

Pop goes the Saviour

Forget what all the experts say about spending too much time watching TV, or losing yourself at the movies. You're learning more than you think.

By Father John Pungente

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(This is the original unedited version)

- **Bart Simpson says to his father, Homer: “It’s just hard not to listen to TV – it’s spent so much more time raising us than you have.”**
- **Frodo Baggins and Harry Potter are proclaimed Christ figures and lauded by the mainstream churches.**
- **On prime time TV, Buffy the Vampire Slayer dies – not once but twice - to save the world; Buffy’s friend Willow is stopped from destroying the universe with a simple declaration of love – while the soundtrack plays St. Francis’ Peace Prayer – a song more heard in churches than on prime time TV. And Buffy’s one time boy friend – Angel – struggles with the moral dilemma of living as a vampire with a soul.**
- **Joan of Arcadia is a teenager to whom God manifests himself (and herself) in persons as diverse as a six year old girl, a teenage hunk, a cafeteria lunch lady, and a TV news anchor. Instead of asking her to save the world, God asks Joan to join the chess club or take advanced chemistry or become a cheerleader.**
- **On a web site, the Hollywood sign now reads “Hollywood Jesus” – the site deals with “Pop Culture from a Spiritual Point of View.”**
- **On the big screen, two new movies on the life of Christ – The Gospel of John and The Passion of the Christ - not only stir up controversy but get critical acclaim and seem set to do well at the boxoffice.**

As a Jesuit, I’ve learned to look at the world in an unique way. St. Ignatius of Loyola – who founded the Jesuits in the 16th century - had the insight that we all live in imagined worlds, and that our imagination constructs the worlds in which we live, using our experiences, our lived contexts, our hopes, our pains and our joys. In effect we live in a highly selective world, and this world defines what is possible for us. It also defines how we see ourselves, how we interact with others and the context in which we find ourselves.

Today the media – particularly film and television – are powerful influences on our imagination. It is film and television which propose to us forms of the world and ethical ways of living in those forms. When we watch movies and TV shows we are more than being entertained; we are being formed and shaped. We expose ourselves to narratives that shape what is possible, and then we can – consciously or unconsciously - live out of those possibilities.

How we respond to such powerful forces can make a significant difference in our lives. Some thirty years ago, the churches recognized that it wasn't just the Church, the family and the school that were passing on values to children - the media had been added to the mix. To its credit, the Catholic Church - instead of succumbing to the temptation to attach the media - began a serious promotion of media literacy - giving our children the critical thinking tools they need to live in our mass mediated world. The Australian Bishops as far back as 1972 were calling this an "awesome responsibility before God and history."

Surprisingly, in learning to "read" - to be literate about - the media, we have uncovered a trend towards spirituality in a place where we might not have expected to find it - the media. And yet there it is - clothed in the trappings of popular culture.

One of the few hits of the current TV season is Joan of Arcadia where the belief - that God always speaks to us and that it is up to us to listen and respond - is clearly demonstrated. While some critics of the show say it avoids the hard choices that come from following principles you believe to be right - like the original Joan of Arc had to do - others speak of the way the show deals with that major problem all teens have - how to develop their own identity. Whatever Joan is asked to do has repercussions not only for herself but for those around her. Surprisingly, the show's humorous, down-to-earth take on spirituality has attracted a wide audience.

In many ways Joan takes over from Buffy The Vampire Slayer - whose show has now finished after seven seasons. On first glance, it is hard to think of Buffy as a "spiritual" TV show. Yet Buffy was, in many ways, a prime time role model for teenage girls teaching them to be willing to learn about themselves and to learn to live with who they are. Values most parents won't argue with.

Of course, Hollywood's preoccupation with the spiritual is not exactly new. The two recent movies about the life of Christ are the latest in a long line which began with a segment in D.W. Griffith's silent film classic *Intolerance* (1916) and continued through Hollywood epics in the 1960's - *The Greatest Story Ever Told* and *King of Kings*. There have been two noted musicals about Christ - *Jesus Christ Superstar* and *Godspell* - both released in 1973 as well as the two so-called scandal films - *The Life of Brian* (1979) and *The Last Temptation of Christ* (1988). But, possibly, the finest and the most valid of the films about Christ was made by Pasolini in 1966 - *The Gospel According to Saint Matthew*.

Yet the Christ story doesn't get old with the telling - it's as newsworthy today as it was 2,000 years ago. The recent *The Gospel of John* - a word by word filmed version of the Gospel - which found favour with Christian groups has both been denounced by a few critics as a "pop-up" book and praised by many others as an accurate and compelling portrayal of Christ.

Now we have Mel Gibson's very controversial movie, *The Passion of The Christ*. The film - based on the four Gospels, the writings of a 19th century German nun, Sr. Anne Catherine Emmerich, and other sources - presents the last 12 hours of Christ's life. Gibson has said that he did not try to make a religious movie but rather something that was real to him. He wanted the movie to be a contemplation where - as he writes in the forward to the coffee table book published to go along with the movie - "one is compelled to remember . . . in a spiritual way, which cannot be articulated, only experienced."

But while Mel is saying this, promoters have produced a Passion lapel pin, witnessing cards, and – incredibly – replicas of the nails used to crucify Jesus in the movie - 6.5 cm in pewter – which are selling out in the USA and are coming soon to a store near you in Canada. Evangelical churches are using the movie to attract new members. A Dallas insurance agent was so inspired, he bought and gave away 6,000 tickets to *The Passion of the Christ*. He also rented all 20 screens of a local multiplex and showed the film 22 times on the opening day. As Gabriel Snyder reported in *Variety*: “What you’re seeing is . . . the Evangelical message and the shrewd marketing . . . kind of dovetailing.”

Whatever you think about Mel’s movie, it’s a shame that the discussion has centered either on the marketing of the movie or whether or not the movie is consciously anti-Semitic (it isn’t, unless you want to argue that its sources are – which is an altogether different discussion).

There is little doubt but that Gibson is a master marketer. But what is he marketing? Is the film an expression of his own self-confessed spiritual conversion? A promotion of his ultra conservative Catholic beliefs? Or a visual and personal meditation on the events leading to the death of Christ making the movie a kind of prayer for Gibson? The answer has to be found in the movie itself. Each of us has to look at what is on the screen. It’s a key concept of media literacy that we bring more than just our eyes and ears to the media we consume – we bring our complete selves.

For myself this meant bringing not only my almost fifty years as a Jesuit but also my study of and work in movies for the past forty years. The Jesuit side of me found the movie strangely unmoving as if there were something vital missing – possibly to do with Catholic belief that Christ is both human and divine. The film teacher side of me was bothered by the excessive and intrusive music, the over the top violence in the scourging scene that goes just that few minutes too long to be meaningful, the lack of any attempt to tell you who the various characters are – if you are not familiar with Christian tradition forget trying to figure out – for example - who the young man is with Mary.

My film side also questioned mixing film styles so that one minute we are in the midst of a scene that could be from any of the traditional films about Christ and then we seem to be in an avant-garde experimental movie and we have the extreme close-up of an eye or what is supposed to be a tear from heaven or where the camera presents scenes from the point of view of one of the characters. And, although there is no doubt that the film centers of the suffering and death of Christ, others characters such as Mary, Pilate, Judas and Simon of Cyrene seemed to be more fully developed as real people.

Professor of New Testament studies at Seattle Pacific University, Eugene Lemcio, got it right when he wrote: “Unless we see what the suffering and death were about, unless there is an attempt to see how the end of Jesus’s life is related to the beginning and middle (and how physical suffering solves a spiritual problem), we will have denied him (and ourselves) justice.” As it is, to concentrate solely on the suffering and death of Jesus leaves the movie – and ourselves – incomplete.

Why do we go to the movies? We want to be entertained, to be distracted, to be informed, we have a thing for one of the stars, we like the particular genre, it’s a social outing, the issues and topics attract us, we are curious, or if you are a movie reviewer - it’s an assignment. These are all fairly common reasons for heading off to the cinema. But when we look more closely, there’s something deeper going on, something suspiciously spiritual.

The desire to be entertained and distracted comes from the attempt to escape boredom, that entrapment within oneself. To be a fan of a star is to engage in a form of identification through idealisation that ritualises one's own religious longings for self-awareness. Genre movies appeal to basic drives within us. Detective flicks call upon our innate desire for order; horror movies allow us to face the fears of unknown powers that can destroy us; love stories affirm the power of relationships to maintain and foster identity. And should we go to the movies just to be with friends, then we see the cinema as a place for celebrating community.

In fact, it's not a stretch to suggest that we go to see movies whose issues and topics attract us or we are curious about because we are seekers – pop pilgrims. We are exercising, consciously or not, a religious sensibility, and that exercise engages us in the rituals of self-transcendence, or classic spiritual enlightenment.

So, we find ourselves in the cinema. Literally, spiritually, and metaphorically. The architecture of the theatre is designed for a religious ceremony in such a way that we can be both individual and part of a community. We sit in a sacred space differentiated from our everyday world by its manipulation of space and time. At the movies, it is neither day nor night. We are plunged into darkness, divorced from time of day or season of year. It is its own time. What time occurs is determined by what plays out before our eyes.

In a technological update of St. Ignatius' imaginative reality-building, both the context and what we are there to see are designed to engage and focus all our senses in a deliberately selective manner. That engagement is not passive. When a bright light shines through a moving strip of film, static images are projected onto a screen and artfully superimposed to give the illusion of movement. The mind creatively transforms that illusion into a semblance of reality, and the individual takes on the critical task of deciding whether or not to accept the imagined as real.

So, at the movies – and indeed on our TV screens - we begin that pilgrim journey into the unknown to discover that we are more than who or what we think we are. We observe and reflect upon the actions and choices of the characters that attract our attention, and on the worlds in which they find themselves. We also reflect upon the way those characters and worlds are presented to us. Out of the encounter with what we contemplate we fashion our lives and the contexts we live in. Such contemplation is more than media literacy; it is genuine spiritual literacy. It may be a minor miracle but such spiritual literacy grows out of the pop culture of this mass mediated world in which we live.

This can be seen in a book, I'm working on with fellow Jesuit and movie fan, Monty Williams, to be published this fall - "Finding God in the Dark" - which offers a way to make a spiritual retreat by praying – not about scripture - but about contemporary Hollywood movies such as *Lost in Translation*, *Mystic River*, *Big Fish*, *Moulin Rouge* and *The Lord of the Rings*.

In a way, Bart Simpson is perfectly correct – TV – and movies – have spent more time raising us. And that might turn out to be, after all, a good thing.

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