

Why Go to the Movies?

Garrison Keillor once commented: *If you can't go to church and for at least a moment experience transcendence; if you can't go to church and pass briefly from this life into the next—then I can't see why anyone should go. Just a brief moment of transcendence causes you to come out of church a changed person.*

Ken Gire, Christian author of *Windows of the Soul: Experiencing God in New Ways* comments, “I have experienced what Keillor described more in movie theatres than I have in churches. Why? I can't say for sure—movies don't always tell truth or enlighten, but they do let you lose yourself in someone else's story.

It is true that many people go to movies just for amusement, distraction, or light entertainment. The word amusement means “without thought” (originally the word meant to deceive or to delude). Yet while many movies are mind-numbing I think people also go to movies for another reason. It was theologian Fredrick Buechner who said that the “story in any of us is in some measure the story of all of us”. That's why I go to movies—to find myself and others in the stories.

But there is another reason why Christians in particular should be literate with contemporary cinema—this is where the culture is talking about the meaning of life. Movie attendance far exceeds church attendance both in the United States and in Canada. The average committed Christian in Canada attends church about 20-30 times per year. Church attendance in Canada ranges from about 3%-10% of the population depending upon where you live. Meanwhile the average American views 38 movies a year. In fact, 95% of Americans see at least one movie/year while only 47% read a book/year.

The story line in a majority of movies deals with a redemption or a release for the main character who is facing what appears to be a hopeless challenge. Talk to any person in the industry and they will tell you “Story is everything”. Discussing story lines takes people into the arena of spiritual life, what the purpose of life is, and questions like, “Is there help [or God] from outside?”

Conversations about God –what we in the church call doing theology—are happening all over the lower mainland in coffee shops adjacent to movie theatres—and the church is not part of it—in fact, we are not invited nor are we aware it is happening.

it seems to me that if Christians want to have serious conversations about life and God with people outside the church, then we would do well to become literate about the main vehicle in the culture exploring life, redemption, reconciliation and meaning—and that is the cinema.

It is not difficult to move a discussion of movies past the mind-numbing amusements to things that matter. The key is to discuss the story on its own merits and then engage the cinematic-gospel story dialogue. The “usual” way of Christians when critiquing film is either to read God into the film or use the film as an imperfect illustration of Bible truths. Better to create a dialogue between film and the Bible—allowing each to teach about oppression and release. Respect the film as art and the Bible as God’s word and great conversations can take place.

Need I say more? See you at the movies.

Mike Nichols
Co-Pastor of Capilano Christian Community
www.capchurch.ca