

Ambushed at the Movies

by

Jo van den Bogaert

**A Research Project submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements of the
Spiritual Directors' Formation Programme of Spiritual Growth Ministries**

“Often what happens in spiritual direction is that people learn to listen for God in their own lives and hearts, and in places previously assumed to be separate from God’s governance.”¹

The usher shone her torch on our row of seats, and we shimmied our way in. I settled in, not expecting much from the movie, but enjoying the comfort and peace of the dark. I certainly had no intention of hearing from God. But *JoJo Rabbit* (2019)² was strangely captivating not just for the quirky humour or the different perspective of the holocaust, for me there was something I couldn’t quite put into words. It niggled away beneath my skin until I saw my spiritual director a few days later. She asked, “I’m curious to know more about this. Tell me what you were drawn to?” So, I thought back. It was a particular scene of pure love between a mother and her child, her playfulness as she tied his shoelaces together and chased him. It was how the filmmakers had dulled the background and highlighted the classic beauty of the mother, the colour of her clothes and her beauty against the colourless war-torn city. I wanted that mother, I longed for her love, for her playfulness, for her relationship with me. And when she died in the movie, I felt the loss of that beautiful love. I mourned with the child. I was that child.

With the gentle prompting of my spiritual director, I had questions answered that I didn’t realise I had asked about my own mother’s death. I recognised God’s love and my mother’s love through the characters and colour and beauty on the screen. I was ambushed by God in that movie and I realised that I had unconsciously secularised my visits to the theatre. So, I decided to explore further how I could use movies in spiritual direction. Joy Cowley started me on my journey,

Head knowledge has words: the knowing of the heart is without language. But head can say what the heart knows, by using extended simile. We call this parable...Parables can become vehicles of spiritual truth...when someone speaks truth to us, it is not discovery but recognition of what is already within us.³

I recognised this heart language in the movie when something inside me had stirred but I couldn’t explain it. Metaphor, simile, parable or simply a story; these are the heart narratives that can’t be told with factual language. They come in various shapes and art forms, and stories on a screen can speak just as clearly as the other arts that are used more frequently in spiritual direction.

Engaging with stories, through the medium of film, offers a significant means of nourishing and stimulating our growth in God; firstly through what we discover about ourselves;

¹ (Phillips, 2008) pg 12

² (Waititi, 2019)

³ (Cowley, 2018) pg. 5

secondly by what we experience of God; and thirdly, by the ways in which we, as a consequence, respond to others and our world.⁴

I considered my reasons for going to a movie and why others chose to go. People go for social reasons, to be entertained or distracted, to escape, to be informed, or perhaps because of a particular actor or director that they like. But the authors I began reading, dared to suggest that going to a movie could be so much more. Watching a movie, “became a kind of devotional practice in which God meets with me in the space between the silver screen, my day-to-day life, and God’s word.”⁵ Another author went further when he said that movies themselves could be prayers, “Prayer can be expressed by anyone and can take place everywhere. Even in movie theaters.”⁶ And, “movies represent the efforts of fallen creatures who.... try, in the same muddled and contradictory way we do when kneeling by our beds, to say something honest and true.”⁷

I’d never thought of a movie being used as a tool for meditative prayer, but I’d engaged with other art forms as prayer without question. When movies are dissected, some of these more known arts can be found within; the visual picture, the written word, the music and vocals, the movement of the body as well as techniques that are common to other art forms such as lighting, colour and camera angles. Movies contain many elements of these more traditional art forms so there’s no reason why they couldn’t awaken the spirit within and encourage prayer. I began to wonder how this could become more usual for me to practise.

When I watched JoJo Rabbit, as with much of life, I was unaware that I was entering a sacred space. But what if I entered the movie theatre with more intent than just watching for entertainment? If I had a posture of openness and willingness to listen, then maybe I would find it easier to use the movie as a prayer or a spiritual discipline as well. “If we are seeking to have a conversation with a movie about what matters in life, we’ll interact with movies very differently.”⁸ Entering the movie expectantly and attentively, watching, listening and experiencing with all my senses, could allow the movie to become a contemplative prayer as I noticed God in front of and within me. “Pay attention to the times where you were moved either to consolation or desolation.... Such moments reveal something significant about ourselves; through them God speaks to us.”⁹

Taking these movements further, as my spiritual director did with me, could become a transformative experience as we discover and notice how the movie had an effect on us. “What is significant for our spiritual awareness is what the feelings mean and whether they

⁴ (Fromont, 2006) pg. 27

⁵ (Davidson, 2017) intro.

⁶ (Larsen, 2017) pg. 93

⁷ (Larsen, 2017) pg. 196

⁸ (Davidson, 2017) pg 21

⁹ (Pungente and Williams, 2011) pg 129

orient us to seek God.”¹⁰ Monty Williams, a Jesuit Priest who teaches workshops on how to use movies as an Ignatian prayer practice, gives helpful questions to help discern these feelings or movements. He suggests to firstly identify/name the feeling; secondly, become aware what the feeling means to you; and thirdly, decide which direction the state of the feeling is tending (i.e. consolation, or desolation).¹¹ Practising this in movies, as with any piece of art, will become easier the more it is done and we will find ourselves more open to experiencing God wherever we are. As Williams further said, quoting Ignatius: “God is never silent in the world... God uses everything to communicate with us.”¹²

There are many media literacy tools available to help with reflection and discernment that can help people to consider film differently, not to delve for moral or theological lessons, but to help access and develop self-awareness and communication with God. I have attached some questions and processes that were helpful to me in Appendix 1.

Another way to interact with a movie in a more transformative way, is to realise that it is a form of hospitality. As one author wrote, “I learned that movies were the work of people asking questions about the world and God and humanity’s relationship with both. (Engaging) with a movie is a way of entertaining the hopes, fears, ideas and questions of the people who make the movies.”¹³ My selection of movies has always been quite discriminatory towards the genre and content that I prefer and I have prided myself on having “good” taste. I have tended to watch movies that have helped me feel good or taught me something historically interesting and true. But, watching and engaging with movies as a form of hospitality has broadened the scope of what I can watch. I am challenged to embrace a wider range of genres and movies as a way to extend my understanding, and therefore compassion, towards people who are very different to myself. Josh Larsen, an American movie critic, discussed movies as being different types of prayer and when he described the Prayer of Reconciliation, he made this very point: “Step out of your comfortable path and offer recognition to the other. We must realise that before we can reconcile – especially in instances where we are too blinded by privilege, comfort and tradition to even notice – that reconciliation is needed.”¹⁴

Larsen was helpful in offering specific film examples for each type of prayer that he suggested, (Appendix 2) and for reconciliation he described how the movie “Tangerine” (2015),¹⁵ the story of two sex workers, “gave recognition to its two ‘fringe’ characters and allowed (him) the chance to offer recognition of my own.”¹⁶ This recognition is valuable but I think that, for my own protection, I would need to limit my exposure to disturbing content

¹⁰ (Pungente and Williams, 2011) pg 133

¹¹ (Pungente and Williams, 2011) pg 133

¹² (Pungente and Williams, 2011) Pg 146

¹³ (Davidson, 2017) pg 21 Davidson coined the phrase “Talking with a movie”

¹⁴ (Larsen, 2017) pg 1496

¹⁵ (Baker, 2015)

¹⁶ (Larsen, 2017) pg 1472

which could do more harm than good. I can acknowledge that some atrocities of history and life are factual, but I also need to be discerning about exposing myself to unnecessary violence or other disturbing content. But, by watching movies that stretch my world view and perspectives of different people, settings and lifestyles, I can honour the filmmakers. I can interact in a more Christ-like way with those people by listening to their voice and responding in a more informed and grace-filled way.

As a spiritual director, I could use movies as this hospitable and transformative practice too. I could do this in various ways like suggesting a specific movie to a directee or offering a group screening with a contemplative session following. (Ideal in a retreat situation). Or I could use a movie that a directee has engaged with to go deeper in a session. All these methods could not only help people experience Christ through a movie, but the movies could help people notice God's grace and then extend that grace to others by welcoming strangers and promoting inclusion and equality. Elijah Davidson, a media manager at Fuller Seminary, referred to this practice as "talking" to the movie: "Love, expressed as respect for the people who made the movie, requires us to interact with the movie whether we like it or not."¹⁷

So far, I have looked at how movies could be used to notice feelings and investigate them as a contemplative practice, and also how to be hospitable through engaging with movies and learning from them. Another way that spiritual directors can use movies as a tool, is to see them as actual prayers. Josh Larsen began to consider that movies had, "the capability of functioning as messy, mixed-up, miraculous prayer."¹⁸ He named ten types of prayers and gave examples of each, (see Appendix 2) and then detailed how to use each of these types of movie to recognise and offer prayerful gestures while seated in the cinema. The ten prayers he wrote of were: Praise, Yearning, Lament, Anger, Confession, Reconciliation, Obedience, Meditation/Contemplation, Joy, and Journey.

I decided to take my newfound understanding of these prayers into the movie "Avatar" (2009)¹⁹. I immediately recognised my desire to praise, which Larsen described as a "human need and human delight."²⁰ There were so many visually breath-taking scenes, accompanied by a rousing soundtrack (composed by James Horner), which moved me to worship. The imaginary futuristic world in Avatar somehow captured my dreams of flying and mingled it with spectacular biological wonder. I found myself longing for such pure, untouched beauty. This yearning, was another prayer Larsen described: "Yearning is among the most universal of prayers, an instinct even the resolutely irreligious have.....Movies can speak for us when we're praising God, when we're lamenting to him, and when we're simply aching to know if he's there."²¹ Avatar also brought out prayers of anger in me as I

¹⁷ (Davidson, 2017) pg 60

¹⁸ (Larsen, 2017) pg 210

¹⁹ (Cameron, 2009)

²⁰ (Larsen, 2017)pg 246

²¹ (Larsen, 2017) pg 458

watched humans destroy creation and undervalue the lives and habitat of the characters. And there was lament for the destruction and death, the “How long O Lord?” prayer as I dwelt on the parallels with our earth’s neglect and the injustices that rage against people and their homes. There was hope of reconciliation near the end of the movie where heroic characters sacrificed their own well-being to try and right the wrongs of their species, and joy as the future together looked possible. I enjoyed the journey of my heart as I rode the highs and lows of the movie, entering the story prayerfully and openly, not only watching the movie but experiencing the prayers that came and sat with me in the dark.

I have begun to understand that as the curtains roll back at the beginning of a movie, we have the opportunity to roll open our hearts to God and to listen to what is stirring us or what we are longing for. “If the root of art is storytelling, then the taproots are longings. Longings for such things as truth, beauty, romance, adventure. We long to find the true north that will guide us through this life and into the next.”²²

Spiritual direction provides a sacred place for us to explore those longings and movements. It is, “a practice that adapts to the context of the culture in which it exists....it encourages an honest look at what grace illumines. It affirms that God is in our lives and can be encountered.”²³

Today, God is working and revealing Himself in movie theatres. We, the audience, can choose to encounter Him through our participation in these stories, by engaging our senses and by paying attention to the stirrings within. Movies provide the parables, the heart stories that speak into our lives, ones that we can recognise, hold and explore, stories that help us experience God as well as people and worlds beyond our own. For me, the movie JoJo Rabbit was my “burning bush,” an ordinary place where God got my attention. Movie theatres have become places where I can encounter the Holy, and hopefully I can become the usher that shines the torch for others as they seek to find God in the dark.

²² (Fromont, 2006) pg 27

²³ (Phillips, 2008) pg 12

Appendix 1 Tools and Questions for Spiritual Directors and Directees

Before watching or offering a movie to directees, make sure you (the director) are media literate.

(These notes could also be offered to directees in advance of a viewing to prepare them for a contemplative movie session.)

Here are some essential points to note.

1. All movies are constructions – they don't reflect external reality, be aware of their construction
2. Movies construct aspects of reality – attitudes, interpretations and conclusions - much of our view of reality is based on media's messages.
3. Audiences negotiate meaning in movies – individual factors such as; family/cultural background, needs/anxieties, daily pleasures and troubles, racial/sexual attitudes etc. all contribute to the perceived meaning.
4. Movie messages have commercial implications. Movies make profits and have control over the consumer.
5. Movie messages contain ideological and value messages. Spiritual literacy examines these messages.
6. Movies contain social and political implications; they have great influence and can be a partial picture, so care is needed.
7. Form and content are closely related in the movie message.
8. Each medium/genre has a unique form that will appeal to different people. (you'll love some and hate some).²⁴

Preparing

Before you hold a viewing or send a directee into a movie,

- give a few ideas to help them focus and prepare. For example: To view a film as a contemplative act, set aside time to be intentional and focused without interruption.
- Help them to be prepared not to use their head to analyse what is happening, but rather to focus on sinking into their heart and allowing all of their senses to direct their experience. Ask them to pay attention to the feelings that rise up and to mentally note when this happens.
- Remind the viewers to ask for God's grace and to be open to the story/metaphor/parable that will unfold before them. It may not be a comfortable or agreeable experience but remember that creators of this movie are asking questions

²⁴ (Pungente and Williams, 2011) adapted from pgs. 149 - 160

about God, the world and its people - so hear and feel the cries and prayers of those people.

- Ask the viewers to focus softly and enjoy the ride. Don't desperately search for hidden meanings but rather be prepared to feel the expressions of their heart and tuck them away for later.

During and After viewing

Prepare a sheet of questions for after the viewing that incorporate some of the ideas below. After some time spent in reflection, these questions could be used in pairs to help in discernment or response to the movie. If you are in a director-directee session, use some of these ideas to help the directee recall the experience

- Listen for ways that God might have been speaking to you (What feelings were being stirred in you? what scene/character moved you significantly? Why? Where do the feelings or movements take you now? What are they associated with in your life? Are there any values or faith issues that arise through the film content? Are there any fears that arise or any hopes and desires?)
- Discern. (Was this a movement of consolation or desolation or was this a movement towards God or away from God? What invitation is this feeling or movement extending to you now?)
- Wait, sit with these reflections. Journal when you are alone. Listen more.
- Respond. (How do you feel called to live, act or respond differently? What has been brought to your awareness that might need transforming? How could that happen? Where is God in this process?)
- Talk with someone you trust and share your reflections and experience of the movie.²⁵

Appendix 2 [Index of Movies by Type of Prayer](#)²⁶

(This could be used for reference or as a specific focus on a type of prayer eg. in a retreat setting)

Praise: Avatar, Babette's Feast, Breathless, Children of Men, Cleopatra, Fantastic Voyage, How Green Was My Valley, Into the Wild, Jiro Dreams of Sushi, Microcosmos, This is the End, The Tree of Life.

²⁵ (Pungente and Williams, 2011) adapted from pgs. 125 - 146

²⁶ (Larsen, 2017) pg. 2668

Yearning:

2001: A Space Odyssey, Casablanca, Close Encounters of the Third Kind, Contact, The Fountain, Interstellar, Hiroshima Mon Amour, In the Mood for Love, Last Year at the Marienbad, The Life Aquatic with Steve Zissou, The Matrix, The Seventh Seal, Solaris, A Trip to the Moon, The Wizard of Oz.

Lament:

12 Years a Slave, Amour, Away From Her, Chinatown, The Dark Knight, Godzilla (1954), Inside Llewyn Davis, Miller's Crossing, No Country for Old Men, Requiem for a Dream, The Sacrifice, A Serious Man, Watchmen.

Anger:

The Big Sleep, Fight Club, Freaks, Irréversible, King Kong (1933), The Maltese Falcon, The Piano, Rebel Without a Cause, Requiem for a Dream, Taxi Driver, The Third Man,

Confession:

The Act of Killing, On the Waterfront, Platoon, Psycho, Rebecca, The Searchers, Strangers on a Train, Sunrise, Toy Story, Trainwreck, True Grit (1969) and (2010), Unforgiven.

Reconciliation:

The Awful Truth, Beasts of the Southern Wild, Brave, The Crying Game, Cry, the Beloved Country, Do the Right Thing, The Interrupters, Tangerine, Where the Wild Things Are.

Obedience:

28 Days Later, The Black Stallion, Citizen Kane, Field of Dreams, Hostel, It's a Wonderful Life, A Man Escaped, March of the Penguins, A Nightmare on Elm Street, Night of the Living Dead, Pinocchio, Psycho, Rocky, Saw, The Silence of the Lambs, Star Wars saga, Sunrise.

Meditation/Contemplation:

Bambi, The Blair Witch Project, The Decalogue, Diary of a Country Priest, The Last Temptation of Christ, Leviathan, The Master, Once Upon a Time in Anatolia, Ordet, Rififi, Sherlock, Jr., Steamboat Bill, Jr., The Straight Story, Upstream Color.

Joy:

The Adventures of Robin Hood, Amélie, Aparajito, Captain Blood, Dancer in the Dark, Forrest Gump, The Great Muppet Caper, A Hard Day's Night, His Girl Friday, Inside Out, The Mark of Zorro, The Muppet Movie, The Muppets, My Neighbor Totoro, Pather Panchali, Top Hat, Umbrellas of Cherbourg, West Side Story, The world of Apu.

Bibliography

- Baker, S. (Director). (2015). *Tangerine* [Motion Picture].
- Cameron, J. (Director). (2009). *Avatar* [Motion Picture].
- CIStems, Inc. (2006-2020). Retrieved from spirituality and practice:
spiritualityandpractice.com/films
- Cowley, J. (2018). *Veil Over the Light*. Wellington, NZ: FitzBeck Publishing.
- Davidson, E. L. (2017). *How to Talk to a Movie - Watching as a Spiritual Exercise*. Eugene OR: Cascade Books WIPF & Stock Publishers.
- Fromont, P. (2006, Winter). Frugal Film-Making. *Refresh "Reel Light: Film & Spirituality"*, pp. 27-28.
- Larsen, J. (2017). Retrieved from Larsen On Film: Larsenonfilm.com
- Larsen, J. (2017). *Movies are Prayers: How Films Voice our Deepest Longings*. Downers Grove IL: Intervarsity Press.
- Phillips, S. S. (2008). *Candlelight - Illuminating the Art of Spiritual Direction*. New York: Morehouse Publishing.
- Pungente and Williams, J. S. (2011). *Finding God in the Dark II; Taking the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius to the Movies*. Toronto, ON: Novalis Pub. Inc.
- Reframe Media. (2020). *Think Christian*. Retrieved from thinkchristian.reframemedia.com/movies
- Riddell, M. (2006, Winter). Mike Riddell on Film and Storytelling. *Refresh*, pp. 36-37.
- Waititi, T. (Director). (2019). *JoJo Rabbit* [Motion Picture].