

## **‘Escaping’ from the world through film:**

### **Theological perspectives on the ‘real’ and the ‘reel’**

Christopher Deacy

The aim of this article is to examine the manner and extent to which popular film is capable of comprising a potential site of theological engagement. From the outset, it is worth bearing in mind that, according to a number of biblical and theological critics, cinema is an infelicitous and ultimately undemanding medium which, a few exceptional instances notwithstanding, is intrinsically incapable of contributing to any serious or constructive theological discourse. For example, David Jasper’s contention is that film is only effective insofar as “it seems to offer the viewer the power to understand without the need seriously to think or change” (Jasper 1997: 243) and is simply “there to help us through the tedium of inactivity” in what comprises, at root, “an art of illusion” (ibid.: 235). Theology, in marked contrast, is, according to Jasper, a much more creative and “two-edged” (ibid.: 244) sphere of activity which “emerges from more problematic and disturbing material than Hollywood dare show” (ibid.). Insofar as Hollywood is an industry which revolves, as do all successful commercial and business enterprises, around “money and profit,” in which “stars are paid enormous sums of money” (ibid.: 235) – it is not uncommon for the likes of Jim Carrey and Tom Hanks to be paid in excess of \$25 million per picture ([www.hollywood.com/news/Hanks\\_Will\\_Be\\_Top\\_Hollywood\\_Earner/3681990](http://www.hollywood.com/news/Hanks_Will_Be_Top_Hollywood_Earner/3681990)) – and who “all too often fall from their dizzy heights as dramatically as they climb to fame” (Jasper 1997: 235), there is, invariably, a kernel of truth behind Jasper’s critique. However, as this article will demonstrate, it would be facile to assume that film is capable of nothing more substantial than rendering audiences passive. Underlying Jasper’s argument is the assumption that theology can critique film because it is capable of a level of intellectual rigour which the manufactured, illusory and escapist medium of film by definition cannot, and this leads us to the heart of the matter. Jasper’s perception of film is largely one-sided (rather than ‘two-edged’), in the respect that he is allowing – indeed, stipulating – that theology can (and must)

critique film, but he overlooks the very real sense in which theology is being allowed to say about film what film cannot say in turn about theology. No matter how tempting it may be for the theologian to critique a film, Gerard Loughlin perceptively notes that “except when discourses on theology and film are reports of actual conversations between film-makers and theologians, such dialogues are nearly always acts of ventriloquism, since film itself is a cultural product about which we may talk, but which is not itself a conversing partner” (Loughlin 2005: 3). In other words, whereas theology is an intellectual and scholarly discipline, practised in university and ecclesiastical institutions, film is an entertainment medium which is susceptible only to being appropriated *unilaterally* by the theologian.

What is more, Jasper’s over-emphasis on the intellectual domain of theology – which he sees as being “ironic, difficult and ambiguous” (Jasper 1997: 244) – is not entirely representative of all that goes on in religious communities where emotional (and devotional) commitment often takes precedence over intellectual assent, to the point that it would be misleading to suppose that God favours the academic! As David Ford attests, “A great deal of theology is done by those who write little or who may not write it down at all” (Ford 2005: 14), thus giving sustenance to the possibility that there is more to theology than the composition and dissemination of sophisticated, erudite, written texts. Indeed, Ford continues, “A lifetime’s theological wisdom may be channeled into prayer, politics, family life, coping with suffering, teaching or other activity” (*ibid.*), and this raises the question of the extent to which it is viable to draw the kind of distinction that is intrinsic to Jasper’s argument between highbrow theology and base, intellectually barren popular culture. If, as Gordon Lynch indicates, theology can be defined as “the process of seeking normative answers to questions of truth/meaning, goodness/practice, evil, suffering, redemption, and beauty in specific contexts” (Lynch 2005: 94), it is difficult to argue for a strict line of demarcation to be drawn between where ‘good’ and ‘bad’ theology may be seen to lie. As Ian Markham puts it, one can have a theology of anything “as long as the purpose is to explicate the implications of belief in God for that topic” (Markham 2006: 194), and although the specific examples adduced by Markham in this instance are work and sexuality, it is hard to justify the exclusion of the agencies of popular culture from the orbit of theology. On this basis, it could therefore be said that theology is failing to fulfil its academic commitments unless there is a readiness on the part of the theologian to engage fully in areas that have previously been supposed

to lie outside its frame of reference. As Ford points out, it has become increasingly difficult in recent years for theologians “to privatize or cordon off religion and reduce its public significance” (Ford 2005: 14). Although the specific remit of his discussion is the social and political issues that have emerged in our post-9/11 world, recent controversies that have emerged within the realm of ‘secular’ culture – including the alleged blasphemy of *The Jerry Springer Opera* (Peter Orton, 2005) and the gross misreading of early Christian sources that underpin the fictional *The Da Vinci Code* (Ron Howard, 2006) wherein we are led to believe that Christ was married to Mary Magdalene and had a child, whose last living descendent is alive today – could also be said to go some way towards demonstrating that “the flourishing of the world” in the present day “depends to a considerable extent on how various religious and secular forces learn to live together” (ibid.).

### **Illusion and Delusion**

With these considerations in mind, this article will investigate whether film is able to provide rich answers to questions pertaining to theological discourse. Insofar as “movies are controlled by crass commercial interests” and “merely provide escape or indulge our prejudices and fantasies, oversimplifying life in the process” (Johnston 2000: 87), Rob Johnston is correct to exercise some element of caution before looking to films to provide theological fruit. As my previous work on escapism has suggested, there is often a tendency among audiences to hope and wish for a real world that follows the same conventions as that of the *reel* world which, as John Lyden puts it, “offer a vision of the way the world should be,” to the point that we have a propensity to “hope and wish for a world like the movies even though we must return to a very different world at the end of the show” (Lyden 2003: 4). These tendencies notwithstanding, the situation is not as clear cut as Jasper’s more one-sided critique initially (and persuasively) suggests. True though it is that romantic comedies, for example, “may have done more harm than good in society because people tend to rush into relationships, and even marriage, with illusions of perfection culled from the movies” (Lyden 2003: 187) – to the extent that “Love is depicted as a matter of magic and moment, not a matter of a relationship that must develop with time” (ibid.: 190) – it is not entirely inconceivable that works of escapism are able to critique and challenge the very conventions on which escapism rests. Cinema may well comprise, in Jasper’s words, a “house of illusions” (Jasper 1997: 244), but Clive Marsh is also

correct when he affirms that even a “frothy” film (and the example he has in mind, here, is *Shirley Valentine* [Lewis Gilbert, 1989]), “should be allowed to do more than its critics, and theologians, often expect” (Marsh 2004: 138). In Loughlin’s words, “before we ask more of film-makers and the systems within which they work, we should ask more of ourselves as viewers, demand more of the films we watch,” in order that we might find “that the films have more to give,” and that “their writers and directors have given us more than we first think” (Loughlin 2005: 2). After all, ‘illusion’ need not be synonymous with ‘delusion,’ and there is plenty of evidence to support the counter-hypothesis that illusion plays a vital and necessary role even within theology, rather than comprise an anathema to it. Although theology does not purport to be about illusions, the Christian Eucharist, for instance, entails worshippers knowing both that the bread and wine remain bread and wine while also representing, in terms of Luther’s doctrine of consubstantiation, the body and blood of Christ. Theologians have for centuries grappled with the manner in which the material bread and spiritual body of Christ are co-terminous (see McGrath 1998: 197-8), just as they have understood the nuances of how Christ can be both fully human and fully divine at one and the same time (see Young 1996: 75-9 in relation to the Council of Chalcedon).

Illusion need not, therefore, be seen as something that stands in opposition to realism. Rather, as Marsh puts it, “The illusions of film are functionally no different from the truthful fiction of a thoughtful novelist. They may merely be fictions in visual form,” and which, moreover, we “need in order playfully to reflect on life” (Marsh 2004: 86). Failure to acknowledge the role of escapism and illusion thus amounts to a failure to understand the rudiments and very edifice of cinema. Jasper is thus wrong to see cinema as incapable of doing anything other than just emulating, or mimicking, theology (see Jasper 1997: 237) and as merely “offering the viewer a commodity which can be consumed without fear of significant change or disturbance” (ibid.: 244). Rather, films have the capacity to challenge, change and even transform people – to the point of, in Johnston’s words, making us “aware of both who we are and what our relationship with others could be,” and even ushering “us into the presence of the holy” (Johnston 2000: 87). Of course, different audience members will glean something different from any one film. But, is there not something potentially educative about a medium which invites this kind of possibility? Despite having been constructed by someone else’s imagination, Johnston correctly notes that

“It is on first reflection incredible that we can view a story about someone or something else that takes place in a different place and time and yet say, ‘This is important to me.’ Or, ‘I agree.’ Or perhaps, ‘Wonderful’” (ibid.: 120). For some people, the film that moves them in this way might be a work of *film noir*, such that, as Eric Christianson sees it, the troubled and gritty individuals who comprise the *noir* world become “deeply embedded nostalgic icons, signs for coping with the uncertainty of dangers long gone and yet strangely familiar” (Christianson 2005: 151). For others, though, a work of escapism may have just the same effect. Contrary to the discussion generated in chapter 2 of *Faith in Film*, in which I set up – in a manner not wholly distinct from that of Jasper – a dichotomy between those films which are, and are not, amenable to constructive theological engagement vis-à-vis their respective escapist versus redemptive world-views, I am recommending, here, that escapism can be justified if and when it does not simply enable audiences to hope and wish for happy endings to come about in their lives, too. Rather, escapist films can be theologically productive if any of the satisfactions and joys that we characteristically associate with escapism – its predilection for happy endings, wish fulfilment and its overall delineation of a fantasy world – can come to be qualified within the context of life *as a whole*. Lyden has produced one of the best contributions to this topic in recent years, in his suggestion that the goal for viewers (and theologians) is not simply to conclude that the real world falls short when compared to the ideal world of a Hollywood fantasy but to “find ways to bring that ideal into relation with the real, however partially or fragmentarily” (Lyden 2003: 104).

### **Ideal Worlds**

While it is undoubtedly the case that some so-called ‘feel-good’ films “aim to take us away, for a moment, from ‘ordinary life’ and immerse ourselves for a while in a different and supposedly ‘better’ world” (Clarke 2005: 60), it is questionable that this is their sole, or exclusive, function. This is because audiences, rather than passive and docile consumers, are afforded the opportunity, when watching a film, to reflect on the discontinuities and tensions between the real and the reel, the actual and the ideally constructed, and to glean some kind of profit from this interchange or dialectic. As Clarke puts it, “It may be seen as escapist to make a film full of images of peace in a time of war, but, on the other hand, to live in this other world for a brief moment may help us to reflect on the reality we know” (ibid.: 60-1). To give an

example, the ending of *Meet Me in St. Louis* (Vincente Minnelli, 1944), in which a large, happy family in turn-of-the-twentieth-century Missouri is spared the trauma of having to uproot and re-locate to the unfamiliar urban world of New York through what Coates refers to as the traditional matriarchal values of rootedness and fantasy coming to override the “patriarchal law of political economy” (Coates 1994: 6), may well turn on “a transformation so improbable in its context that it has to be read as utopian” (ibid.). But, in delineating the belief that “utopia is possible here and now” (ibid.), the film could also be construed as a means of preventing “defeatist acceptance” of what Coates identifies as “the hardships of 1944, the film’s year of release” (ibid.). That *Meet Me in St. Louis* is overtly escapist in nature is not in dispute. Indeed, film author and critic David Thomson recalls that, upon seeing Vincente Minnelli’s musical in his youth, it made him wish “for older sisters, a large fond family, and the precious aura of St. Louis in 1904,” to the point that “long before I heard the word escapism I made the journeys [such] films allowed” (Thomson 1978: 21). At the same time, however, escapist films can constructively shed light on real-life pressures and traumas. The films of Frank Capra – arguably cinema’s greatest proponent of escapism – may, similarly, be “permeated by nostalgia for a vanished America, an idealized pre-urban America, where a purer, better, freer way of life was lived” (Richards 1976: 77), but Capra envisaged some good coming out of what we may be inclined to see as an ostensibly backward-looking and regressive mentality. Capra identified the cause of the malaise at the time of the Depression “in the disappearance of good neighbourliness,” such that if one’s “friends rallied round and people loved and helped one another” (ibid.) then many of the *present* problems in society may be resolved. These same themes have also arisen in more recent Hollywood works, such as *Field of Dreams* (Phil Alden Robinson, 1989), *The Horse Whisperer* (Robert Redford, 1998) and *The Legend of Bagger Vance* (Robert Redford, 2000), where a deliberate attempt is made to set aside our largely materialistic and media-saturated culture and to pursue instead what Collins, writing in 1993, refers to as “an almost forgotten authenticity” and “purity” in which “the problems of the present are symbolically resolved” (Collins 1993: 257).

Significantly, this is precisely the same sort of dynamic that lies at the kernel of many of the biblical passages which Jasper construes as comprising sound theology. Despite Jasper’s contention that “the fire of religious passion” (Jasper 1997: 238) which underscores the writings of the Hebrew prophets is ontologically different

from the reassuring and secure ambience of a Hollywood blockbuster, both the Old Testament prophets and escapist films are involved in a related enterprise. Both are predilected to juxtapose the inadequacies of present reality with the promise of a more utopian order or realm which is facilitated by the intervention of (and deliverance by) an external ‘other’. The agency may be different: in the case of Hollywood, we require the likes of Spiderman, Superman, the Terminator and the Pale Rider to deliver oppressed and defenceless individuals and communities from various manifestations of evil and suffering, whereas Amos prophesies a future free from oppression and social exploitation in which it is thanks to *God’s* judgement and mercy that justice rolls “down like waters and righteousness, like an everflowing stream” (Amos 5: 24). Both the words of the prophets and the screenplays of many escapist movies are redolent in positing a present unsatisfactory human condition (whether physical or psychological) from which deliverance is sought by a trans-human redeemer. Yet, instead of requiring the suspension of our rational faculties, as Jasper’s critique would suggest is the inescapable corollary of escapism, something far more nuanced is going on, here.

Simply because, in the ‘real’ world, life does not work out as neatly as it does in the filmic universe where ‘happy endings’ are normative, Jasper does not seem to allow for the possibility that audiences do not necessarily subscribe to these ‘illusions’ lock, stock and barrel. When I recently showed my students clips from the romantic comedy *You’ve Got Mail* (Nora Ephron, 1998), whose fantasy denouement typifies the Hollywood ‘happy ending’ – wherein the protagonists’ implausible reconciliation offers, in Paul Fiddes’ words, nothing more than “an escape from life, a happy-ever-after world which fails to connect with the world in which we are living” (Fiddes 2005: 110) – the unanimous response was one of derision. After all, Joe Fox (Tom Hanks) is a corporate shark (though a rather tame one) while Kathleen Kelly (Meg Ryan) runs a small, family corner shop which puts its customers’ welfare above financial greed and business acumen, yet all conflict is miraculously spirited away at the film’s end. At the same time, it was clear from questioning my class that almost everybody had previously seen – even, in some cases, purchased the DVD of – the film. How may we account for this paradox? Lyden may not be too wide of the mark in his attestation that “One escapes to the world of film in order to return better equipped to this world, and so even the ‘idealist’ aspect of film serves a ‘realist’ function” (Lyden 2003: 50). Theologically, this has a number of ramifications. As

Lyden sees it, “Even if we cannot be *perfect* parents and *perfect* career women/men at the same time, as our filmic counterparts manage to be, the model proposed in [films] can serve as an ideal to which we aspire, however inadequately, and one that helps us partially resolve the conflict in our daily lives” (ibid.: 76). In much the same way, theological values and ideals are rarely, if ever, attained, but this does not mean to say that the aspiration is compromised or rendered deficient. Writing in 1941, William Temple made a distinction between ‘men as they are’ and ‘men as they ought to be,’ and advised that part of the task of Christian ethical exploration “is so to order life as to lead them nearer to what they ought to be; but to assume that they are already this, will involve certain failure and disaster” (qtd in Gill 2006: 165). In other words, due to human imperfection the Church has to acknowledge the unattainability of a perfect social order, to the point, indeed, that even the attempted *sketch* or *outline* of such a utopian state is fraught with difficulties. As Temple saw it, any attempt to establish “the order that would work best if we were all perfect” could never come to fruition – indeed, “we should wreck it in a fortnight” (ibid.). Similar tensions are evident in Augustine’s *City of God*, in which it is noted that there are two divisions in society – “one city of men who choose to live by the standard of the flesh, another of those who choose to live by the standard of the spirit” (Augustine 1984: 547). Nevertheless, the fact that there are competing and irreconcilable conceptions afoot concerning how one should best aim to lead a good and fulfilling life does not annul, for Christians, the pursuit of *agape*. Whatever tensions there may be between the earthly and the heavenly cities, to appropriate Augustine’s metaphor, Christians are still required to “love God and his fellow-Christians” (Kelly 1958: 414), even if it will only be at the end of history that the city of God will exist in perfection. For now, those who belong to the kingdom (or city) of God are merely “on pilgrimage in this condition of mortality” (Augustine 1984: 877) in what amounts to a mixed body of brethren where the members of the two cities are inextricably “interwoven and intermixed in this era,” before being separated “at the last judgement” (ibid.: 46).

Frustrating though it may be for the Christian that this is a fallen and defective world in which we need laws, courts, prisons and other corrective agencies rather than one in which “all would tell the truth, respect the property... of others, and would be self-less and self-giving” (Gill 2006: 141), it does not follow that Christians feel required to escape from the world because it does not live up to the ideal of the heavenly city. Instead, both in the case of theology and escapist films, a compromise

has to be struck. Since Christian businesspeople, for example, are “not working in a society composed solely of sincere Christians,” then they have to be attuned to the reality that “if they were to follow the injunctions of the Sermon on the Mount literally, their business would probably collapse” (ibid.). Even among Christians whose *telos* is the heavenly city, it is impossible to completely separate oneself from human culture, as St. Paul identified in his dealings with the Corinthian Church, many of whose members had no qualms about eating meat that had been sacrificed to pagan gods (1 Corinthians 8: 4-13). These questions provide the very benchmark of H. Richard Niebuhr’s fourth model of the relationship between Christianity and culture, *Christ and Culture in Paradox*, that is documented at length in his classic 1952 publication *Christ and Culture*. There, Niebuhr notes that “man is seen as subject to two moralities, and as a citizen of two worlds that are not only discontinuous with each other but largely opposed” (Niebuhr 1952: 56). Nevertheless, there is no alternative, for those who subscribe to this model, to being caught up in the affairs of this world. Provided that Christians derive their knowledge about what to do in the secular sphere from their Christian ethics, beliefs and values – so that they live out, as best as possible, a Christian life – then the fundamental tensions between Christ and culture can and must be (albeit paradoxically) held together, with a view to gaining new insight from that dialogue and exchange.

### **Enriching Escapism**

With films, similarly, perfection may be as unattainable in real life as it is attainable on the silver screen, but this is not to say that our response to escapism should be as disparaging as Jasper counsels. At the very least, a movie can provide an entry-point to discussions about all manner of theological questions. Films may not be capable of supplying all of the answers, but by the same token it would seem churlish to castigate the Sermon on the Mount because human society today is as self-centred, divisive and has the same propensity to seek war over peace as was the case two thousand years ago. As Lyden puts it, “there is no reason to automatically assume that films designed to challenge people normally fail in their aim simply because most people do not make radical, life-changing decisions after viewing them” (Lyden 2003: 30). Not everyone who reads the words of Amos will suddenly be disposed to give all of their money to the poor afterwards, but it is never easy to quantify the effect a film has on

an audience. In Lyden's words, "The people who loved the movie *Gandhi* [Richard Attenborough, 1982] may not have become pacifists, but perhaps the film had an effect on their subsequent behavior or political views" (Lyden 2003: 103). Similarly, Martin Scorsese's *Cape Fear* (1991) can provide a possible entry-point to questions about truth-telling, confessing one's sins or atoning for the transgressions of the past, without necessarily preaching to an audience about precisely how they should behave or conduct their lives (see Deacy 2001: 139-40). The fact that the film tackles issues of alienation and redemption is the key consideration, irrespective of whether it posits a remedy that will be satisfactory or appropriate for everyone (inevitably it will not be). Marsh similarly argues that we may identify or relate to Morgan Freeman's character, the convicted murderer, Red, in *The Shawshank Redemption* (Frank Darabont, 1994) not because we are murderers ourselves but because we may be able to tap in to "the sense of guilt or remorse" that we "feel about a past action of our own" (Marsh 2004: 92), in a manner that is analogous to what happens in Darabont's film. Even in an ostensibly escapist film, such as *Mrs. Doubtfire* (Chris Columbus, 1993), in which much humour is served up at the visual spectacle of Robin Williams' character dressing up as a female nanny, any mawkishness on display must be seen within the context of the film's presentation of broken, single parent families and the extremes a father feels he must go to (which are not, perhaps, entirely removed from the antics of the Fathers for Justice campaign in Britain who have gone to all manner of extreme lengths, including scaling the walls of Buckingham Palace, in order to advocate their cause) in order to be close to his children. Such a film asks, in Marsh's words, "hard questions about how people grow and develop, both in relation to primary relationships within families, and to other relationships which develop through education, work and life events" (ibid.: 44).

On this basis, to 'escape' into the world of a movie is not simply bound up with illusion. In Lyden's words, "We willingly enter another world in the cinema, one that we realize is not the empirical world, but one that has power over us nonetheless" (Lyden 2003: 52). The effect need not be seen as wholly distinct from a religious ritual, wherein a worshipper enters sacred space with a view to seeking an encounter with another dimension of existence which he or she knows is not the empirical world but which nevertheless charges the empirical world with meaning and value following the experience of transcendence and an encounter with, to borrow Rudolf Otto's term, the *numinous* (Otto 1959: 21). Both cinema and church thus enable people to achieve

a degree of separation, or escape, from the restrictions and limitations of the ‘real’ world before their ‘return’ to the everyday which is, subsequently, imbued with new significance (see Segal 1999: 127-8). As Lyden puts it, “We desire alternate worlds because we find our own imperfect; but such desires to flee also entail a desire to return, renewed and refreshed, to the everyday” (Lyden 2003: 53). Similar ideas have been expounded within liberation theology by Leonardo Boff, who has noted that “Modern studies have shown convincingly that fantasy is not mere fancifulness or a mechanism for escaping from conflict-ridden reality” (Boff 2004: 285). Rather, it is “the key to explaining authentic creativity,” not least the ability to “break away from things that are taken for granted, to abandon accepted presuppositions and begin to think in unorthodox ways” and “set off on a different road or head in a different direction” (ibid.). Escapism thus plays a powerful theological role in that, through the encounter with an alternative, fantasy world, the inadequacies of the real world can be stripped away and exposed and, what is more, brought into relationship with, and shed new light upon, the real world which, at the end of the day, is what Boff calls “stronger than the structures that serve as its support and framework” (ibid.). We can thus be enriched, rather than impoverished, by escapism, to the point, even, that Boff sees in fantasy “the richest source of human creativity,” and even as, in theological terms, “the image of the creator God in human beings,” and “the soil in which humanity’s capacity for invention and innovation flourishes” (ibid.). Fantasy is thus capable of *enriching* our apprehension of the empirical world, with all of its trials, obstacles and impediments, rather than (as Jasper would see it) *distancing* us from them.

To give an example, Lyden makes the point that the Steven Spielberg fantasy *Hook* (1991) “holds out an ideal of familial perfection... not because [Spielberg] believes this is literally attainable, but because the fantasy invokes an image of the world as we would like it to be” (Lyden 2003: 201). In other words, without seeing the world of fantasy and escapism as anything other than a realm of wish-fulfilment, hope and idealism, there is always the possibility that such a vision will “rub off on reality” (ibid.) and engender in audiences the hope that this world, for all its imperfections, has the capacity to improve.<sup>1</sup> In contrast to the world of *film noir* which, arguably, presents the world as it presently is, the advantage with escapist films is that they have the capacity to inject into this present world a measure of hope and aspiration as to how life could, and even should, be. This links with the premise

of Bernard Brandon Scott's 1994 publication, *Hollywood Dreams and Biblical Stories*, in which the thesis is advanced that cinema comprises a rich repository of modern mythology, through which "we work out who we are and negotiate the problems of modern life" (Scott 1994: 4). In offering resolutions to conflicts in life that are unresolved, or remain irresolvable, Scott sees a children's film such as *Home Alone* (Chris Columbus, 1990) as significant because it is able to implicitly confront the anxieties of its adult audience regarding the safety of children in a dangerous world, and could only do so, moreover, in terms of a happy ending since an ending that was pessimistic and downbeat (indeed, realistic) would fail to convey to an audience that it is possible for good to triumph over evil. While acknowledging that many people may deride "popular films as not worthy of serious attention" (ibid.: 15) – and Jasper's critique comes particularly to mind – Scott is right in his attestation that "their very popularity demands explanation," and that it is not adequate to simply attribute their appeal "to the audience's lowbrow taste" (ibid.). Rather, there is something far richer (and more subtle) taking place.

A film with a wish-fulfilment sensibility can therefore play an integral role in theological discourse, since it can offer constructive models of human negotiation and interaction. As Peter Francis says of Clint Eastwood's Westerns, for example, the likes of *High Plains Drifter* (1973), *The Outlaw Josey Wales* (1976), *Pale Rider* (1985) and *Unforgiven* (1992) "capture something of our persistent need to have utopias of freedom that give us some hope in the present," even to the point of enabling us "to understand how to build an inclusive community and leave behind old hatreds" (Francis 2005: 197). We may not choose to literally emulate the characters on screen – indeed, it would be worrying if we all turned into vigilantes as a consequence of watching Eastwood's Preacher in *Pale Rider* taking the law into his own hands because, like him, we want to start saving oppressed communities from being driven from their land by marauding bands of gold prospectors, or their modern day counterparts. Rather, it is sufficient that, as Lyden puts it in the context of a discussion of gangster films, "the ideal world of the myth is set up in contrast to the real world we live in, not as a literal model to follow in every respect but as a challenge to our ordinary ways of seeing and doing things" (Lyden 2003: 156). Quite how audiences actually appropriate films is a different matter, but it is sufficient that, in an imperfect world (as Augustine and Temple saw it), films are able to supply visions of how love, mercy, goodness and justice can be accomplished and realized,

albeit incompletely. The visions may be more reel than real, but, in Lyden's words, the "imaginary constructions within them" can nonetheless "serve to convey real truths about the nature of reality and how it is believed to be" (Lyden 2003: 54), and, perhaps, provide a template as to how we would like the 'real' world to function.

### **Sloppy Thinking and Futile Idealism?**

Of course, in a fundamental sense this is easier said than done. One of the great joys of *film noir*, for example, is that its delineation of an ambiguous, fallen and capricious world also contains much in the way of theological potential. This may be a body of film in which, as Christianson puts it, "audiences are generally morally disempowered," and "not offered a secure vantage point from which to pass judgement" (Christianson 2005: 154) on what is unfolding on the screen, but this is not to say that audiences cannot 'do' theology with films that portray a world devoid of hope and wish-fulfilment. Speaking about the downbeat – even hope-less – ending of *Chinatown* (1974), which portrays a world in which good demonstrably does not triumph over evil, the director, Roman Polanski, argued in a BBC interview that,

If it all ended with happy endings, we wouldn't be sitting here talking about this film today. If you... feel... there's a lot of injustice in our world, and you want to have people leaving [the] cinema with a feeling that they should do something about it in their lives, [then] if it's all dealt for them by the filmmakers they just forget about it over dinner, and that's it (qtd in Deacy 2005: 37).

Similarly, in the words of Donald Levine, "ambiguity can be productive if it is taken not as a warrant for sloppy thinking but as an invitation to deal responsibly with issues of great complexity" (qtd in Christianson 2005: 163). Roy Anker is a theologian who even goes so far as to suggest that the greater the darkness on display, the more incandescent the light. In his words, "it is by arriving at a clear purchase on what afflicts the human creature that people have some hope of understanding the Light or 'good' that might dispel evil's distortion and malice" (Anker 2004: 20). Despite the Manichean – even Gnostic – perspective which appears to inform his vision, Anker makes the judicious theological point that since it is darkness, rather than light, which constitutes "the natural human condition," and that "people are beset by evil inside and out, and cannot find their way to any slight portion of Light,

whether as rescue, safety or love” (ibid.: 19), then even though we may look for a better, more idealistic world our quest will be futile. For, according to Anker, “Even though people may want a better world, they not only lack sufficient sense or virtue to find or forge a path to that destination, but their best efforts to get there will more than likely only aggravate their already grievous fix” (ibid.). On this basis, there is no profit to be found in using escapist films as a tool for gaining theological insight, to the point, perhaps, that Jasper may not be entirely wide of the mark after all in his attestation that theology “emerges from more problematic and disturbing material than Hollywood dare show” (Jasper 1997: 244). Indeed, only those films which are, like theology, “two-edged, ironic, difficult and ambiguous” (ibid.) – and *noir* perfectly fits this bill – would qualify as even remotely able to contribute to serious theological discourse.

### **Towards a Re-Drawing of the Boundaries**

However, this is somewhat tautological, since Jasper appears to have already pre-determined that Hollywood film and the discipline of theology make for very incompatible bedfellows. Underlying his critique is the supposition that only limited dialogue can accrue between theology and film on the grounds that theology is invariably, and consistently, more stable, meaningful and fecund than Hollywood escapism could ever be. Yet, for there to be any serious dialogue or interaction between any two entities, it is a basic pre-requisite that both ‘sides’ in the debate need to be at least amenable to the possibility of change. The way Jasper sees it, theology is always going to be too serious and intellectually superior for any meaningful dialogue with Hollywood film to result. Is this always the case, though? As Marsh sees it, “to imply that religious meanings are somehow always inevitably more transparent and morally truthful than what one sees on screen seems overly optimistic” (Marsh 2004: 86), although I have to confess that this is a line I have previously adopted in *Faith in Film* where I indicate that theology’s dealing with redemption is more serious and efficacious than anything Hollywood can do in the context of escapism (Deacy 2005: 26). However, for dialogue to be serious, theology must be prepared to gain something – and even be challenged by – film rather than simply amount to a static discipline whose message is timeless and beyond growth. As Christian history has shown, there is no such thing as an immovable or fixed theology. In the early Church, for example, the challenge of Gnosticism in the second century precipitated the

drawing up, by the likes of Irenaeus and Tertullian, of the so-called ‘rule of faith,’ which endeavoured to combat those influential contemporary currents of thought that sustained the view that the physical world was an evil that must be escaped in order that one may become more spiritually enlightened (see Young 1996: 22-29). Likewise, at the turn of the fifth century, Augustine came to the view that, in light of the challenge to the Church presented by the Donatist controversy, there were situations in which it was legitimate to invoke the secular arm, and to employ coercion by the state, in order to bring a schismatic church body – the metaphorical lost sheep, as it were – back into the Catholic fold (see *ibid.*: 61).<sup>2</sup> In both cases, theological thinking was at the mercy of all manner of social, cultural, intellectual and political currents of thought which radically transformed the way in which theology was thenceforth able to operate. Indeed, the ‘rule of faith’ constituted a radical break from previously unregulated and spontaneous theological wisdom which, as brought to a head in the Montanist movement of the second century, witnessed a progressive shift away from spontaneity and improvisation (in the form of apostles, preachers and teachers) towards institutionalization and orthodoxy (in the form of bishops, presbyters and deacons), while the use of coercion was subsequently taken to justify the use of state power to suppress various heresies and to impose penalties (including death) on heretics throughout the medieval and early modern periods.

On the grounds that theology is thus inescapably dependant on historical and cultural circumstances, the challenge for theologians today is to ensure that theology does not comprise a self-important and immobile – even retroactive – discipline, but one that is capable of taking stock of changes in cultural paradigms and is able to cope with what Ford calls “the novelty and disruption of modernity” (Ford 2005: 2). Jasper is by no means unaware of this, as demonstrated by his acknowledgement that in the cinema of Scorsese, for instance, “life and film are more complex than simple religious readings would allow” (Jasper 1997: 242). However, when Jasper then illustrates his argument by pointing to the fact that *The Last Temptation of Christ* (Martin Scorsese, 1988) is capable of transgressing “the demands of its audience” (*ibid.*: 243) in a way that Hollywood escapism is characteristically unable to achieve, it is apparent that, for Jasper, although not all films are theologically barren, a dichotomy exists between mainstream theology and mainstream cinema which will (and should) never be reconciled. So long as there is a tendency among theologians to scorn the output of Hollywood, then theologians are susceptible to the charge of

misreading what does, and does not, constitute a legitimate repository of theological activity. Jasper may consider escapism as too shallow and superficial to be of any durable theological value, but the idea that we therefore ignore or denigrate something that we do not believe in has a number of unfortunate ramifications. Taken to the extreme, it is not fundamentally different from the way in which the early Church fathers decided that the best way of defeating the challenge of Gnosticism was to suppress it, and to destroy its texts (although Jasper in no way goes this far with respect to filmic texts!), or that the best way of defeating the rival claims of the Donatists was to employ against them a systematic programme of force, administered by the state, in order that they may come to see the error of their ways. A far better, and more intellectually viable, approach is to employ a greater sense of reciprocity and to allow for the possibility that, through whatever means – whether erudite written texts or crude escapist films – the key thing is that individuals and communities are enabled to harness their own resources and gifts and strive to attain their potential, and thereby be in a position to move towards what Bedborough refers to as “the unique design for which God intends us” (Bedborough 2005: 128) and what, for Jürgen Moltmann, amounts to the “movement of history toward the fulfillment of human destiny in the kingdom of God” (Bauckham 2005: 157).

### **Concluding Remarks**

Often, of course, Hollywood films richly deserve to be critiqued by theologians. As Peter Francis comments, in the context of a discussion of discerning Christ-figure motifs in *Pale Rider*, a film in which a mysterious, even supernatural, agent comes down from above in order to dispense justice “to those who need empowerment” (Francis 2005: 191) raises a number of theological problems. Francis is concerned about the way in which Eastwood’s Preacher conforms to all the “stereotypes of flawed masculinity” and comprises a detached figure “who only descends to dole out judgement or to flex his miraculous muscles” (ibid.). Using theistic parallels, Francis is perturbed by the fact that “This is a God who remains aloof, unknown and unnamed” (ibid.) and whose “supernatural help” is actually disempowering, rather than empowering, for the community concerned as “The Preacher does it all for them, they are not participants in the struggle for freedom” (ibid.). In such a context, a theological critique is not wide of the mark.<sup>3</sup> However, as the above discussion on escapism has demonstrated, the fact that a film presents a wish-fulfilment and fantasy

world in no way means that all audiences are incapable of responding in a spirit of anything other than passivity, docility and submission. As liberation theology has demonstrated, the fact that one third of the population of Latin America live in a state of abject poverty does not ensure, on the part of all Church activists, that the only response is one of acceptance of the status quo and the tendency (as critiqued by Marx) to direct one's *telos* to an afterlife where the trials and tribulations of this present age will be overcome and restitution guaranteed. Likewise, Augustine's contention that the Church on earth is qualitatively distinct from the heavenly city to which we are called in no way precipitated, on Augustine's part, a spirit of resignation or complacency. Rather, the onus was to ensure, in the present, that the person of faith should not "hesitate to obey the laws of the earthly city by which those things which are designed for the support of this mortal life are regulated" (qtd in Gill 2006: 120), even if this meant – as his dealings with the Donatists best exemplified – that a necessary evil (coercion) can sometimes be justified in order to bring about a greater good (Church unity and catholicity). As Moltmann's theology of the Cross has shown, furthermore, one does not transform the world by rejecting the manner in which people are presently engaging with it. Rather, if there is to be any radical change in society, this must take the form of "a political praxis of solidarity with the victims," wherein "desire for radical change must result from real solidarity with the victims of society and be rooted in their actual interests" (Bauckham 2005: 157). In other words, only by relating to what actual individuals and groups are doing on their own territory in a spirit of empathy and openness, rather than one in which the answers have already been pre-determined by outside channels and dogmas, can constructive theological activity take place. Escapist films may therefore have their shortcomings, but unless films, from whatever genre, are allowed to participate in the task of human flourishing and fulfilment, and are grounded in "the created dignity and eschatological destiny of humanity as the image of God" (ibid.), then we have a very long way to go before film and theology can be brought together as discerning, and reciprocal, dialogue-partners.

## **Bibliography**

Anker, Roy M. 2004: *Catching Light. Looking for God in the Movies*, Eerdsmans, Grand Rapids.

Augustine, St. (trans. Henry Bettensen) 1984: *The City of God*, Penguin, London.

Bauckham, Richard 2005: "Jürgen Moltmann", in David Ford with Rachel Muers (eds.), *The Modern Theologians. An Introduction to Christian Theology Since 1918*, Blackwell, Oxford: 147-62.

Bedborough, Sally 2005: "Taking the Waves by 'Surprise': *Master and Commander*", in Anthony J. Clarke & Paul S. Fiddes (eds.), *Flickering Images. Theology and Film in Dialogue*, Regent's Park College, Oxford: 123-135.

Boff, Leonardo 2004: "Liberating Grace", in Gesa Thiessen (eds.), *Theological Aesthetics. A Reader*, SCM, London: 284-5.

Christianson, Eric 2005: "An Ethic You Can't Refuse?: Assessing *The Godfather* Trilogy", in William Telford, Eric Christianson & Peter Francis (eds.), *Cinéma Divinité. Readings in Film and Theology*, SCM, London: 110-123.

Clarke, Anthony 2005: "Gaining Fresh Insights: Film and Theological Reflection in a Pastoral Setting", in Anthony J. Clarke & Paul S. Fiddes (eds.), *Flickering Images. Theology and Film in Dialogue*, Regent's Park College, Oxford: 59-79.

Coates, Paul 1994: *Film at the Intersection of High and Mass Culture*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

Collins, Jim 1993: "Genericity in the 90s: Eclectic Irony and the New Sincerity", in Jim Collins, Hilary Radner & Ava Preacher Collins (eds.), *Film Theory Goes to the Movies*, Routledge, London: 242-63.

Fiddes, Paul 2005: "When Text Becomes Voice: *You've Got Mail*", in Anthony J. Clarke & Paul S. Fiddes (eds.), *Flickering Images. Theology and Film in Dialogue*, Regent's Park College, Oxford: 97-111.

Deacy, Christopher 2001: *Screen Christologies. Redemption and the Medium of Film*, University of Wales Press, Cardiff.

Deacy, Christopher 2005: *Faith in Film. Religious Themes in Contemporary Cinema*, Ashgate, Aldershot.

Ford, David 2005: "Introduction to Modern Christian Theology", in David Ford with Rachel Muers (eds.), *The Modern Theologians. An Introduction to Christian Theology Since 1918*, Blackwell, Oxford: 1-15.

Francis, Peter 2005: "Clint Eastwood Westerns: Promised Land and Real Men", in William Telford, Eric Christianson & Peter Francis (eds.), *Cinéma Divinité. Readings in Film and Theology*, SCM, London: 182-198.

Gill, Robin 2006: *A Textbook of Christian Ethics*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edn., T&T Clark, London.

Jasper, David 1997: "On Systematizing the Unsystematic: A Response", in Clive Marsh & Gaye Ortiz (eds.), *Explorations in Theology and Film: Movies and Meaning*, Blackwell, Oxford: 235-244.

Johnston, Robert 2000: *Reel Spirituality. Theology and Film in Dialogue*, Baker Academic, Grand Rapids.

Kelly, J.N.D. 1958: *Early Christian Doctrines*, A&C Black, London.

Livingston, James C. 1971: *Modern Christian Thought: From the Enlightenment to Vatican II*, Collier Macmillan, London.

Lyden, John C. 2003: *Film as Religion. Myths, Morals and Rituals*, New York University Press, New York.

Lynch, Gordon 2005: *Understanding Theology and Popular Culture*, Blackwell, Oxford.

Loughlin, Gerard, 2005: "Cinéma Divinité: A Theological Introduction", in William Telford, Eric Christianson & Peter Francis (eds.), *Cinéma Divinité. Readings in Film and Theology*, SCM, London: 1-12.

Markham, Ian 2006: "Theology", in Robert Segal (ed.), *The Blackwell Companion to the Study of Religion*, Blackwell, Oxford: 193-210.

Marsh, Clive 2004: *Cinema and Sentiment. Film's Challenge to Theology*, Paternoster Press, Carlisle.

McGrath, Alister E. 1998: *Historical Theology. An Introduction to the History of Christian Thought*, Blackwell, Oxford.

Niebuhr, H. Richard 1952: *Christ and Culture*, Faber & Faber, London.

Otto, Rudolf 1959: *The Idea of the Holy*, Penguin, Harmondsworth.

Richards, Jeffrey 1976: "Frank Capra and the Cinema of Populism", in Bill Nichols (ed.), *Movies and Methods*, vol. 1, University of California Press, London: 65-77.

Scott, Bernard Brandon 1994: *Hollywood Dreams and Biblical Stories*, Fortress, Minneapolis.

Segal, Robert A. 1999: *Theorizing about Myth*, University of Massachusetts Press, Amherst.

Thomson, David 1978: *America in the Dark. Hollywood and the Gift of Unreality*, Hutchinson, London.

Young, Frances 1996: *The Making of the Creeds*, SCM, London.

---

<sup>1</sup> The thinking of Walter Rauschenbusch, a leading figure in the Social Gospel movement in the United States, comes particularly to mind, here. See Livingston 1971: 263-6.

<sup>2</sup> To cite another example, the Council of Chalcedon in 451 C.E. was an attempt to offer a compromise between two competing tendencies – one, the Alexandrian approach, which held that, through the Incarnation, God had become united with human nature in order that human nature can share in the life of God (such that there was only one divine nature), while the other, Antiochene position vigorously defended the independence of the two natures and understood Christ as both fully human and fully divine. For Antiochenes, the two natures were held together by the grace of God in the form of the hypostatic union (see Deacy 2001: 87).

<sup>3</sup> For more on this, see Deacy 2001: 146 where I argue that since the filmic action hero “is single-handedly capable of saving the world from catastrophe, by taking risks and executing stunts which are beyond the competence and means of the average human being, there is a fundamental sense in which the film viewer is being forced to abdicate responsibility in favour of a quasi-messianic, fantasy redeemer-figure who will shoulder our burdens.”