careless display of violence, or other vices.[33]

Cardinal Mahony proposes an evaluation of sexuality in motion pictures by raising exploratory questions in three areas: First, what the characters say to each other and if only acted as a source of pleasure and physical release, if the film is

31. Guillermo C. de Vega, *Film and Freedom: Movie Censorship in the Philippines*, 107-108.

32. Margaret Miles, *Seeing and Believing: Religion and Values in the Movies* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2002), xv.

33. Guillermo C. de Vega, *Film and Freedom: Movie Censorship in the Philippines*, 101.

honest about the level of inauthenticity, inadequacy, terrible emptiness, and shallowness. Secondly, whether those scenes are exploitative, and what potential effects can they have on younger vs. mature viewers? And thirdly, whether the film conveys the beauty of authentic sexuality, or if it demeans it, and if it caters to the self-indulgent side of its viewers, or if it motivates them to be honest, sensitive, and loving in relating with other people?[34]

Just like a storyline and scenes, characters in films are created, oftentimes carefully. Their authors assign them values, attitudes, and emotions that are actionable and understandable. Paradoxes, inconsistencies, and emotional layers are added to them to make them more unique and the scenes deeper and richer. There are also patterns of attitudes that help deepen and define them, showing how each character looks at life, and how he/she can appeal to possible predictability in the eyes of keen viewers.[35] As these qualities do not exist alone, they are important building blocks of the moral fabric of the film as they determine the interactions among characters when their values and beliefs meet, question, contest, or resist those of another.[36]

Faith Seeking Understanding in Films

Here comes the question: As people of faith, should we question the movies? The answer is 'Yes'! We have the moral task to hold high our moral sense and point an intelligent

34. Roger Mahony, *Film Makers, Film Viewers: Their Challenges and Opportunities*, 12.

35. Linda Seger, *Creating Unforgettable Characters: A Practical Guide to Character Development in Films, TV Series, Advertisements, Novels and Short Stories* (Ontario: Fitzhenry & Whiteside Ltd., 1990), 29-36.

36. Margaret Miles, *Seeing and Believing: Religion and Values in the Movies*, xv.

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finger at what is wrong with movies,[37] and to go deeper into questioning the world the movies create. John Pungente and Monty Williams rightly point out that every film proposes to the audience forms of the world and ethical ways of living in the world it creates. When we watch film therefore, we are not just being entertained; we are being formed and shaped.[38]

Across the globe, different countries have civil regulatory bodies for films to protect and safeguard public morals. In the church, some councils help safeguard the faith, especially of our fragile young believers, which is endangered by movies aimed at the contrary. There is a threshold of open-mindedness; a fact that is strongly fought against in the perverted secular circles. Pope Francis once warned about the danger of the ongoing well-planned 'ideological colonization' agendas and manipulation, which aim at advancing divisive ideologies that trample on the values and beliefs of people, uprooting traditions, history, and religious bonds of people, and opening doors to the 'cancel culture'.[39] We ought to be conscious that films can be used as agents for these manipulative agendas.

In addition, we would be concerned with 'aesthetic distancing', a kind of psychological gap, by which the audience is made to be attracted to something in some way, while allowed to remain free to respond to the totality of the situation.[40] This is applied to what is publicly considered 'sin'. An argument

37. Malone, *Film and Faith* (Manila: CFA Media, 2008), 9, 11.

38. Pungente and Williams, *Finding God in the Dark*, 14.

39. Pope Francis, *Address of His Holiness Pope Francis to Members of the Diplomatic Corps Accredited to the Holy See*, January 9, 2025, *Vatican.va*, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2025/january/documents/20250109-corpo-diplomatico.html (accessed February 11, 2025).

40. Jennifer Lane, "Aesthetic Distance in Film and Theater," *Backstage Magazine*, August 2023. https://www.backstage.com/magazine/article/aesthetic-distance-film-theater-76310.

on which this hangs is that the portrayal of vices and 'sins' in the film is not a participation in an actual sinful act, but a representation.

However, it is difficult to contain, predict, or account for the impact of this representation, as viewers are vulnerable to being influenced by what they see as if it were real. Scriptures remind us that the eye is a gateway to the soul (Prov. 30:17). By the fact that such 'representations' damage the nature of human persons, they qualify as wrong and sinful. The Catechism of the Catholic Church, in speaking about sin, mentions the capacity of sin to wound the nature of the human person and to injure human solidarity.[41] A 'representation' of, for example, promiscuity, racism, hatred, revenge, and all other vices in film cannot be taken for granted, as it can be a validation for people who lean towards those vices, eventually leading them to internalize and actualize unpleasant and wrong actions, and also can pervert collective action in the present and the future. Films can be watched many years later and be misinterpreted as representative of the morality of their time.

Richard Leonard highlights that:

> Our concern is not whether a story explores sin, but whether it is glamorized and seen as normal. By glamorized, I mean made to seem not deadly at all, but life-giving. Movies may seem to deny the destruction and alienation of sin, and suggest it brings happiness, popularity, and success. This is a lie, and we need to say so.[42]

41. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2nd ed. (Vatican City: Librerie Editrice Vaticana, 1997), no. 1849.

42. Richard Leonard, *Movies that Matter: Reading Film through the Lens of Faith* (Chicago: Loyola Press, 2006), xvii.

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We need a balanced outlook here, nonetheless, as not every portrayal of wrong in the movies harms our faith. Though films show us who we are, 'when we watch a film, what we feel largely depends on our basic commitment."[43] A certain level of maturity is needed, with a capacity to separate ourselves from the reality we see in film by conscious choice. As our faith is a lived experience, we are not tied to the adolescent-like timidity and proneness to scruples and conformism. Without proper maturity in our emotions and sexuality, we are likely to make wrong sweeping assumptions and can be preoccupied with only a sense of moral 'law' while excluding everything else in that regard.

What we need, as Malone suggests, are sounder attitudes to films as complete works of art, backed by a more personal, Christian approach to the moral principles of living. Positive formation (a re-thinking of attitudes) to aid in discerning the moral worth or worthlessness of each film is important, so that we are not just passive containers. The vulnerability here is for everyone, despite our reactions. Both young and older audiences are vulnerable to being exploited by unscrupulous directors and advertisers.[44] However, young people are at a greater risk as they may not yet be emotionally mature, know too little about delaying gratification or self-discipline, and with a shaky sense of values and self-affirmation. As a result, what might be a tasteful and realistic portrayal of reality for adults can be sensitive to young people, leading to self-destruction and antisocial behaviour.[45] In addition, young people have problems with staying within the margins of responsible use of freedom.

43. Pungente and Williams, *Finding God in the Dark*, 17.

44. Malone, *Film and Faith*, 12, 13. 15,16, 19.

45. Roger Mahony, *Film Makers, Film Viewers: Their Challenges and Opportunities*, 6.

Theological Foundation of Salvation in Relation to Social Constructs

The Church teaches that salvation is an ongoing process, and is not just a personal reality but a journey of our life and our existence with an indispensable social dimension. In this journey, first, to live in society/community is a requirement of our very nature as God created us; as put in the Catechism, it is not 'an extraneous addition.' Secondly, justice, the pursuit of the common good, and care for the needy are essential in the order of our salvation which, apart from being spiritual, also involves social transformation and healing the wounds and hurts of social sin.[46]

While salvation comes from God alone, the Church, through God's grace, is the Mother of humanity's new birth and is the teacher[47] of our faith. The manifestation of this faith is in both vertical and horizontal dimensions. In the latter, it transforms the individuals, and through them the society, to reflect the love of God nourished by the former, in real life. The Church as one community of faith has the responsibility and mission to guide the social structures towards justice, liberation, freedom from sinful social conditions, and protection of human dignity. We cannot practically pursue the common good successfully without actually questioning and challenging the unjust social structures. [48] Pope John Paul II said, "The redemption of the world – this tremendous mystery of love in which creation is

46. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2nd ed. (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1997), nos. 169, 161, 386–389, 408–410, 737, 1879.

47. John Paul II, *Il Rapido Sviluppo: Apostolic Letter* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2005), no. 10.

48. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2nd ed. (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1997), nos. 169, 181, 1905 – 1917, 2420-2425.

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renewed – is, at its deepest root, the fullness of justice in a human heart."[49]

From a Christian glance at daily life, we experience salvation every day both individually and collectively in many ways, to mention a few: in our being favoured, helped, and forgiven, saved from danger, hunger, and desperate situations, in our turning away from sin—from darkness into light—and in becoming more and more faithful, resilient, and Christ-like in our own lives by being kind, loving, and full of joy and hope. There is, according to Peter Knox, a clear relationship between "natural or secular" salvation and "supernatural or theological" salvation, which consists in a life-giving relationship with God.[50] In all these, we see the work and movements of the Holy Spirit, who is also the master of our interior life,[51] where this interplay is first manifested in every person of faith.

Film Stories, Gospel Values, and Dynamics of Social Constructs

Stories of humanity - in its global diversity – are not without tensions, as they are social realities.[52] But they are transformed and healed with hope forever with the revelation of God's eternal plan of salvation manifested in and through His Son, Jesus Christ. While the stories of humanity have been for centuries influenced and transformed by the greater story

49. John Paul II, *Redemptor Hominis* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1979), no. 9.

50. Peter Knox, "Salvation in Film in Africa: A Seminar in Contextual Theology," *Hekima Review* 66 (May 2023): 11-31. 23. https://journals.hekima.ac.ke/index.php/journals/article/view/142/89.

51. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 1995.

52. Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, 221. – The four fundamental hermeneutical principles for building a people (222-237) can also apply to films as they mirror a merger of actual societal events and creative ideas of humanity.

of God who loves and saves, told by words and deeds, in the persons of God's people, it is ultimately told in the person of Jesus, resulting in a strong wind of Christian values and witness all over the world which both challenge and heal the wounded structures of the world.

The Christian message is not neutral. This is why Romano Guardini (who was once a teacher of Pope Francis) teaches that, insofar as God's revelation is concerned, Christians must have an attitude towards it.[53] It is contradictory to being Christian to be neutral, or non-aligned. This is why we need to take a position as people of faith regarding what stories of humanity are told, and particularly, what the media communicates to us. In the same line of thought, Pope Francis admonishes that "An authentic faith always involves a deep desire to change the world, to transmit values, and to leave this earth somehow better than we found it."[54]

As films are rooted in the stories of human life, many reflect the triumph of the Gospel values of love, faith, justice, fairness, equality, kindness, resilience, etc., even amidst persecution, and the fall of evil even amidst its false and vain glories, victories, and powers. Pungente and Williams, prominent authorities in media literacy and Ignatian Spirituality, respectively, referred to cinema as 'a contemporary church.' In their joint appropriation of film literacy merged with Ignatian Spirituality, they aver that when film interacts with the imaginations of conscious Christian viewers, it sparks a living faith, effects a conversion, and deepens their relationship with God.[55] Regardless of culture, this effect is globally seen in stories that

53. Romano Guardini, *The End of the Modern World* (Wilmington: Intercollegiate Studies Institute, 1998), 104.

54. Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, no. 183.

55. Pungente and Williams, *Finding God in the Dark*, 14, 15.

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are genuine to their rootedness in human experiences, even when such stories are imaginary (either in part or in whole), as it is in most films.

It is important to explore the interaction between social constructs, which are a product of human choices, contracts, and practices, and the human-divine relationship, especially in the line of religious assent of faith. Humanity cries every day because of human practices that have global consequences as they undermine the equality and solidarity of all human persons, marginalize the common good, promote injustices, oppression, discrimination, and exclusion, resulting in unending chaos and pain. These perils are at the heart of the social structures of sin, and in all these, there are individual as well as societal (group) players. These are part of the dynamics in the stories that the most unique movies tell!

Movies, when laden with the Gospel values, even when they are not religious, stand as prophetic voices capable of transforming the way human persons negotiate meanings of human stories, especially in a direction that is in favour of the good, which in turn is what God envisioned for the world He created. The direction of the negotiation of meaning is important as it influences the direction of one's actions. This rightly falls into what catholic social ethicists refer to as 'the social message of the Gospel'; in which, as theologian Christina Astorga expounds, the Gospel is not considered a theory but above all else a basis and a motivation/call for action.[56]

In his published seminar, *Salvation in Film in Africa*, Peter Knox highlights that:

> While the films present no theological narrative and do not tell us about how the characters enjoy (or do

56. Christina A. Astorga, *Catholic Moral Theology and Social Ethics: A New Method* (Quezon City: Claretian Publications, 2014), 376-377.

> not) eternity, they do show the hand of God operating in the misfortunes and restored fortunes (in some cases) of the protagonists. Even in details like character developments from selfishness to self-sacrificing, we see the in-breaking of the Kingdom of God (cf. Lk. 17:21).[57]

Movies can also be used to engage the viewers in conversations or dialogue with the Scriptures. Maria Azevedo expounds in her doctoral dissertation how movies can help viewers to dialogue with the Gospels and discover social values and teachings. She highlights among other things, the potential of movies in enabling their audience to identify values, articulate them (as well as questioning whether they are being enforced or downplayed in the message), deep viewing especially from the lens of Gospel parallels, dialogue, reflection and finally action, in view of making a difference;[58] all progressing in that continuum.

Portrayal of Salvation in Film and Christian Response

The majority of films have storylines revolving around salvation, as in being saved in the literal sense of the word, in different ways. It is common to have a hero, often also the protagonist, suffering and almost losing it, only to triumph in the end; hence, a happy resolution of that very story with the triumph of a hero and the good. The tension in the movies is established by contradictions of irreconcilable values and beliefs, which necessitate collisions that need resolution. This is both our concern as well as the concern at the heart of the film industry globally. At the heart of the films' tensions are problems that need a saviour, who, most of the time, is not fully

57. Knox, *Salvation in Film in Africa*, 28.

58. Maria Rosalia Tenorio de Azevedo, *Media Literacy and the Common Good: A Link to Catholic Social Teaching* (PhD diss., Loyola Marymount University, 2016), 129, 245, https://digitalcommons.lmu.edu/etd/191.

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known from the outset. However, while to us it is a message issue, to the film producer, it is an issue at the heart of the financial concern over the film.

According to Pungente and Williams: "If the media provides us with much of the material we use to build our picture of reality, each of us finds or 'negotiates' meaning according to individual factors: personal needs and anxieties, the pleasures or troubles of the day, racial and sexual attitudes, family and cultural background, moral standpoint, and so on."[59]

Many Christians can relate films with perspectives of faith in which salvation is experienced in the day-to-day life and entails being freed from burdens, problems, helplessness, shame, guilt, pain, brokenness, sicknesses, needs, etc. When these are portrayed in the film, they ignite in Christians that spark of a sense of being Christian, and being an agent of patient and resilient Christian love, whose manifestation is seen in core Christian virtues and fruits and gifts of the Holy Spirit, which are rooted in our Scripture and millennia-old Christian living. To mention among them: faith, hope, love, joy, peace, truth, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control, forbearance, forgiveness, and others.

Many feel connected to the characters, which can be the start of a salvation conversation with the film. Cardinal Mahony teaches a method one can use to make the most of this occasion by evaluating what I can call "character – inner self – others relationship." He proposes questions regarding the appearance and nature of characters, our disposition and inner perception, our faith and values, and the reflection of people around us and those close to us in relation to the characters.

59. Pungente and Williams, *Finding God in the Dark*, 27.

- Are they believable?
- Can I relate to them?
- Can I find an echo of myself in them?
- Am I taken inside the characters in the story?
- Do I get to know what they think, feel, or choose? ...
- Do I feel compassion when they suffer?
- Do I see glimmerings of the divine in the despicable characters?
- Inklings of the demonic in the admirable ones?
- What do these Characters tell me about myself, about the people around me?[60]

In film, Gospel values are often marginalized, yet as they are heroic, they resiliently triumph over the vices of the villains or antagonists: hate, blackmail, betrayal, exploitation, deceit, pseudo-modesty, promiscuity and sexual permissiveness,[61] jealousy, greed, bad secrets, revenge, etc. While it has become the cinema normalcy to have a battle of good and evil, film characters who maintain their faith and hope even in the face of adversity invoke a strong Christian motif among viewers who readily relate to their own lived experiences of struggles, redemption, and holding onto hope, which according to St Paul, '... does not disappoint us' (Rom. 5:5). For Romano Guardini modern Christians live in a world that has forced their cultural values to contradict their faith.[62]

Christopher Deacy highlights that while there are points of convergence in the Christian perspective, we ought to

60. Mahony, *Film Makers, Film Viewers*, 8.

61. Richard Leonard, in *Movies that Matter*: "Sex is treated in film as one of the many recreational options," p. xix.

62. Guardini, *The End of the Modern World*, 105.

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recognize the place of subjectivity and the marginal possibility of a consensus regarding the meaning and message of a film, even among viewers who share a similar religious sensibility.[63] Shedding light on points of view, Lloyd Baugh makes an important observation that while faith can be shared, the quality of belief cannot be automatically the same. Using the Gospel-based *Jesus* film as a focus example, he elaborates that while one viewer can be a fundamentalist who holds onto the literal truth of every word of the Gospels, another viewer may have a more enlightened and understanding attitude in belief, recognizing, for example, the complexity of the literary genres and other unmentioned details behind the reality of the Gospels,[64] a reality that has greatly influenced the dynamics of that film.

Faith Challenges in/from Contemporary Filmic Reality

Catholic author Tim Drake remarks in his book *Young and Catholic* that young Catholics are a sign of contradiction in the world, first, by their very existence, and secondly by the very practice of their faith – a faith that is often challenged daily by their peers, their teachers, the secular media (including films), and sometimes their own family. Yet these young people seek a deeper, more meaningful faith - a faith that is lived out not just on Sunday, but in their daily relationships and lives.[65] There is an ongoing quest for meaning.

63. Christopher Deacy, *Faith in Film: Religious Themes in Contemporary Cinema*, 1st ed. (London, Routledge,, 2005), https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315255507, 7.

64. Lloyd Baugh, *Imaging the Divine: Jesus and Christ-Figures in Film* (Wisconsin: Sheed & Ward, 2000), 3-4.

65. Tim Drake, *Young and Catholic: The Face of Tomorrow's Church* (Manchester: Sophia Institute Press, 2004), 7.

Among young Christian film lovers, one of the most important questions asked about films is whether such films promote the values ingrained in our faith. Of course, films are complex, just as actual human stories are! But the secular media, in general, is not in favour of the religious perspective, particularly when it comes to matters of morality and boundaries. Based on studies conducted among Catholic young adults twenty years ago, Tim Drake testified that young Catholics do not seek to reject authority; they rather seek 'authoritative guidelines and meaningful commitment,' as they manifest orthodoxy and a deep love for the Church.[66]

This is true even today. What young people need is to be guided accordingly, especially considering that most teenagers struggle to search and try to find a place to fit in. One way to do that, with regards to our approach as Christians, towards the endless abundance that the media has to offer (most of which for free) is what Robert Johnson calls "Christian discrimination." He suggests that while Christians ought to be selective in what they see, they also ought to make an effort to be knowledgeable of the dangers ahead of every move we make, especially when exploring the unfamiliar in media. He further instills that, 'new eyes are called for as we attempt to see God anew.[67]

It is a challenge to these young, innocent, and religious 'seekers' who are hungry for positive modelling, when for example, evil is presented in a film as good or justifiable, or as the signature character of the film protagonist/hero, or even as the whole atmosphere of the film; or where negative characters do not get converted to be good, or keep doing evil

66. Drake, *Young and Catholic*, 7.

67. Robert K. Johnston, *Reel Spirituality: Theology and Film Dialogue*, 2nd ed. (Michigan: Baker Academic, Grand Rapids, 2006), 22-23.

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again and again; or when the movie ends with the triumph of 'a lesser evil', a phenomenon that is becoming more and more prevalent in terms of the economics of movie making, as it captivates the audience, especially for series movies. A typical example of this is a Christian-themed movie, *Conclave* (2024),[68] though officially categorized as a 'political thriller.'

Tom Hoopes, a Catholic author, was amazed at the crowd he saw when he went to watch the movie *Conclave* just after its release, a movie he analytically describes as "artfully deceptive." "It was the fullest I'd seen a movie theatre for years", he says. But he adds: "That so many people are interested in the Church's inner workings is a good thing—but that this movie is the vehicle for their education about it is unfortunate. The movie is bound to confuse the Church."[69] This view is reflected in other reviews, which described it as containing "murky moral values,"[70] "a ridiculous portrayal of Catholic doctrine,"[71] and "simplistic, ignorant, shallow, badly written, poorly researched, half-baked mystery... unwitting comedy."[72]

Hoopes further notes in context the effect of cinematography and artful techniques, which are always at the service of

68. *Conclave*, directed by Edward Berger (New York: Focus Features, 2024).

69. Tom Hoopes, *Artfully Deceptive: Setting the Record Straight on the Movie 'Conclave'* (Kansas: Benedictine College, November 3, 2024), accessed February 5, 2025, https://media.benedictine.edu/artfully-deceptive-setting-the-record-straight-on-the-movie-conclave.

70. John Mulderig, "Movie Review: 'Conclave,'" *Catholic Review*, October 11, 2024, accessed February 5, 2025, https://catholicreview.org/movie-review-conclave/.

71. Sarah KS, *Conclave: Movie Review*, November 6, 2024, accessed February 5, 2025, https://www.catholic365.com/article/43944/conclave-movie-review.html.

72. Stephano Rebeggiani, *Conclave: Movie Review*, October 22, 2024, accessed February 5, 2025, https://angelusnews.com/arts-culture/conclave-movie-review/.

the ideological goals of a film. "The sets were extremely dark, to telegraph the movie's opinion that the Church's business takes place in shadow. In the movie, it takes an unwelcome intrusion from the real world to open a window, and the film only became brightly lit to make a symbolic point, when religious sisters stream out of the conclave's kitchen, escaping their servile role at last."[73] This shows how high the possibility of viewers being deceived by films is.

Moreover, it is important to note that not every hero in the movie is a Christ figure. The criteria for 'Christ figure', as Charlene Burns writes, should be 'an innocent victim for whose sufferings we are responsible and through whose suffering we are redeemed.'[74] The portrayal of a triumph is not to be taken literally in the eyes of a Christian; what is needed is a holistic expounding of movies, each on its own basis.

There is an avalanche of heavily funded films deliberately themed on an erring end of entertainment, normalizing vices, immorality, self-centredness, materialism, and the endless desire to claim 'naked power', i.e. violence, and limitless control over people and things, without intuition or sensitivity, and taking shortcuts of force.[75] There are countless anti-God and supremacist thoughts, covert blasphemies, and efforts to normalize hopelessness, cruelty, despair, violence and revenge, promiscuity, and contempt for marriage and life. There are suicides, deaths, mass killings, horror, indiscriminate destruction, and politicized and engineered hate propaganda. On another layer, there are occult and dark powers, abuses,

73. Tom Hoopes, *Artfully Deceptive: Setting the Records Straight on the Movie 'Conclave'.*

74. Christopher Deacy and Gaye Williams Ortiz, *Theology and Film: Challenging the Sacred/Secular Divide* (Blackwell Publishing, Victoria, Australia, 2008), 4-5.

75. Guardini, *The End of the Modern World*, 174, 178, 179.

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slavery, bondage, 'end justifies the means' philosophies, and many other non-life-giving themes. These are contemporary dangers, and are contrary to the cherished Christian way of life, in the same way as those inclinations are not accepted as life-giving by Christians in real life. But these are seen in the movies now more than ever.

But even amidst these, God's greatness is not completely hidden from the audience. Jesuits Pungente and Williams suggest that in the very presentation of a movie—with its features such as flashbacks, simultaneity, cross-cutting, reversals, overlays, changes in perspective, tempo, lighting, tone—a sense of multiplicity that allows for an understanding and imagining of a God who is not caught up by the Greek *chronos*, by inevitability and by tragedy but rather allows for variation, change, the carnavalesque, all that seems to some like chaos, is created.[76]

Right actions are needed to guard the light of faith in young believers facing these challenges today. They are the Church of the future. Our shared 'faith and *sensus fidei* are not only anchored in the past; they are also oriented towards the future.'[77] The participation of the faithful and their questions, fears, and doubts matter because those eventually shape the ever-evolving *sensus fidei*. The *sensus fidei* according to Juan Scannone, is "revalued as 'a theological locus' or source of theological knowledge," making the faithful not only the subjects of the theological task, but also the recipients.[78] As the faithful on a mission, we respond by putting on the full armour

76. Pungente and Williams, *Finding God in the Dark*, 16.

77. International Theological Commission, *Sensus Fidei in the Life of the Church* (*Vatican*: 2014), no. 69.

78. Juan Carlos Scannone, *Theology of the People: The Pastoral and Theological Roots of Pope Francis* (New York: Paulist Press, 2021), 108.

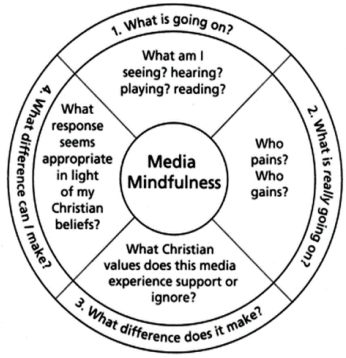
of God to stand the schemes of the evil one, as St. Paul teaches (cf. Eph. 6:10-18).

On the practical plane, however, there is a need to invest in media literacy, especially among young people in the Church at local levels, appropriating particularly the synodal approach in protecting ourselves against the common enemy. Pope Francis emphasized in one of his speeches early this year that media literacy education will provide our young people with essential tools for critical thinking as consumers of media, and eventually help promote in them personal growth and active participation in the future of their society.[79] Maria Azevedo refers to this integration of media literacy education into religious education and catechesis 'media mindfulness strategy,' wherein 'learning is looked at beyond the surface and aims at forming a whole individual holistically, especially on the aspect of character, leaving up the faith community to develop in the student a sense of awareness to the needs of others, and a concern of how the choices they make impact the common good.'[80]

79. Pope Francis, *Address of His Holiness Pope Francis to the Members of the Diplomatic Corps Accredited to the Holy See.*

80. Tenorio de Azevedo, *Media Literacy and the Common Good*, 114-115.

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This illustration is adapted from Maria Azevedo's dissertation.[81]

Nonetheless, in the same contemporary *ad-populum* market-oriented movies, when acts of sacrifice and unforeseen and unprecedented larger-than-life goodness are portrayed, especially when involving endangering one's life or saving another's, forgiveness and reconciliation, and a sense of being given a second chance are important, a Christian sense of salvation surfaces again. While there can certainly be generational disagreements on the taste of different elements of the movie, such as the cinematic technicalities, props, and acting styles, the Christian lens unifies believers across generations in the perception of God who is almighty and who saves, even in the oftentimes ambiguous portrayals of human life in film.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study demonstrates that contemporary films are not merely sources of entertainment, but powerful social constructs that shape theological meaning and the moral sense of society. We find in secular films both open and hidden portrayals and nuances of salvation as understood in the light of Christian faith, as films are made in the context of human life, and appeal to real or possible dynamics of human life,

81. Azevedo, *Media Literacy and the Common Good*, 279.

in which 'being saved' is a daily life experience. However, the negotiation of meaning in films presents both opportunities and challenges for young Christian viewers who must navigate the complex socio-cultural setting while remaining rooted in their faith. The delicacy and genuineness of their faith must be complemented with rich, integral/holistic formation, especially through faith-integrated media literacy. With proper formation, Christian viewers will be not only consumers, but will also engage actively in shaping the narratives being told so that there are no compromises of Gospel values and the common good. Future research should further explore how digital storytelling, interactive media, new cinematic forms, and Artificial Intelligence shape theology, religious consciousness, and imagination in an ever-evolving media landscape.

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