



Film and Faith

Why use film?

Most young people like and regularly watch movies!

- Film is popular and credible amongst children and their parents... it is also marketed directly at them even when inappropriate
 - *Survey an average Reception class and you will be amazed at how many 4-year-old boys can describe Spiderman's cinematic costume, adventures and adversaries even though both **Spider-Man 1 and 2**¹ were released on a 12/PG certificate in the cinema and on DVD/Video.*
- The popularity of film assists the RE teacher because pupils are enthusiastic about watching film in the classroom.
However, they are not necessarily critical readers.
Film is more than a narrative – we have to be sensitive to, and able to explore the whole package:
 - *The leap between passive consumption and critical evaluation can be large but is an essential part in the development of pupils' critical thinking skills.*
 - *Consider why they sympathise with one character and despise another, why they feel tense this moment and amused the next – this involves reflection on more than the narrative and characterisation – it also involves acknowledgment of and reflection upon the mechanics of cinematic presentation: the direction, lighting, dialogue, costumes and so on, without which film would remain a screenplay*
- Films are about life; the 'stuff' of RE:
 - *Film is a medium through which humans seek to explore, explain and rationalise their place within the world.*
 - *Suggest a topic covered in RE and you can almost certainly identify a film that addresses it (although it may not then be appropriate for use in the classroom!). Mainstream films repeatedly reference, address, and sometimes depend upon religious ideas, language, concepts, figures and narratives. The fact that film does so often usurp the 'stuff of faith' makes an exploration of film in RE not just valuable but sometimes essential.*
 - *Do we want our pupils to accept uncritically 'resurrection' as it is named and presented in **The Mummy**² or understand prophecy purely in terms of **The Matrix**³?*
 - *The fact that film is so much a part of children's lives makes it even more important that we enable them to articulate, explore and evaluate the (often implicit) messages they contain.*

¹ Spider-Man (2002, 12) Spider-Man 2 (2004, PG)

² The Mummy (1999, 12 [cinema], 15 [DVD])

³ The Matrix (1999, 15)



Integrating film in RE

Film can...
 stimulate
 illustrate
 challenge
 support
 ...the RE curriculum.

Film can...
 be used as a starter activity or it may form a core area of study
 be used alongside a variety of thinking skills activities e.g.
 fortune lines, community of enquiry, prediction, odd one out, etc.

When used appropriately film can deepen reflection and enable pupils to actively engage mentally, emotionally and sometimes spiritually with the area of study.

But it is important to address the complexity of the cinematic material and not simply take a film for its narrative content – otherwise we under-use the resource and limit pupils' critical reflection on the medium

The interface between film and faith

These areas of interface and the films that stimulate them may be legitimately explored in RE providing that this exploration is critical (in the best sense of the word) and takes note of the cinematic delivery (and not just the narrative content):

Type of Interface	Examples
'Re-presenting'	Some films 're-present' religious material either from scripture or from the lives of founders or key figures, e.g.: Little Buddha ⁴ , The Miracle Maker ⁵ , or Gandhi ⁶ . The extent to which these films are, or are not, faithful to the scriptures and/or biographical material they are based upon is an interesting area of study

⁴ Little Buddha (1993, PG)

⁵ The Miracle Maker (2000, U)

⁶ Gandhi (1982, PG)



Exploitation/Exploration	<p>Other films may exploit or explore religious material and where a film lies on this spectrum will depend on the viewer. Diversity of view as to where a film should be placed on this spectrum may lead to conflict and controversy. An example of the complexity here would be the film <i>Priest</i>⁷ – the subject of both admiration and boycott by different members of the Christian faith who either admired or despised its presentation of a homosexual Catholic priest. <i>Bend it like Beckham</i>⁸ (Sikh) and <i>East is East</i>⁹ (Muslim and Christian) are examples of two British films that sought to explore the religious backgrounds, beliefs and diversity of the British Asian experience but which were received very differently by members of the faith groups concerned. Sometimes an extended exploration of religious material and concepts turns up in an unlikely place: it would be worthwhile comparing the extended on-screen discussions of the definition and nature of ‘signs’ that takes place in <i>Pulp Fiction</i>¹⁰, <i>The Messenger: The Story of Joan of Arc</i>¹¹ and <i>Signs</i>¹². Each of these directly refers to a Christian context and seeks to explore when an event may be understood as a sign from God.</p>
‘Faith-free’ concept use	<p>Other films depend for narrative coherence upon concepts that originated within, and are given meaning by, faith communities but that, in their portrayal may have little to do with those living religious contexts. Examples of this might be <i>City of Angels</i>¹³, <i>The Devil’s Advocate</i>¹⁴ and <i>Constantine</i>¹⁵. In their exploration of angels, demons and the devil these films have something to say about human free will, human suffering, the nature of God and God’s relationship with humankind but they do so in a ‘faith free’ context. What they do say can legitimately be explored in RE where the faith context can be revisited and the stance of the film explored in that light. It is perhaps appropriate to note here that when a faith context is offered (and it is often Catholic Christian as in <i>Dogma</i>¹⁶) it is frequently not one that the faith community itself would acknowledge or affirm. For example it is generally assumed in many horror films that there is an afterlife from which spirits may return for good (<i>Sixth Sense</i>¹⁷) or for ill (<i>Ghost Ship</i>¹⁸ and many hundreds of others!) but this is rarely ever explored within a coherent theological context. Films that do seek to explore heaven and hell are often religiously unorthodox, presenting images that faith communities would reject or see as unhelpful. The extent to which a given portrayal of an idea, concept or figure is ‘orthodox’ or acceptable to any given faith community is a valid area for study in RE.</p>

⁷ Priest (1994, 15)

⁸ Bend It Like Beckham (2002, 12)

⁹ East is East (1999, 12)

¹⁰ Pulp Fiction (1994, 18)

¹¹ The Messenger: The Story of Joan of Arc (1999, 15)

¹² Signs (2002, 12A [cinema], 12 [DVD])

¹³ City of Angels (1998, 12)

¹⁴ The Devil’s Advocate (1997, 18)

¹⁵ Constantine (2005, 15)

¹⁶ Dogma (1999, 15)

¹⁷ Sixth Sense (1999, 15)

¹⁸ Ghost Ship (2002, 18)



Allegorical representation

Some films may be read as allegorical representations of faith stories, figures or traditions. There is a long tradition of 'Christ figures' in film from **Cool Hand Luke**¹⁹ through **Jesus of Montreal**²⁰ to Neo in **The Matrix**²¹. **The Truman Show**²² has been successfully read as an allegory of Genesis 2 and **Deep Impact** as an expression of the teachings of Baha'u'llah: the founder of the Bahai faith. The **Stars Wars**²³ films have been allegorically read by those from many diverse faith traditions and have led to the establishment of a new faith: Jedi.

Exploring film and faith in the Primary Phase

Explore the Lives of Founders/Religious Experience/Revelation/The Nature of God

Prince of Egypt²⁴ The Burning Bush - Moses learns that God has a task for him. (start at 41 minutes and end at 46 minutes – Moses leaves the cave)

In exploring the content of this clip it is important to appreciate the cinematic techniques used and to encourage pupils to consider these when they discuss their responses to the film.

Cinematic Points to consider:

How are colours used to denote mood/emotions?

How do the different camera-angles help to convey what is happening?

How is God characterised through the voice/dialogue/colours?

Points for the Teacher to consider:

The voice of God is composed of male and female tones.

In the Bible the encounter takes place on 'the mountain of God' – why set Moses Encounter in a cave?

The power of God is mainly seen through Moses experience – the camera is rarely on the tree itself.

The cinematic account makes several omissions and deviations from the biblical account.

Key Questions that may be useful to explore in unpacking this clip:

What is God like? (Male/female, kind/unkind, friendly/scary)

How did Moses' emotions change during his encounter with God? (A 'Fortune Line' may be helpful here)

If you had an experience like this how would you feel? Would you feel worried or special, happy or sad, brave or frightened?

¹⁹ Cool Hand Luke (1967, 15 [cinema], PG [DVD])

²⁰ Jesus of Montreal (1989, 18)

²¹ The Matrix (1999 15)

²² The Truman Show (1998, PG)

²³ Star Wars: Episode IV - A New Hope (1977, U) to Episode III - Revenge of the Sith (2005, 12A [cinema], 12 [DVD])

²⁴ Prince of Egypt (1998, U)



Moses was asked to stand up for his people and help them to be free – who would you help/stand up for?

Extension task

This film starts with the following quotation:

“The motion picture you are about to see is an adaptation of the Exodus story.

While artistic and historical licence has been taken we believe that this film is true to the essence, values and integrity of a story that is a cornerstone of faith for millions of people worldwide.”

Compare this cinematic presentation with the biblical account (Exodus 3:1 - 4:17). How has the film altered the biblical account, what has been added, left out or changed? Why do you think the writer/director decided to make these changes?

Approach religious material allegorically: Creation, the Creator & the Created

The Snowman²⁵ The Boy creates the Snowman
(start at beginning and end at 3 minutes – the completion of the Snowman)

In exploring the content of this clip it is important to appreciate the cinematic techniques used and to encourage pupils to consider these when they discuss their responses to the film.

Cinematic Points to consider:

This clip is dialogue free - how does the music convey mood/emotion?

How do the different camera angles help to express the developing relationship between the boy and the Snowman?

Points for teachers to consider:

There are parallels between this clip and the Judao-Christian creation story: first there was nothing, from the materials available God forms a man, the man is created in God’s own image. The creator personally forms and then cares for the creation. The creation has free will.

Key Questions that may be useful to explore in unpacking this clip:

The boy initially made a snowball that hit the house – was this a good way to use the snow – how do we know?

Does the boy take care when he is making the snowman?

How is it dressed – where did these clothes come from?

When the snowman is finished is the boy happy: does he like his creation?

What do you think will happen next?

Outline the Snowman coming to life: When the snowman comes alive will he like the boy?

Many people believe that God created the world and all the people in it. Is God like the boy or is He/She different?

²⁵ The Snowman (1982, U)



If you were able to create someone what would they be like – what powers would they have? How would you treat them? (You could give pupils a 'recipe' page here for them to list the 'ingredients/personality/powers' of their creation.

The Snowman tells us that a creator can create, love and play with his creation but it also tells us that the creation is free. The boy does not control the Snowman – it sometimes does things that the boy does not like. In the end the boy has to accept that his creation will melt away and 'die'.

If you could ask/or say something to God about the world what would it be?

Who am I? What is my role in life?

***Toy Story*²⁶**

(start at 43 minutes and end at 46 minutes – Buzz broken on the landing)

In exploring the content of this clip it is important to appreciate the cinematic techniques used and to encourage pupils to consider these when they discuss their responses to the film.

Cinematic Points to consider:

Buzz does not speak during this clip – explore the way the animators move his body to express how he feels.

Take note of the song lyrics – they narrate the scene.

How do the camera angles convey meaning – consider in particular the last shot of Buzz lying on the floor.

Points for teachers to consider:

Part of human experience is change and self-discovery. For some pupils (and adults) finding out who you are can be painful and difficult – we may not be as good or as popular as we thought or hoped we were. But that doesn't mean that we aren't special, valuable, useful or loved. Buzz doesn't stay broken – he is mended and goes on to save his friend Woody at a time when Woody has lost hope. One message of the Christian Gospel (and other religious traditions) is that we need to accept that we aren't perfect but that we are nevertheless loved and lovable.

Key Questions that may be useful to explore in unpacking this clip:

What kind of person is Buzz at the start of this clip?

How does Buzz feel when he watches the television advert?

Why do you think Buzz decides to try to fly after he discovers he is a toy?

Should Buzz have tried to fly?

How has Buzz changed at the end of the clip?

When have you learned something about yourself that you didn't like?

When have you failed at something that you wanted to do?

What gifts and strengths do you have?

²⁶ Toy Story (1995, U)



Who makes you feel special?
How can you let others know that they are valued and cared for?

Exploring film and faith in the Secondary Phase

Signs and Revelation

The Messenger: The Story of Joan of Arc²⁷
(start at 202 minutes and end at 206 minutes)

In exploring the content of this clip it is important to appreciate the cinematic techniques used and to encourage pupils to consider these when they discuss their responses to the film.

Cinematic Points to consider:

Compare and contrast the two characters in this clip – direction/acting, make up, costume, voices – what do these tell us about their very different emotional states.

What do the camera angles and the cutting between the cell and the field tell us about the ‘reality’ of Joan’s experience?

The visitor is filmed mainly in ‘close up’ – what is this technique trying to convey?

Points for teachers to consider:

Warning: this scene is not representative of much of the rest of the film, which includes rape and graphic battle scenes.

Key Questions that may be useful to explore in unpacking this clip:

The cinematic presentation indicates that the visitor (played by Dustin Hoffman and listed as ‘The Conscience’ in the credits) is not physically in the room with Joan – who is he and where does he come from?

The music that accompanies the visitors’ description of the supernatural appearance of the sword in the field was also used in the film ***The Omen***²⁸ about the appearance and demonic influence of the anti-Christ on earth. Does the Directors use of this particular score alter the pupil’s perceptions about the character of the visitor? Does it give new insight into what the visitor’s intentions might be as he gets Joan to reflect upon her experiences? Can the pupils suggest an alternative score for this clip?

Joan believes that she has received several signs: the wind, the ringing clouds, the dancer and the sword. The visitor reiterates her list and offers several alternative explanations for the sword being in the field. What are they? If the visitor is correct and the sword got there by any of the means he suggests does that mean that Joan finding the sword was not a sign from God?

How do you think this encounter will affect Joan’s faith: in herself, her mission and in God?

²⁷ The Messenger: The Story of Joan of Arc (1999, 15)

²⁸ The Omen (1976, 18)



This film has been accused of taking liberties with the story of Joan of Arc – there is no historical record of this encounter ever taking place. Is the inclusion of such a fictional scene justifiable in a ‘biography’ if its inclusion seeks to tell us something about the nature of Joan’s faith?

Religious Language and Sacrifice - The Messiah

***Deep Impact*²⁹**

(start at 25 minutes end at 28 minutes and 17 seconds)

In exploring the content of this clip it is important to appreciate the cinematic techniques used and to encourage pupils to consider these when they discuss their responses to the film.

Cinematic Points to consider:

In this clip cutting between one scene and another is frequently used. What does this achieve, how does it influence the pace of the story, what emotions does it try to convey or generate? Does the use of the music suit the camera cutting techniques?

Points for teachers to consider:

Films frequently borrow or reference religious language and concepts to give depth to characters or plot. In *Deep Impact* the rocket ship ‘The Messiah’ is essential to the survival of the human race. The crew do reach the comet but they are unable to destroy it with the weapons they have. Like Jesus (to whom the title Messiah relates for Christians) they must decide to willingly sacrifice themselves to ensure the survival of the Earth. In doing this they ensure that those that have been purposefully selected to survive the impact of the comet will have the chance to do so. The film concludes with contrasting images of destruction, reconciliation, sacrifice and hope.

Key Questions that may be useful to explore in unpacking this clip:

The President is introducing “the crew that will stop the comet”. From what you know about the life of Jesus can you predict what will happen to the crew of the Messiah? Will they be able to reach the comet and destroy it? Will they save the earth? Will they survive their mission?

In this clip we don’t see the crew – does it matter what they look like? What personal skills will the members of this crew need if they are to succeed in their mission?

Is there any contemporary cause, person or belief that you believe is worth sacrificing your life for?

Deep Impact and many other films, (e.g. *The Matrix*), use words or depend upon concepts that gain meaning from religious or mythical traditions. Can you suggest other films that use religious words or concepts? Are their use of the religious words and concepts relevant and/or appropriate?

Some of the characters that we see in this clip do not survive the film; some radically alter their lives knowing that the world may end when the comet hits. If you knew that your life was about

²⁹ Deep Impact (1998, 12)



to end in this way how would you change your life? Would your attitudes, relationships, and behaviour change?

Guidance on Film Copyright and Classification

Access

Films are easily and cheaply available on DVD and video (although the latter has fallen from fashion and new films may not have a video release) through high street and internet stores and rental agencies. Often pupils will have copies of the films although they may never have considered using them for RE!

Copyright

The copyright statement at the start of videos / DVDs clearly states that commercial films may not be used in a school context. However, the British Film Institute publication, ***Making Movies Matter***³⁰, quotes the Copyright Designs and Patents Act (1988) as follows: “films or broadcasts can be copied... to make a film in the course of instruction by a person giving or receiving instruction”. **Teachers or students can record broadcasts “for educational purposes” so long as they are not sold or hired out to third parties.** All works - including film and video - may be copied under the Act’s fair dealing provisions. This means that it is permissible to copy a reasonable proportion of the work for “criticism or review”. This of course covers copying rather than showing, but, the advice from the British Film Institute is that teachers can screen what they wish in school, providing it is part of an educational scheme of work relevant to the subject.

This means that teachers may:

- Show films, in whole or part, during a teaching session
- Buy a video/DVD for use in the classroom
- Copy relevant parts of a video/DVD for students to take home and study as part of the curriculum
- Show films as part of an educational, curriculum-linked after school club

Providing that:

- This is part of the curriculum
- No charge is made for any of the above activities
- That the films are not being shown for the purposes of ‘entertainment’ (schools that show films at the end of term please note!)

³⁰ *Making Movies Matter*, chapter 4, para 4.6, British Film Institute, 1999



Classification

Teachers often ask if it is permissible to show extracts or whole films to pupils when the film has been given a film classification certificate over their age?

The British Film Institute advises that this is permissible (but please see below). Film certificates regulate cinemas, shops/rental agencies and those to whom films are sold / rented. Schools, acting as they do in *loco parentis*, are free to exercise their own judgement as to what should and should not be shown to children.

However, film classification is an indication of the content of a film and teachers should take note of certification. If teachers still wish to show a film with a certificate over the age of the pupils it is advisable to seek permission from the Headteacher and Governors in the first instance. Then, having outlined the educational context and value, teachers should obtain parental approval before the films are viewed.

Sources of Film Resources & Useful Information

Resources Centres and Agencies

The North East Religious Learning Resources Centre (NERLRC) has a particular interest in Film and Faith. There is a dedicated section on its website with a frequently updated and expanding publication '**Movies, Movies, Movies**' listing over 150 films annotated with diverse themes relevant to RE. It also has an excellent collection of resources relevant to the topic including materials for schools, churches and centres of higher and further education. An annual residential – 'The Film and Faith Forum' – is offered for those interested in pursuing the subject in a relaxed and informal setting (please contact the NERLRC for details).

There are a variety of other agencies, institutions and publications that make reference to film as a support for the teaching of RE or as a basis for exploring issues of faith. These vary in the extent to which their interest in film is confessional rather than critically educational – it will be up to the teacher to evaluate any resource that uses film to explore faith and to be aware of the various agendas that authors/publishers may have.

Websites supporting the use of film in RE

www.biblesociety.org.uk

Home of *Reel Issues*, subscriber based film and faith magazine run by the Bible Society. Has interesting film reviews and discussions (archived), reviews of film and faith publications/articles and a new movies trailer spot.

www.connectbiblestudies.com

Films are referenced as a way of accessing biblical teaching and issues.

www.fish.co.uk

Christian Aid site, which contains all kinds of material but includes some interesting comments



on contemporary films and their link the theological issues

www.filmeducation.org

Site devoted to teachers using film and new media across the National Curriculum. Unfortunately there are no suggestions here for a faith / Religious Education focus at present.

Websites dealing with film in a religious context

www.adherents.com/movies/

Movies recommended by the adherents and representatives of specific faith communities as showing images that are positive or realistic. Covers the major six faiths (identifying the denominational representations within them) but also has recommendations for Latter-Day Saints and Wicca. Infrequently updated.

www.bc.edu/csg

Website of the Christian Scholars Group on Christian-Jewish Relations, which is sponsored by The Center for Christian-Jewish Learning at Boston College, US. Although the website is not dedicated to film it keeps an eye on contemporary culture (including film) and responds accordingly. Contains an excellent downloadable article written by Peter A Pettit: *Facts, Faith, and Film-Making: Jesus' Passion and Its Portrayal* which is essential reading for anyone teaching The Passion using Jesus Movies.

www.christiancritic.com/movies

Exactly what it says it is....

www.cinemainfocus.com

A 'Social and Spiritual Commentary' by Hal Conklin and Denny Wayman. Reviews and clips of mainstream movies...

www.cmu.ca/library/faithfilm.html

Excellent resource on Film and Faith written by Gorden Matties, Associate Professor of Biblical Studies and Theology at the Canadian Mennonite University. Links to lots of other web-based resources including: movie reviews, theological blogs, discussion sites, online articles and much more.

www.hollywoodjesus.com

Exactly what it says it is! Interesting section on books concerning film and faith.

www.nccbuscc.org/movies/

The website of the US Conference of Catholic Bishops. If you want to know the Vatican's' top 45 movies or which movies the Bishops believe support family values then this is the place to visit! Interesting although not regularly updated.

post.queensu.ca/~rsa/realreel.htm

Website of the Queen's Theological College, Queen's University, Ontario. Here they've set up the 'Jesus: Real to Reel' page listing bibliographical and web resources for religion/theology and film. Pretty comprehensive (most are in the NERLRC for loan!)



www.textweek.com

Designed for Christian preachers and can offer film reviews that provoke thought.

www.unomaha.edu/jrf/

The Journal of Religion and Film on-line from the University of Nebraska at Omaha: easy to navigate, searchable by article, author or film. Its purpose is to examine the description, critique and embodiment of religion in film. Academic, readable and everything is downloadable - enjoy!

www.word-on-the-web.co.uk/main/film.htm

Ian Maher, Church Army Evangelist, lecturer and author, offers comprehensive reviews of latest releases and then looks at them again 'through the lens of Christian Faith'.

Reference websites for film

www.bfi.org.uk

Official website of the British Film Institute. Gives limited access to archived film reviews from the fabulous *Sight and Sound*.

www.bbfc.co.uk

Excellent for finding plot summaries, cast lists, movie ratings (often different on the original movie release from subsequent DVD/video) etc., and for finding out what's about to be released.

www.chireader.com/movies/

Chicago Reader on Film: 10,000 movie reviews....

www.empireonline.co.uk

Website of *Empire* film magazine.

www.filmeducation.org

Provides resources (inc. free study guides) and information on the annual National Schools Film Week (October). Also contains guidance articles e.g. how to start and organise your own After School Club.

www.imdb.com

Fabulous resource with thousands of film reviews, credit lists and other relevant info (also American version: www.us.imdb.com though the information seems to be mainly common to both).

www.metacritic.com/film

"Metacritic's mission is to help you make an informed decision about how to spend your money on entertainment". To that end if you go to the film section you can see a short review of any given film / DVD / video release plus a summary of the critics' responses to the film. If you want you can then access any one of the reviews for full details on what the critics did or didn't like. If you want an immediate response from the US film critics on what any new release is like then this is the place to start!



www.mrqe.com/lookup

Movie Review Query Engine is a useful search engine but also offers interesting lists e.g. 'latest UK releases' films shown at Cannes, Montreal and all the major film festivals. Not just US focussed.

www.suntimes.com/ebert.html

Roger Ebert, Film Critic of the *Chicago Sun Times* and winner of the 1975 Pulitzer Prize for his film criticism the previous year - an institution! Ebert is thought provoking and sensitive to religious issues and themes in film.

www.upcomingmovies.com

The Yahoo! Movies! site written by Greg Dean Schmitz, previews upcoming new releases giving info on cast, crew, plot and some commentary. Easily searchable by title / director etc, also has lots of hyper-links if you want to follow a film up in more detail.

*Karenza Passmore (& Gavin Bainbridge) at:
North East Religious Learning Resource Centre*