

From Bultmann to Burton, Demythologizing the Big Fish: The Contribution of Modern Christian Theologians to the Theology-Film Conversation

Christopher Deacy

While recently teaching an undergraduate module entitled “Death of God?: Christian Theology and the Modern World,” one of the questions I asked my students, in the specific context of a seminar on Latin American liberation theology, concerned the extent to which theology should be thought of as a contextual discipline which can only be conducted and understood in ways that, as Gordon Lynch puts it, “take seriously the particular context and experiences of those engaging in theological reflection.”¹ Although the discussion that followed was fruitful, I could not help feeling that, in talking in a European university about the nature and impact of a distinctively South American phenomenon over the last forty or so years, a crucial point was being missed. For, while it may be appropriate to enter into a discussion about the merits of Neo-orthodox theology, evangelical theology, liberal theology, post-modern theology or “Death of God” theology, liberation theology is not simply another way of “doing theology” in the modern world. As Gustavo Gutierrez showed in 1971, upon the publication of his groundbreaking work *A Theology of Liberation*², a new kind of theology is involved, here, which does not amount to just doing theology in a new way. Since the Latin American situation is qualitatively different from Europe³, a completely different conceptual framework is required.⁴ In South America, unlike in Europe, the important thing is not to reflect or philosophize but to *do* the right thing, rather than merely think it. In asking my students, therefore, to reflect critically upon the significance of liberation theology, I was asking them to do something which, while appropriate for the curriculum, insufficiently takes into account Martin Luther’s dictum that one becomes a theologian “by living, by dying, and by being damned – not by understanding, reading and speculating.”⁵ With this in mind, the aim of this chapter is to suggest that, since theology is so inescapably contextual, rather than in the business of generating what Lynch calls “universal, timeless concepts that will be equally valid or helpful in all times and places,”⁶ this necessarily impacts upon the way in which the theology-film conversation is understood, today.

At first sight, any correlation may appear over-stretched. After all, it is one thing to claim that theology is in principle adaptable and amenable to new perspectives and horizons that emanate from the specific milieu in which it has arisen, as is the case with a theology of liberation. However, it is by no means clear that the way in which audiences engage with, and appropriate, films has so far succeeded in a re-drawing of the boundaries within which theology is traditionally practiced. This chapter will explore the possibility that, once we move beyond a more superficial understanding of how films can be used to illustrate theology⁷, films can themselves facilitate quite sophisticated theological activity. On a pedagogical level, it is surprising just how many opportunities arise in the course of teaching a theology module that is not explicitly film-based to “do” theology through film. In my “Death of God?” course, for example, greater, by virtue of being less contrived, opportunities tend to arise for doing theology through film than in an explicit module on “Theology and Film”. In the latter, an often artificial dichotomy will be set up between “theology” on the one hand and “film” on the other in a manner comparable to H. Richard Niebuhr’s five models of “Christ” and “culture”,⁸ with a view to establishing where possible convergences may be located. Any reservations that I have in a “Theology and Film” module concerning how students can be expected to engage theologically with films when they do not always come to

the module with a background in theology is offset in the case of a module on modern Christian theology where the theological tools are first provided before a film may be employed as part of the conversation being entered into with the likes of Bultmann, Tillich or Pannenberg. The rest of this chapter will comprise an examination of how, in the twenty-first century, films can (and should) be used not so much to illustrate theology but to enable us to (re-)examine, critique and challenge the efficacy of the work of a number of prominent twentieth century theologians.

The Contextuality of Film

Upon winning the Best Actor prize in the April 1995⁹ BAFTA awards ceremony for his performance in *Four Weddings and a Funeral* (Mike Newell, 1994), Hugh Grant made reference in his acceptance speech to one of the other films in competition that year, *Pulp Fiction* (Quentin Tarantino, 1994). Although the speech in itself contained no explicit (or for that matter implicit) theology, it recently came to mind during the aforementioned class on liberation theology. Searching for a way to explain how liberation theology is culture-specific, to the extent that the particular circumstances which led the Roman Catholic Bishops from South America who met in 1968 at Medellin in Columbia to apply the insights of Vatican II to their own predicament – where one-third of the population live in abject poverty – I found myself curiously reminded of Hugh Grant's address at the London Palladium more than a decade ago. In his speech, Grant comically explained to his fellow nominees that *Pulp Fiction* might have performed better on a night in which *Four Weddings* took home most of the trophies if Quentin Tarantino's film had been set and filmed not in the sun-drenched metropolis of California but in the leafy suburbs of Sussex. Besides being a reference to the fact that British films tend to eclipse their American counterparts at British award ceremonies, what struck me most about what Grant said is that one could not imagine *Pulp Fiction* being set anywhere other than America, just as *Four Weddings* is a quintessentially English phenomenon. The idea that either film could be transplanted from one continent to another would be no less absurd, I suggested to my students, than that liberation theology could be re-located from Medellin to Maidstone, or Brasilia to Broadstairs. When one considers that such theologians as Barth, Bonhoeffer and Moltmann all had their theologies shaped by the particular cultural and political events that surrounded them – Moltmann, indeed, served in the German army for six months during the Second World War before surrendering in 1945 to a British soldier and becoming a prisoner of war, while Bonhoeffer was executed that same year in a Nazi prison camp after attempting, through the Confessing Church, to remove Hitler from power – it becomes clear that theology cannot be other than contextually bound. Exactly how film can contribute to this process of theological reflection and engagement needs to be addressed.

On a superficial level, it might be useful to examine how paranoia and conspiracy thrillers such as *The Parallax View* (Alan J. Pakula, 1974) and *The Conversation* (Francis Ford Coppola, 1974) shed light on the cultural malaise that swept through America in the early to mid-1970s at the tail-end of the Death of God movement. In reinforcing, through the lens of often dislocated and psychopathically lonely anti-heroes (of whom *The Conversation's* Harry Caul [Gene Hackman] is an exemplar) what Robert Kolker calls "fears of lost control over political and economic institutions, whose discourse insisted that no matter what efforts are made, an unknowable presence... will have its way and exert its ineluctable power,"¹⁰ it is not surprising if there is no room in this climate for God. The specific context of what William Hamilton and Thomas Altizer meant when they proclaimed the death of God less than a decade earlier¹¹ may have been intrinsically theological, in the respect that it related specifically to the Incarnation during which they believed God started to die through taking

on human form, entering human history and experiencing at first hand sin, suffering and mortality. But, it is notable that Hamilton believed that this process was reflected in nineteenth-century literature, thereby underscoring the theologico-cultural dynamics at work. Writing in *Playboy* in August 1966, Hamilton suggested that “Perhaps the most unforgettable image of the dying God in our language is that of Ahab finally fixing his harpoon in Moby Dick’s side, as the two of them sink together, both of them God, both of them evil.”¹² In reading Kolker’s assessment that many 1970s films illustrated a certain ambience of “impotence and despair, and signalled disaster, a breakdown of community and trust so thorough that it left the viewer with images of lonely individuals, trapped, in the dark, completely isolated,”¹³ it need not be wide of the mark to investigate how films are also potentially capable of documenting a social, cultural and theological process of which Herman Melville’s 1851 novel may be seen as something of a literary precursor.

Cupitt and Bonhoeffer meet the *Kranks*

A case in point is the theology of Don Cupitt, which is both a development of the ideas put forward by Death of God theologians – not least Richard Rubenstein’s claim that “We live in the time of the ‘Death of God’”¹⁴ – and a useful portal into the present theology-film conversation. Cupitt’s starting-point is that, since the Enlightenment, there has been an ebbing of the sea of faith to the extent that, nowadays, Christians are embarrassed if one suggests that God intervenes directly in history. Referring, for example, to “the myth of a supernatural redeemer,” he argues that it can no longer be “presented with full seriousness,” and so we cannot accord much credibility to the “Christian creeds that incorporate it in its original and most uncompromising form.”¹⁵ Cupitt suggests that while people still subscribe to the myth, as evinced by their singing of Christmas carols, “the authority of the myth has been visibly deteriorating around them.”¹⁶ The kernel of Cupitt’s argument is that many people who claim to believe in God are often quite secular in their worldview, as betokened by the fact that while many people today have appropriated such Christian virtues as showing concern for the sick, hungry and oppressed, they are critical of those doctrines relating to Original Sin, the disciplining of children and subjection of women, as well as prohibitions against nakedness, homosexuality and contraception.¹⁷ We have thus, he contends, invented our own autonomous ethic rather than have it prescribed for us by religious authorities. That traditional forms of religion are increasingly relegated to the margins of life, with no more than a veneer remaining, is encapsulated well in Joe Roth’s seasonal film comedy *Christmas with the Kranks* (2004), based on John Grisham’s 2001 novel, *Skippping Christmas*. The film concerns the ultimately unsuccessful attempt on the part of an affluent American couple from the Chicago suburbs, Luther and Nora Krank, to forego the rituals of celebrating Christmas in order to set sail, instead, on a Caribbean cruise. Aside from the film’s implicit message that non-conformity (delineated in this film as individualism and a failure to subscribe to the collective neighbourhood task of erecting a one hundred pound snowman on their rooftop) amounts to subversion and even heresy, *Christmas with the Kranks* also propounds the idea, in tandem with Cupitt’s theme in *The Sea of Faith*, that the traditional functions of religion have been displaced by secular agencies. Christmas may once have been a Christian festival, but this film ostensibly celebrates the ceremonial and sacramental allure of Christmas but without, as Roger Ebert points out, “a single crucifix... a single crèche... a single mention of the J-name...” Accordingly, “No matter what your beliefs or lack of them, you can celebrate Christmas in this neighborhood, because it’s not about beliefs, it’s about a shopping season.”¹⁸ This is exemplified in the film by the portrayal of a Roman Catholic priest, Father Zabriskie (Tom Poston), who manages to be able to spend Christmas Eve at the Kranks’ annual pre-Christmas party with seemingly no congregation to attend to on one of the busiest

nights in the Christian calendar. Commercialism is given more status than Christology, and the kerygma has been supplanted by kitsch.

What is useful about the film is how it is living proof of what Dietrich Bonhoeffer spoke about earlier in the twentieth century concerning how the world has come of age and can do without religion. As a barometer of our modern cultural values, *Christmas with the Kranks* is a theologically important film, even if there is a dearth of any theology within the film itself. In an age when theologians often identify the theological value of a film on the basis of the preponderance of Christ-figure motifs to which it bears witness,¹⁹ this is an instance where the film's absence of explicit theology provides it with the distinction of not simply bearing witness to, but actually contributing to, a serious and sophisticated theological discussion about how, for Bonhoeffer, "God is being pushed more and more out of life" and that "we are moving towards a completely religionless time."²⁰ Bonhoeffer's distinction between superficial religiosity and genuine Christianity – as identified by the dichotomy between cheap and costly grace – cannot be so much read into a film like *Christmas with the Kranks*. It is more the case that such a film can be employed to elucidate the difference between how genuine Christianity entails faith with involvement, whereas "cheap grace" entails not the "justification of the sinner in the world" but "the justification of sin and the world,"²¹ and involves not the call to obedient, costly discipleship but mere passive and complacent assent to a doctrine or creedal formula. Since Bonhoeffer believed that the "trappings" of religion were a barrier to true and authentic faith, film can facilitate what for Bonhoeffer was a priority for theology – namely, allowing the Gospel to address humans in a secular age, and to do so without requiring them to become "religious". To fully understand this process, it must be stressed that when Bonhoeffer referred to the need to espouse a "religionless Christianity," he did not mean a "Christless" or "Godless" Christianity. On the contrary, Bonhoeffer believed that authentic Christianity entailed an emphasis not on increasingly redundant rituals and elaborate metaphysical teachings (both of which enabled people to escape the challenge of the Gospel) "but to be a man. It is not some religious act which makes a Christian what he is, but participation in the suffering of God in the life of the world."²² In other words, being a person for other persons, and discovering the importance of others, was the kernel of the Christian faith. As he wrote in his *Letters and Papers from Prison* to his friend Eberhard Bethge:

To feel that one counts for something with other people is one of the joys of life. What matters is not how many friends we have, but how deeply we are attached to them. After all, personal relationships count for more than anything else... what is the best book or picture or house, or any property to me, compared with my wife, my parents, or my friend?²³

Seen through this lens, film can play a vital and pivotal role as a conversation-partner with modern theology. As Robert Johnston writes in *Reel Spirituality*, after seeing *The Year of Living Dangerously*, his wife became so immersed in the pain and poverty of Jakarta, as depicted in Peter Weir's 1982 film, that she could not escape the question that Billy Kwan (Linda Hunt) asks Guy Hamilton (Mel Gibson): "What then must we do?" In his wife's words:

I left the theater with that phrase and the amazing eyes of the children of Jakarta burned onto the screen of my mind... It became a turning point, a conversion. The next week I returned to my project at work, that of appraising a hospital, and I saw the world differently. Within weeks I applied for a leave of absence and within months left for Mexico to work as a short-term missionary.²⁴

What is remarkable, here, is not simply that the film, which addresses the fall of the Sukarno government in Indonesia in the mid-1960s, resonated so strongly, but that, in addition to the aforementioned missionary work, it could pre-empt someone to “give myself to the youth of my church and community, to the financial and political struggle to build a shelter for women and children in my city, and to study in the area of cross-cultural theology and ministry.”²⁵

It would, of course, be facile to suggest that films function in an identical way for all audiences. Neither Vincent Canby in *The New York Times* nor Pauline Kael in *The New Yorker* were quite so enamoured, for example, with *The Year of Living Dangerously*. Canby felt that the film “has all the correct impulses but no real grasp of the humane irony that separates sincere fiction from possibly great fiction,”²⁶ while Kael (despite finding the film engaging) felt an “aversion to its gusts of wind about destiny” and “truth versus appearance.”²⁷ What is important, however, is that Weir’s movie exemplifies Bonhoeffer’s belief, as presented in *The Cost of Discipleship*, that “as Christ bears our burdens, so ought we to bear the burdens of other human beings.”²⁸ Since Bonhoeffer was of the view that the Church had forgotten the “costliness” of God’s bearing our flesh, it may not be surprising if alternative agencies are sometimes more suitably able to enter into a theological conversation about what it means to be human. This is not to say that Peter Weir was intentionally bearing witness to theological concerns – in my view, it is futile to go down this path – but merely that secular agencies can be no less effective in enabling audiences to reflect (and engage) theologically. Since, for Bonhoeffer, the Church was too often caught up in transcendental and other-worldly matters, it tended to neglect the fact that the God of the New Testament is not an omniscient, omnipotent, omnipresent deity, but a powerless and suffering God “who conquers power and space in the world by his weakness.”²⁹ Indeed, he believed that through the Incarnation “God allows himself to be edged out of the world and on to the cross,” such that “God is weak and powerless in the world, and that is exactly the way, the only way, in which he can be with us and help us.”³⁰ With this in mind, the Church should reconsider its relationship to the secular world, thereby rendering the distinction between the sacred and the secular an artificial and somewhat outmoded one. So long as the distinction is made, the Church and a medium such as film will always be seen as being in some sense in opposition to one another, both ostensibly promoting a different and irreconcilable agenda. In Bonhoeffer’s eyes, the forging of just such a separation denies the unity of God and the world as achieved in Jesus Christ, since in reconciling Himself to the world through the Incarnation God began the process of reconciling the world to Himself. There is, for Bonhoeffer, no God apart from the world, no supernatural apart from the natural, and no sacred apart from the profane. Reading Bonhoeffer today, it is clear that films can play a vital role in the way in which theology is practised and understood.

This is no less the case when films do not always neatly tie in with the kind of theology with which links are being advanced. Fred Burnett has shown, for example, how Mel Gibson’s character, Martin Riggs, in *Lethal Weapon* (Richard Donner, 1987) “is the living embodiment of Bonhoeffer’s person who has come of age”³¹ and can do without religion. Burnett insightfully shows how films do not have to presuppose the Christian faith or contain, through their dialogue and images, anything that explicitly correlates with theology to be theologically rich. In Burnett’s words, “What Riggs knows and portrays is that any current solutions to evil in the world will not come from God but from humans, or more precisely, from Riggs himself.”³² This ties in with how, for Bonhoeffer, “There is no longer any need for God as a working hypothesis, whether in morals, politics or science... in religion or philosophy.”³³ Accordingly, Riggs’ secular and non-religious stance functions well as a filmic representation of what, over forty years earlier, Bonhoeffer was attempting to encapsulate in his *Letters and Papers* about the way we have been forsaken by a supernatural

and all-powerful God, leaving the onus of how we live our lives squarely upon our own shoulders. Riggs' suicidal behaviour – his “death-wish”, indeed – may not directly address how, for Bonhoeffer, it is Jesus' “being a person for other persons” that is the key Christological and theological concern. However, Bonhoeffer's concentration on the flesh-and-blood Christ of the New Testament, with the attendant motifs of self-sacrifice and suffering, provide a useful counterpart to the nihilistic and self-destructive Riggs, who has, perhaps, not yet quite “come of age,” in constant search as he is for a set of values and commitments by which to orient his increasingly suicidal and narcissistic life. It would be out of place to propose that Bonhoeffer's theology would provide such a meaning-system, but *Lethal Weapon's* depiction of the contemporary existential crisis reaps rich theological dividends when interpreted as a filmic exposition of the challenge presented by the Gospel. It may not provide us with obvious theological answers,³⁴ but the film can help us to establish the questions and flesh out the contours of the debate.

Films can also go further in suggesting in a more systematic way how theology is able to function in the modern world. Martin Scorsese's *Mean Streets* (1973) exposes the failure of the Roman Catholic Church to adequately impart redemption on the “mean streets” of New York's Little Italy, just as *The Mission* (Roland Joffé, 1986) is a film I use in my classes on liberation theology to show how the Catholic Church may historically have been seen in Latin America as complicit in the slave trade. In contrast, a theology of liberation radically changes the way in which the Church understands the plight and dignity of those who are disempowered. Bonhoeffer's union of the sacred and the secular is a useful corrective, however, to those of us working in the theology-film field to appreciate that a film does not need to concern the role of the Church to be significant theologically. There may be serious problems afoot, here, not least in the light of Clive Marsh's perception that “trying to maintain a serious interest in popular culture for serious theological purposes is not always met with seriousness in theology.”³⁵ However, since theologians must necessarily live both in the Church and the world, any major separation of the two “distorts both the task of Christianity's self-understanding and self-presentation, and the task of theological construction itself.”³⁶ This is not a new phenomenon. It is notable that Harvey Cox, arguably Bonhoeffer's greatest champion in the 1960s, quotes Amos Wilder in *The Secular City* that:

If we are to have any transcendence today, even Christian, it must be in and through the secular... If we are to find Grace it is to be found in the world and not overhead. The sublime firmament of overhead reality that provided a spiritual home for the souls of men until the eighteenth century has collapsed.³⁷

For Wilder, artists and poets are now more important than ever in dealing “at first hand with life, beyond the fences of social or religious propriety.”³⁸ In the forty years or so since Wilder was writing, it is, arguably, no less filmmakers who can contribute to this conversation. While, as Marsh rightly counsels, this “does not justify every cultural product as an equally valid or equally revelatory work of God,” it does “invite caution before popular culture is devalued, or too easily labelled as trite, or ‘kitsch’.”³⁹ A film such as *Christmas with the Kranks* may in itself exhibit kitsch, and be said to comprise an aesthetically impoverished film with what one critic has called its “strained farce, laboured slapstick and sickly sentimental finale,”⁴⁰ but the film discloses too much about our preoccupations and values not to command any attention from theologians as well as from cultural commentators.⁴¹

This is not to say, however, that popular culture is intrinsically amenable to a conversation with theology. Paul Tillich is often cited as a theologian whose work most enables a fruitful dialogue between theology and film to arise, in the light of his contention in *Theology of Culture* that neither the religious nor the spiritual realm “should be in separation

from the other” since both “are rooted in religion in the larger sense of the word, in the experience of ultimate concern”⁴². But, Tillich’s theology also underscores the dangers inherent in presupposing that so-called secular phenomena constitute a religious significance *per se*. Despite being seen as someone for whom, in Lynch’s words, “any form of belief that genuinely provides the basis for a person’s or community’s life could be understood as ‘religious’,” and that “if religion is the search for and expression of ‘ultimate concern,’ then culture is itself a manifestation of this fundamental religious orientation,”⁴³ Tillich was also quite limited in his understanding of the parameters of this process. While in principle “everything that has being is an expression, however preliminary and transitory it may be, of being-itself, of ultimate reality,”⁴⁴ Tillich did not believe that every manifestation of popular culture comprises or bears witness to this dimension of depth. When Tillich argued that “ultimate reality becomes manifest in works of art,”⁴⁵ he had in mind not cinema but the paintings of Van Gogh, Munch, Derain, Marc, Heckel and Nolde. Despite the significance of his claim that “I always learned more from pictures than from theological books,”⁴⁶ he believed that “the rediscovery of the expressive element in art since about 1900 is a decisive event for the relation of religion and the visual arts” and “has made religious art again possible.”⁴⁷ The cinema is not accommodated at all in his schema, thus making it difficult to apply his theological insights to, for instance, a legal thriller that has been adapted from a John Grisham novel, along the lines of *A Time to Kill* (Joel Schumacher, 1996) or *Runaway Jury* (Gary Fleder, 2003). In Bonhoeffer’s case, no such tensions seem to apply, especially in the light of Grisham’s tendency to sketch eminently flawed, dysfunctional and human protagonists whose character trajectories tend to involve materially obsessed, unscrupulous lawyers being transformed by suffering and destitution into selfless, humble and more responsible individuals who cherish the joys of the families and friendships that they had hitherto spurned. It may be a stretch to forge too great a correlation between Bonhoeffer and Grisham, but at least there is scope for dialogue, whereas it is much more difficult to enter into the theology-film conversation with someone who believed that, unless one sees God as the ground or structure of all being, a certain idolatry is at work. Instead of film, Tillich believed that “the renewal of religious art will start in co-operation with architecture”⁴⁸ and he did not entertain the possibility that other media and artistic forms, which fail to satisfy our deepest spiritual needs, may also be capable of making a contribution.

Bultmann Meets Burton: the Way Forward

However, one of the most powerful ways in which the theology-film dialogue can move forward is with respect to the work of Rudolf Bultmann, arguably the greatest New Testament scholar of the twentieth century. Underlying Bultmann’s thinking was the inescapably mythological and pre-scientific world-view⁴⁹ within which the Gospel writers were functioning. For Bultmann, “Man’s knowledge and mastery of the world have advanced to such an extent through science and technology that it is no longer possible for anyone seriously to hold the New Testament view of the world,”⁵⁰ not least because it is no longer intelligible to confess in creedal formulas that Christ “descended into hell” or “ascended into heaven” if in our post-Copernican universe one no longer shares the underlying mythical world picture of a three-storey world. Accordingly, Bultmann saw it as his mission to clear away “the false stumbling blocks created by modern man by the fact that his world-view is determined by science”⁵¹, and he did this through his appropriation of Heideggerian existentialism⁵² and his programme of demythologization. The goal was to attempt to set free the true and authentic Gospel message which has for too long been submerged in the language of mythology, thereby ensuring that the *kerygma* could once again be heard. Such a process entailed, for Bultmann, not so much eliminating the myth as re-interpreting and

translating it, and in so doing making it clearer to modern men and women what the Christian faith is all about.

At first sight, the relationship of Bultmann's theology to the modern theology-film conversation may not be so readily apparent. Indeed, Bultmann's disdain for the way the mass media can control us and lead us away from appropriating God's grace,⁵³ thereby ensuring that we remain in bondage to death, would suggest that popular culture is more of a barrier than an invitation to undertaking theology. However, I would suggest that Bultmann's programme rests on a misguided understanding of the role that the mass media – not least the medium of film – is capable of performing, and is also somewhat flawed in his claim that myth – a staple not just of the New Testament but of many popular films – is an impediment to the way in which the Christian message can be most effectively communicated. Regarding the first point, while our increasingly celebrity and consumer-orientated society, perhaps typified by the *Big Brother* television phenomenon, might be said to correspond with what Bultmann had in mind when he saw technology and the media as instruments which prevent us from properly encountering ourselves as human beings and which ensure that we live an inauthentic existence, Bultmann's assumption rests on a monolithic interpretation of the mass media – one which assumes that all it does is propagate illusion and cause us to immerse and lose ourselves in worldly and insecure concerns. When one bears in mind that the world of *film noir*, for example, is enmeshed in alienation, paranoia and despair, where, in a film such as *Kiss Me Deadly* (Robert Aldrich 1955), we are confronted with protagonists who are journeying on “a downward path to a miserable death or annihilating despair”⁵⁴, we have a no less erudite understanding of the human condition than Bultmann was attempting to disclose. Since authenticity is seen to involve, in John Richardson's words, “a turning-towards those nullities”⁵⁵ from which an inauthentic existence flees, and when one “most directly and unflinchingly”⁵⁶ confronts and faces up to their “own Being”⁵⁷ rather than detaches him/herself from it, is film not capable of documenting this process? There may be something transitory and ephemeral about the role that the mass media often performs, but it does not always cause us to be transfixed and incapacitated by transitory concerns. Can film not provide us with a full and authentic awareness of the contingency of the world rather than prevent us from doing so? Since, as Livingston writes, “it is only by meditating on such limit-situations in life that we can be awakened to decision, to freedom and, hence, to authentic existence,”⁵⁸ films can be no less conducive to this enterprise than the appropriation of a secular philosophy – existentialism – which is now somewhat dated and which has merely succeeded, in the eyes of some scholars, in “dissolving the substance of the Christian Gospel... into some sort of self-understanding subjectivism.”⁵⁹

Film is an especially powerful medium at evoking in the spectator what Jacob Golomb terms “the pathos of authenticity”⁶⁰ and is capable of engaging one's attention and provoking the viewer into an evaluation of his/her own being and to define the mode of our existence through an authentic encounter with chaos, guilt and the inevitability of death. The fact that, as John Berger puts it, “No other narrative art can get as close as the cinema does to the variety, the texture, the skin of daily life”⁶¹ militates against Bultmann's dismissal of its properties. Needless to say, films which tend to rely on special effects and other technical transformations may be more diversionary and bring about the situation where, as J. Dudley Andrew sees it, we “attend to the movie and not to the world.”⁶² But, even in films of a more escapist and fantasy orientation, it is possible to find much that is germane to the present discussion, linking as it does to my second critique of Bultmann – his contention that myth is a stumbling-block to the way we understand the Christian message. It may have been Bultmann's premise that mythological language and thought-forms are nowadays obsolete, and that “It is impossible to use electric light and the wireless and to avail ourselves of modern medical and surgical discoveries, and at the same time to believe in the New

Testament world of spirits and miracles,”⁶³ but, as Karl Jaspers rightly noted in 1962, Jesus’ resurrection was as implausible and problematic in the first century as it is today.⁶⁴ For Jaspers, “Mythical thinking is not a thing of the past, but characterizes man in any epoch,”⁶⁵ which is mirrored in G.B. Caird’s assertion that “Myth is a pictorial way of expressing truths which cannot be expressed so readily or so forcefully in any other way.”⁶⁶ In looking at Tim Burton’s recent film fantasy *Big Fish* (2003), which draws on the power of myth to propel the narrative forward, it is possible to find a powerful critique of Bultmann’s programme.

Big Fish consists of a series of extravagant fairy-tales as recounted by an aging father, Edward Bloom (Albert Finney), who is dying of cancer, which has caused a rift to develop over the years with his son, William (Billy Crudup), who has become exasperated by his father’s seeming inability to tell the truth. On one level, it is easy to empathise with William’s frustration. Stories concerning witches, werewolves, circus-performing Siamese twins and twelve-foot giants are, in a literal sense, too fantastic and the product of an over-fertile imagination. When a rational and sceptical son is told that on the day of his birth his father was wrestling in the sea with the legendary and uncatchable Big Fish, which he then caught by offering it a wedding ring, rather than – as he later learns – that he was away on business trying to eke out a meagre existence as a travelling salesman, it is perhaps not surprising if a breakdown of communication has occurred. So long as William’s point of reference is the literal preposterousness of his father’s stories, this estrangement will persist. Yet, at the heart of *Big Fish* is the transformation on the part of William as he comes to realize that “it is impossible to separate the man from the myth, the story from the reality.”⁶⁷ Rather than dogmatically seek truth over fiction, the son comes to learn that the two are often at their best when intertwined, with the myth a powerful and stimulating medium for articulating the unqualified love that Edward has for his family. As Sutcliffe puts it, “his father’s extravagant birth story celebrates the mystery of life and the power and challenge of love, and points to the child as being of special significance,”⁶⁸ in a manner that is congruent with biblical heroes such as Moses, Samson and Jesus whose extraordinary birth narratives are effective (and arguably unsurpassed) narrative ways of drawing attention to their special status. The mythological thus has an intrinsic importance and does not require, as Bultmann believed, a process of demythologization in order to understand the truth that is being conveyed. Indeed, as Karl Jaspers wrote in *Kerygma and Myth*, “The mythical figures are symbols which, by their very nature, are untranslatable into other language,”⁶⁹ and are only accessible in this way and cannot be translated rationally. In a similar fashion, Edward Bloom sees the rational tendency to judge a story’s truth with reference to its basis in actuality as a sterile approach which imparts “all of the facts and none of the flavour.” Edward Bloom would, no doubt, have concurred with Jaspers, in his critique of Bultmann, that “How wretched, how lacking in expressiveness our life would be, if the language of myth were no longer valid!”⁷⁰ It is notable in this regard that Jaspers even goes so far as to denounce the demythologization programme as “almost blasphemous.”⁷¹

If Bultmann was around today, it would be interesting to see how he would have responded to Tim Burton’s presentation of myth which, if demythologized, would leave us with just an empty shell. *Big Fish* – though not an explicitly theological film – is a useful corrective to Bultmann’s over-zealous deconstruction agenda, illustrating as it does that all demythologization does is to take away a story’s essence and vitality. At the end of the film, William fully immerses himself in the vocabulary and power of the mythological, in order to give his dying father a death narrative that is in keeping with the exuberant birth story he had earlier espoused. In so doing, he has ensured that Edward’s spirit lives on. On a literal level, of course, Edward is dying in a hospital bed, connected to various surgical equipment, but what gives the film such an emotional charge at this point is William’s gracious giving of a “good story to help his father die,” involving Edward’s being released into a river,

surrounded by all of his family and friends, and becoming “the big fish he always was.”⁷² There may be a certain exaggeration of reality going on, here, but this depends on what we mean by *reality*. As Sutcliffe observes, “Physical reality may have proved susceptible to the story-teller’s hyperbole, but what we might refer to as emotional reality has been accurately expressed – more accurately than if it were constrained by literal reality.”⁷³ The redeeming power of story-telling is the film’s *raison d’être*, and ties in with how, as Heinz Zahrnt suggests, “without myth faith would be speechless.”⁷⁴ Bultmann may have seen mythological language as obsolete and bound up with a world-view to which we no longer subscribe, but Eliade has also shown us how, in certain cultures, myths are “indispensable” for the ways in which “they enable communities to find meaning and value in life.”⁷⁵ Writing in 1955, John Macquarrie suggested that “twentieth-century man has been ready to swallow myths that are much more improbable than any that are to be found in the Bible.”⁷⁶ Although this claim precedes *Big Fish* by nearly fifty years, the willingness of audiences to swallow wholesale a film narrative that, to paraphrase Bultmann, bears witness to an anachronistic world-view that scientific thinking has left behind, demonstrates just how far film can be used not merely to illustrate but to critique and challenge various theological paradigms. Whether we are reading Bultmann or watching Burton, an engagement with *Big Fish* is an invaluable theological lesson in how we should be seeking not to destroy but to restore the language of myth.

Conclusion

In conclusion, what may have first appeared to be a juxtaposition of two irreconcilable and ontologically disparate pursuits – the work of a number of influential modern Christian theologians and the “secular” medium of film – has resulted instead in a re-drawing of the boundaries within which both theology and film can be understood. Much work has been published over the years about how film is one of many contemporary agencies that has challenged traditional religious institutions and even taken on their functions. For instance, in 1985 Margaret Miles wrote that Christian churches “have relinquished the task of providing life-orienting images,”⁷⁷ and she followed this up, just over a decade later, with the assertion that the representation of values in American culture may be seen to occur most persistently not in the church or synagogue but in the movie theatre, where people now gather “to ponder the moral quandaries of American life.”⁷⁸ This was reiterated in 2004 by Christine Hoff Kraemer who noted that “In some cases, the communal viewing of a film in a darkened theatre and the lively discussion it inspires have become a more vital site of spiritual exploration and reflection than the mainline church service.”⁷⁹ Clive Marsh has also recently written that the multiplex may be the modern cathedral and that those who work in film “may be functioning more authoritatively or at least more influentially than bishops.”⁸⁰ This is all very persuasive, not least in the light of statistics, from which we learn that by the end of the twentieth century “only 7.5% of the population in England attended church on a regular basis”⁸¹ (Lynch 2005 p166) and that, in Australia, “the past two decades have seen the virtual disappearance of people under the age of forty from mainline churches.”⁸² In both cases, scholars have suggested that, since institutionalized faith is on the decline, we may be entering (or have already entered) some kind of post-Christian era, where non-institutionalized forms of spirituality or religiosity have taken the place of the churches. The popularity of yoga, devotion to fitness regimes and the preponderance of “Mind, Body, Spirit” sections in mainstream bookstores all testify to the fact that alternative agencies may be taking on religious functions in the modern world.

In this article, however, I have sought to show that, rather than replacing religion, film has proven itself adept at facilitating and fine-tuning a theological conversation that is already taking place, albeit within scholarly circles. Outside of the academy, it is undoubtedly true

that people who pay to see movies at the cinema or on DVD will not be particularly stimulated by any conversation concerning the way in which *Christmas with the Kranks* or *Big Fish* can be used to shed light upon – even to critique – the way in which Cupitt, Bonhoeffer or Bultmann undertook their theologies. Yet, while ordinary filmgoers may not be privy to the conversations going on within theology, for theologians the need to be attuned to the sort of dialogue that films can foster should be taken more seriously. Whatever the religious or “religion-like” properties of the cinema, whereby, as I have argued elsewhere, groups of people file into a theatre at a specified time, choose a seat, and prepare with others for what could be said to amount to a religious experience,⁸³ it does not follow that the only meaningful way in which the theology/religion-film debate can be conducted today involves assessing, in psychological or sociological terms, how cinema has become a functional equivalent of religious activity. That films may be addressing questions that churches are no longer meaningfully asking is of course an important issue, but it tends to overlook the very real and vital sense in which theology is an intensely contextual discipline which has always – and not just in recent years since the advent of the theology/religion and film field – depended upon an analysis of the close and inescapable interplay between theology and culture. Just as a theology of liberation, as I suggested at the beginning, cannot be adequately understood outside of the specific cultural, historical, political and economic milieu within which it arose, so no theology can ever exist within a vacuum. Irrespective of whether Bultmann or Bonhoeffer drew on films in the course of the construction of their theologies, we cannot, in a film-permeated Western culture at the beginning of the twenty-first century, understand their work today outside of the matrix of our own political, social and cultural influences. Not only is it impossible, in my view, to “do” theology without constantly finding an intersection with popular culture (as when I recently found myself able to explain the distinctiveness of South American liberation theology most effectively in the light of a Hugh Grant speech). But, we cannot even watch a Tim Burton film without encountering a critique of Bultmann’s programme of demythologization which is no less insightful than what Karl Jaspers and John Macquarrie were espousing half a century ago.

Notes

¹ Gordon Lynch, *Understanding Theology and Popular Culture* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), 96.

² First published in English as Gustavo Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics and Salvation* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1973).

³ It is notable in this regard that all of the other theologians we have looked at in class are European, mostly German-based, thinkers, such as Barth, Bultmann and Pannenberg.

⁴ The basic questions that concern theologians in Europe and Latin America are so radically divergent because the type of questions asked by the former – “Does God exist?”, “What does it mean to live a ‘worldly holiness?’”, “Is God Wholly Other, with no point of consciousness existing between God and humans?”, “What is the nature of revelation as distinct from reason?”, and “What does it mean to define God as the ground of all being and as ultimate concern?” – are peripheral to the latter who are working in a continent where there already exists a framework of faith and where belief in God is normative.

⁵ Quoted in James C. Livingston, *Modern Christian Thought: From the Enlightenment to Vatican II* (London: Collier Macmillan, 1971), 347.

⁶ Lynch, *Understanding Theology and Popular Culture*, 96.

⁷ As characterized by the abundance of literature on Christ-figure motifs in film.

⁸ For more on this, see H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (London: Faber & Faber, 1952).

⁹ The ceremony took place on Sunday 23 April 1995 at the London Palladium.

¹⁰ Robert Philip Kolker, *A Cinema of Loneliness* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 64.

¹¹ See William Hamilton and Thomas Altizer, *Radical Theology and the Death of God* (New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1966).

¹² L. Miller and Stanley J. Grenz, *Fortress Introduction to Contemporary Theologies* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1998), 83.

- ¹³ Kolker, *A Cinema of Loneliness*, 64.
- ¹⁴ Richard Rubenstein, *After Auschwitz: Radical Theology and Contemporary Judaism* (Indianapolis: Boobs-Merrill Company, 1966), 151.
- ¹⁵ Don Cupitt, *The Sea of Faith* (London: B.B.C., 1984), 10.
- ¹⁶ Cupitt, *The Sea of Faith*, 10.
- ¹⁷ See Cupitt, *The Sea of Faith*, 30.
- ¹⁸ Roger Ebert, "Christmas with the Kranks," *Chicago Sun-Times*, November 24, 2004, <http://rogerebert.suntimes.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20041123/REVIEWS/41116002/1023>.
- ¹⁹ See for example, Anton Karl Kozlovic, "The Structural Characteristics of the Cinematic Christ-figure," *Journal of Religion and Popular Culture*, Fall 2004, www.usask.ca/relst/jrpc/art8-cinematicchrist.html.
- ²⁰ Miller and Grenz, *Fortress Introduction to Contemporary Theologies*, 70.
- ²¹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (London: SCM, 1959), 41.
- ²² Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison* (London: Fontana, 1963), 123.
- ²³ Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, 128-9.
- ²⁴ Quoted in Robert K. Johnston, *Reel Spirituality: Theology and Film in Dialogue* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker, 2000), 194.
- ²⁵ Quoted in Johnston, *Reel Spirituality*, 194.
- ²⁶ Vincent Canby, "The Year of Living Dangerously," *New York Times*, January 23, 1983, <http://movies2.nytimes.com/mem/movies/review.html?res=9951A0C0173BF932A35750C8BF67>.
- ²⁷ Quoted in John Walker, ed., *Halliwel's Film Guide*, 3rd ed. (London: HarperCollins, 1995), 1277.
- ²⁸ Wayne Whitson Floyd, "Dietrich Bonhoeffer," in *The Modern Theologians*, ed. David Ford with Rachel Muers, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), 51.
- ²⁹ Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, 122.
- ³⁰ Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, 122.
- ³¹ Fred Burnett, "The Characterization of Martin Riggs in *Lethal Weapon 1: An Archetypal Hero*," in *Screening Scripture: Intertextual Connections Between Scripture and Film*, ed. George Aichele and Richard Walsh (Harrisburg, Pa.: Trinity Press International, 2002), 266.
- ³² Burnett, "The Characterization of Martin Riggs in *Lethal Weapon 1*," 266.
- ³³ Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, 121.
- ³⁴ In this respect, it is helpful to encounter a theological reading of a film which challenges a theological paradigm rather than – as is the case with the Christ-figure literature – attempt to simply illustrate an elementary narrative thread.
- ³⁵ Clive Marsh, *Cinema and Sentiment: Film's Challenge to Theology* (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 2004), 144.
- ³⁶ Clive Marsh and Gaye Ortiz, "Theology Beyond the Modern and the Postmodern: A Future Agenda for Theology and Film," in *Explorations in Theology and Film: Movies and Meaning*, ed. Marsh and Ortiz (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), 254.
- ³⁷ Quoted in Harvey Cox, *The Secular City* (New York: Macmillan, 1966), 228.
- ³⁸ Quoted in Cox, *The Secular City*, 228.
- ³⁹ Marsh, *Cinema and Sentiment*, 144.
- ⁴⁰ Neil Smith, "Christmas with the Kranks," *BBC Movies*, December 1, 2004, www.bbc.co.uk/films/2004/12/01/christmas_with_the_kranks_2004_reviews.html.
- ⁴¹ As Harvey Cox puts it, "Secularization rolls on, and if we are to understand and communicate with our present age we must learn to love it in its unremitting secularity" (Cox, *The Secular City*, [New York: Macmillan, 1966], 3). Seeing secularization as a process distinct from secularism, Cox feels that it "represents an authentic consequence of biblical faith" (*ibid.*, 15), the seeds of which go as far back as the Creation narrative in Genesis where God gives Adam and Eve the task of cultivating and making use of the created order. For Cox, once we move beyond "inherited metaphysical and religious meanings", this can have a liberating effect as humans are thereby turned "loose to compose new ones" (*ibid.*, 94), with all of the attendant possibilities for maturity and responsibility that this can entail. That film may be part of this process is implicit in Cox's theology, not least in the light of his concern that the theologian must avoid the danger of being concerned with merely "high" culture. For Cox, developing ideas that Bonhoeffer himself would very likely have advanced had he survived the Second World War, a balance must be struck by theologians between an uncritical reception of popular culture and remaining in their ivory towers. Cox explicitly advocates moving "beyond a culture dominated by print" with what he calls "its inherently elitist characteristics", to the point where electronic media has the potential to "facilitate a more democratic and more participatory society than we now have" (Cox, "The Seduction of the Spirit, The Use and Misuse of People's Religion," in *Theological Aesthetics: A Reader*, ed. Gesa Elsbeth Thiessen [London: SCM, 2004], 254).

- ⁴² Paul Tillich, *Theology of Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964), 9.
- ⁴³ Lynch, *Understanding Theology and Popular Culture*, 29.
- ⁴⁴ Paul Tillich, "Art and Ultimate Reality," in *Theological Aesthetics: A Reader*, ed. Gesa Elsbeth Thiessen (London: SCM, 2004), 210.
- ⁴⁵ Paul Tillich, "Art and Ultimate Reality," 11.
- ⁴⁶ Paul Tillich, "Art and Ultimate Reality," 216.
- ⁴⁷ Tillich, *Theology of Culture*, 74.
- ⁴⁸ Tillich, *Theology of Culture*, 75.
- ⁴⁹ This is epitomized by the belief in a three-decker cosmos containing heaven above, the underworld below and the earth somewhere in the middle to which both God from on high and demons from beneath have access.
- ⁵⁰ Rudolf Bultmann, "New Testament and Mythology," in *Kerygma and Myth*, vol. 1, ed. Hans-Werner Bartsch (London: SPCK, 1953), 4.
- ⁵¹ Bultmann, "The Case for Demythologising," in *Kerygma and Myth*, vol. 2, ed. Hans-Werner Bartsch (London: SPCK, 1962), 183.
- ⁵² Bultmann found the most appropriate medium for liberating the New Testament message to be the philosophy of existentialism, as formulated by Martin Heidegger. Bultmann thought that Heidegger's philosophy has "all by itself" discovered and encapsulated what the New Testament was telling us, through its anachronistic world-view, about the human condition. While acknowledging that there is no absolutely perfect system, Bultmann believed that Heidegger's philosophy "offers the most adequate perspective and conceptions for understanding human existence" (*Jesus Christ and Mythology* [London: SCM, 1966], 55) by virtue of its delineation of human beings as existing "in a permanent tension between the past and the future" ("New Testament and Mythology," 24) which we can either accept responsibility for and live out authentically or lose ourselves to the variety of outside pressures that try to deny our individuality and freedom.
- ⁵³ Bultmann's argument is that when the New Testament mentions the existence of demonic powers ruling our world and of our being "fallen" creatures, this says something vital about human existence which we can understand in the modern day. Due to our passion for material things and the influence upon us of the mass media, we are alienated in a comparable way as it is external objects and influences – albeit technology instead of supernatural demons – that exert an undue sway over our lives. The goal for Bultmann is to learn to be dependant for security not on the world but on God, and in so doing make the transition from an inauthentic to an authentic existence.
- ⁵⁴ Michael Walker, "Film Noir: Introduction," in *The Movie Book of Film Noir*, ed. Ian Cameron (London: Studio Vista, 1994), 16.
- ⁵⁵ John Richardson, *Existential Epistemology: A Heideggerean Critique of the Cartesian Project* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1991), 194.
- ⁵⁶ Richardson, *Existential Epistemology*, 194.
- ⁵⁷ Richardson, *Existential Epistemology*, 195.
- ⁵⁸ Livingston, *Modern Christian Thought*, 350.
- ⁵⁹ Miller and Grenz, *Fortress Introduction to Contemporary Theologies*, 51.
- ⁶⁰ Jacob Golomb, *In Search of Authenticity: From Kierkegaard to Camus* (London: Routledge, 1995), 19.
- ⁶¹ John Berger, "Every time we say goodbye," *Sight and Sound*, 1, no. 2 (June 1991): 16.
- ⁶² J. Dudley Andrew, *The Major Film Theories: An Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976), 110.
- ⁶³ Bultmann, "New Testament and Mythology," 5.
- ⁶⁴ Karl Jaspers, "Myth and Religion," in *Kerygma and Myth*, vol. 2, ed. Hans-Werner Bartsch (London: SPCK, 1953), 134.
- ⁶⁵ Jaspers, "Myth and Religion," 144.
- ⁶⁶ Quoted in Maurice Wiles, "Myth in Theology," in *The Myth of God Incarnate*, ed. John Hick (London: SCM, 1977), 154.
- ⁶⁷ David Sutcliffe, "Virtual Literalism: *Big Fish*," in *Flickering Images: Theology and Film in Dialogue*, ed. Anthony J. Clarke and Paul S. Fiddes (Oxford: Regent's Park College [with Smith & Helwys, Georgia], 2005), 85.
- ⁶⁸ Sutcliffe, "Virtual Literalism," 92.
- ⁶⁹ Jaspers, "Myth and Religion," 144.
- ⁷⁰ Jaspers, "Myth and Religion," 144.
- ⁷¹ Jaspers, "Myth and Religion," 144.
- ⁷² Sutcliffe, "Virtual Literalism," 92.
- ⁷³ Sutcliffe, "Virtual Literalism," 87.
- ⁷⁴ Heinz Zahrnt, *The Question of God*, trans. R.A. Wilson (London: Collins, 1969), 246.
- ⁷⁵ Quoted in David Fergusson, *Bultmann* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1992), 129.

⁷⁶ John Macquarrie, *An Existentialist Theology: A Comparison of Heidegger and Bultmann* (London: SCM, 1955), 245.

⁷⁷ Margaret Miles, *Image as Insight: Visual Understanding in Western Christianity and Secular Culture* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1985), 152.

⁷⁸ Margaret Miles, *Seeing and Believing: Religion and Values in the Movies* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996), 25.

⁷⁹ Christine Hoff Kraemer, "From Theological to Cinematic Criticism: Extricating the Study of Religion and Film From Theology," *Religious Studies Review*, 30, no. 4 (October 2004): 243.

⁸⁰ Marsh, *Cinema and Sentiment*, 3.

⁸¹ Gordon Lynch, *Understanding Theology and Popular Culture*, 166.

⁸² Peter Horsfield, "Electronic Media and the Past-Future of Christianity," in *Mediating Religion: Conversations in Media, Religion and Culture*, ed. Jolyon Mitchell and Sophia Marriage (London: Continuum, 2003), 271.

⁸³ See Deacy, *Screen Christologies*, 4.