

# Motion Icons: Images of Christ in Unexpected Places

The separation of church and cinema runs deeper than obscene language and sex. It is a rift between church and art, specifically the Protestant Church and visual art. After smashing Catholic 'idols' to bits, Reformers predictably built churches inhospitable to visual art, so not to distract believers from 'true, spiritual worship'. The result is that many sanctuaries today resemble mosques—walls bare save for a few calligraphic banners. Meaningful symbolism is lost on Protestants who fear 'empty ritual' and 'ceremonial pomp'. Starved of symbolism, our religious imaginations are skin-and-bone. 'We do not primarily get our informing images from the walls of churches as historical Christians did,' laments Margaret Miles in *Seeing and Believing*, 'we get them from the media culture in which we live.'

One cure for this malady may be the filmic icon—a short film nestled in the liturgy that ushers Christians into a holy moment of prayer and praise. Not merely an evangelistic tool or sermon illustration (or entertainment), the film would demand the dignity of art as art, wearing its own trousers, as revelatory beauty or prophetic confrontation.

At Life on the Vine church, a post-modern church within the Christian and Missionary Alliance denomination, we call them "liturgicons" because the film is followed by a call-and-response that interacts with the icon.

## A CASE FOR THE FILMIC ICON

**World-Projection Powers:** Immersion in a work of art is to enter another world. Both the truth and falsity of that world serve to benefit our perception of the real world in

which we live. Few would disagree that film is an exceptionally useful medium through which to project possible worlds.

Upon entering the world of the artwork, we are either confronted or confirmed. Borrowing from Nicholas Wolterstorff, art confirms our identity as a community by retelling our 'myth' (history and beliefs) in ways

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familiar to us, satisfying our desire for concrete answers. The filmmaker in this case acts as artist-priest, eliciting worship and praise.

Conversely, art confronts us with something new, or something old in a new light, as would a parable—not promoting but subverting the status quo. The filmmaker here is an artist-prophet, who 'unmasks the false sanctity that pervades every culture.'

When creating an icon at my church, we ask whether it's going to confirm their beliefs or prophetically confront the congregation with personal or cultural sin.

**Hero-Saints:** Movie actors are often referred to as 'idols' or 'cultural icons'. Both on and off the screen the movements of the 'stars' are followed and envied by millions, Christians among them. What makes these people larger than life? Looks, talent, charisma? Certainly it is not intelligence, education, or job skills, nor indeed their integrity.

It is no secret that the real-life character of most celebrities is not worth celebrating.

The filmic icon can help change this trend by refashioning our imagination's construct of the true hero, i.e., the saint, and to imitate him or her. The idea is nothing new, for Christ-figures have been around since the days of silent film (e.g., Dreyer's *The Trial of Joan of Arc*). The snag is that few Christians actually see these films.

However, if we produce short Christ-figure films (or saint-films) cut to fit the Sunday morning service, parishioners can see new possibilities for imitating Christ in contemporary contexts. The saint-film need not portray canonized Saints, or even historical persons, but could rather portray 'ordinary' modern-day people—to explore

what a saint looks like when doing the washing up or sharpening pencils.

**Exercise of Gifts:** Songs, banners, and floral arrangements are pleasing to God, but the Body is more creative and diverse than these. Film, being the 'seventh art', combines all six art forms: dance, drama, poetry, music, visual arts, and architecture. The production of filmic icons would therefore provide artists a broader venue for self- and divine-expression, and the congregation with a unique and thought-provoking addition to the usual Sunday liturgy or service order.

## KINDS OF ICONS

I propose here three different kinds of filmic icons: sacramental, scriptural, and sermon.

**Sacramental films:** Richard Viladesau,

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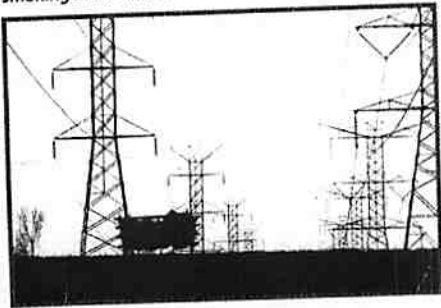
in *Theology and the Arts*, posits that sacred images are not sacraments but rather sacramentals, in that all things set apart as aids to worship and fellowship are media of grace. Sacramental works do not contain grace, as if magical; rather they mediate God's truth and grace—in a manner similar to that of mountains, birdsongs, and coddling hens. In this sense all filmic icons are sacramentals.

Filmic icons particularly sacramental might take their cue from the realist school of filmmaking. By filming raw nature, mundane human life, common scenarios bespeaking martyrdom, etc., such icons can reveal God's being, goodness, beauty, and sacrificial love. The epiphany, or "holy moment," of such films need not be announced with fanfare. Subtle epiphanies will join the pool of privileged symbols that shape the viewers' imaginations. After viewing sacramentals, worshippers will require a moment of silence, whether bowing their heads or gazing prayerfully at the final frozen shot (the "stasis").

#### EXAMPLE: MAKING WAY FOR THE SUPERNATURAL



This picture above, (along with the picture below) were shown every Sunday of Advent 2005, the theme being 'Making Way for the Supernatural.' No one pays attention to the supernatural except for the young woman smoking in the final shot.



Obviously this type of film does not follow the realist school; mangers aren't ubiquitous in reality. However, it is sacramental in that the manger is recognized as a sacred image.

**Scriptural films:** Another type of filmic icon is a 'translation' of scripture, with as much variety as the biblical genres: narrative, psalm, prophecy, lament, or prayer. If the translation into cinematic language is too vague for churchgoers, verbal scripture could be

Bearing in mind that motion icons are not on equal footing with holy writ, this 'translation' into filmic language is better called an 'interpretation.' Even when filming raw nature, interpretation and localization are inevitable. Filmmakers record nature with their own unique perspective (angle), attention span (cut), and correlation to other scenes of life (juxtaposition). A filmmaker is a maker, or at least an interpreter, of reality. This is not to say the icon is a mere illustration of scripture. Viladesau believes a religious painting (and thus a film) can become 'an auxiliary text, an interpretive "gloss" that consciously or unconsciously bears a further dimension of the message.' Whenever scripture is placed in a new context or seen with fresh eyes, it holds a new significance.

This 'auxiliary text' idea, however, presents the problem of artistic license: both the conflict of opinion among artists and the conflict of their interpretation with scripture itself. Seeing how one's cultural milieu conditions the portrayal of Jesus, the probability of conflicting 'visions' is unavoidably high.

#### EXAMPLE: THE CALL TO BE THE BODY

For our sermon series 'The Call to Be the Body,' this piece follows God's calling of Adam, Abraham, Jacob, Moses, Jesus, the Apostles, and us. A series of paintings may not be film proper, but it is made filmic by the juxtapositions, zooms, pans, dissolves, and fades. For clarity, fragments of scripture were superimposed on these images.



'Adam and Eve,' (by Watts) was shown with the caption 'Where are you?'



'Desert Encampment,' (by Pasini) was shown with the caption 'I will make you into a great nation.'

**Sermonic films:** Other motion icons will teach a moral lesson or entreat us to obey God by doing a specific deed—hopefully without feeling preachy or legalistic.

In one such film I created, Lady Liberty was contrasted with those enslaved to poverty. Neither does America have the power to free souls from bondage to sin. Christ, however, came to liberate both soul and body. This piece was made to fit Luke 4, when Jesus reads Isaiah's words in the temple, 'sight to the blind, freedom for the captives....' The music used was Coldplay's *Yellow*, which states, 'Look at the stars. See how they shine for you.'

#### OVERCOMING OBJECTIONS

**'Motion icons' are oxymorons:** An icon is static; it holds our gaze and invites us into silent meditation of its represented reality. Is not the drama and motion of film contrary to the peaceful, contemplative mood of static icons?

This objection, though fair, forgets the stylistic range of cinema: the freeze-frame, still shot, and slow motion. These techniques facilitate a more thoughtful, meditative experience for the viewer. Granted, nothing beats the meditative powers of an icon—if the worshiper is Orthodox. If, however, the worshiper did not grow up learning the conventions of static icons but rather the conventions of film, then it would seem that filmic icons would better captivate their religious imaginations. Eastern Orthodox worshipers come to an icon with words embedded in their minds: the meaning of a color or a shape. Protestant evangelicals come with Bible stories. Film—being a mixture of word, image, music, and its own conventions of fade, cut, and juxtaposition—can present symbols familiar to its viewers or, if not familiar, the words to explain the symbols.

**Spectatorship:** Among many of Jacques Ellul's concerns in *The Humiliation of the Word* is that images are turning us into onlookers rather than doers. The same assault has been launched against movies. We go from one screen to the next, sitting on our bums, watching others do the action but taking none ourselves.

Ellul is right to warn us of images' potential for passivity (though he forgets the same trap exists in music and books). Wolterstorff's motto, Art in Action, should help worship leaders

reality of television, film, and video games outshines our real lives. Cyberspace, online banking, home shopping, cell phones, and video telephones either remove us from people entirely or foster a less personal mode of communication.

Agreed. We must not allow a medium such as film to so dominate the service that it substitutes real faces speaking in real time. To prevent impersonality, keep the films short (3-5 minutes) and be sure the congregation participates together in what they just watched.

But is virtual reality something to fear? Or is not verisimilitude what storytellers and painters have been achieving for centuries? Some films actually make us less mechanical and more human. Film has proved itself a capable art form for capturing attention and compelling change in the lives of moviegoers. Images and movies dominate our culture. Instead of fighting it, churches would be wise to embrace, employ, and empower film to do things it has not yet done.

**Emotional manipulation:** Icons help create a sacred space and mood for reflection and prayer, so that viewers might actually feel like praying. Such 'emotional manipulation', as some indict it, ought not discredit the authenticity of such prayer, no more than the deep, plangent sentiments aroused by Górecki's symphonies.

**Extravagance.** Alluding perhaps to the Suffering Servant who 'had not beauty in him' and who commands us to take up our (not-so-pretty) crosses, some Christians object that when the arts flourish the poor perish. While this objection applies to all the arts, it is hurled at film in particular because production is expensive and time-consuming. Admittedly, any conscientious bystander on the set of a shoot, counting the hours of preparation for a five-second shot that may or may not make the final cut, will wonder whether that time would be better spent feeding the poor. Indeed, I wondered the same while compiling this research!

Then I stumbled upon the words of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who, while in a Nazi prison, wondered, '... whether it is possible ... to regain the idea of the Church as providing an understanding of the area of freedom

reestablished within it.'

In the midst of his own suffering, Bonhoeffer saw the necessity for art, even play, in church. God is love, but also God is lovely. Filmmaking does require much time and money for a short product, but there are payoffs, such as large audiences, multiple screenings, and broad accessibility of film as an art form.



'Christ at the Sea of Galilee'; (by Tintoretto) was shown with the caption 'I have come to call sinners.'

## CONCLUSION

As the arts return from exile, may film be found among them, not a mere sermon illustration but as an artistic element of the liturgy. While some churches are not prepared for this proposal—for reasons theological, technological, or temperamental—others are sure to welcome it.

The trick is to do it well. If a church member has talent and interest in filmmaking, then, God be praised, one more artist has found her niche in the ministry of the

local church. With digital technology and editing software, independent filmmaking is now an attainable reality.

Motion icons most certainly convey a message. But much more than that, their stories and images sculpt our imaginations; they give us a feeling of exuberance or consolation, a way of looking at the world, a way of living in the world. If guided by the Holy Spirit, they will inspire us, convict us, model Christ for us, and reveal the beauty and omnipresence of God.



## AARON LINDLOFF

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