

INTERDISCIPLINARY
REFLECTIONS ON
THE INTERPLAY
BETWEEN

**RELIGION,
FILM AND
YOUTH**

ANITA CLOETE (Ed)

Interdisciplinary Reflections on the Interplay between Religion, Film and Youth

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ANITA CLOETE (Ed)



29 July 2019

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Dear Sir/Madam

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- the cover, title-, imprint- and content pages of the publication

We trust this will suffice, but please do not hesitate to contact me should you have any further enquiries.

Yours faithfully



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Film is a universal and esteemed medium from which messages are often sent which are capable of influencing and conditioning the choices of the public and especially young people.
Saint John Paul II, 29th Communications Day

Introduction

This chapter focuses on the use of film as a discussion platform in youth ministry. Focus-group discussions were used to investigate and subsequently describe the role that film can play as a discussion platform in youth ministry. The central question in this chapter is: What is the role of film in the facilitation of discussion in youth ministry? To meet the aims of the study described in this chapter, a practical theological approach was adopted by using Osmer's (2008) framework of practical theological research. Eight youth pastors and 14 young people were interviewed using the central research question to guide the interviews. The key findings revealed that film can facilitate discussion in youth ministry in the following ways: spontaneous modelling, mentoring, raising awareness and discussion, informing and deepening the knowledge of young people, encouraging thematic discussion, providing new insights and perspectives and by creating change in behaviour.

Films have the power to influence the thinking of young people. Historically, films have changed society and social trends and introduced new fashions in society. Films may be described as trendsetters, because it has a direct bearing on young people's social life. Films can go a long way towards arousing

FILM AS DISCUSSION PLATFORM IN YOUTH MINISTRY

Nathan Chiroma

meaningful discussion and also in utilising the energies of young people for social reconstruction and nation-building. Young people live in a world inundated with all forms of films, and the reality is that not all of those films carry positive messages. Extraordinary films containing teachable moments with direct bearing to God's Word for young people are few and far between. However, studies by Kohl (2012), Brandon (2013) and Bosco (2007) have shown that film could be an invaluable platform for discussion when working with young people. Using film as discussion platform in youth ministry provides valuable opportunities to engage young people who might not traditionally be involved in our youth ministry. Film has the power to enthuse young people and it allows them to adopt new identities, hear new voices and to see the world from many different points of view. According to Jensen (2015:89), film brings young people news of other cultures and other values. The perceptible collective ability of film to excite and engross young people, together with the fact that it challenges them to think, encourages empathy and compassion and provoke laughter and tears make film an ideal catalyst for discussion in youth ministry.

The role and impact of film in the lives of young people is undeniable, and therefore the notion that a film equals entertainment only could not be further from the truth. Ever since its formation, film has demonstrated to be far more than an unadorned tool for entertainment only. Consequently ministry to young people using film as a discussion platform is vibrant and exciting work and also significant to the life of the church. There are many ways to harness the power of film to heal, grow and change young people for the better. For example, in Cameroon, during the Bamenda Human Rights Film and Arts Festival 2013, various panel discussions were held among young people on topics related to violence against women, human trafficking, discrimination towards girls and domestic violence – topics that were featured in many of the films shown at the festival. The organisers were pleasantly surprised by the quality and meaningfulness of the contributions that young people brought to the table during the panel discussions (Hunter, 2013:5).

Film exerts a significant influence on the minds of young people and, if harnessed correctly, could also have profound educational value. Being an inextricably part of the multi-dimensional framework of youth culture, film can achieve splendid results as a discussion platform in youth ministry. Young people have conversations with each other on the latest films. Because film has such a powerful sway on today's young people, it is fundamentally important that those who work with young people embrace the power of film as a discussion platform in youth ministry. Borgman (1997:138) aptly notes that "our goal as youth ministers is not to show young

people how much we know. They will quickly humble us if we try to impress them with any such knowledge. Rather, we want to study with them and learn their ideas about film and music. We are interested in their empowerment to discern and protect themselves from the manipulation of electronic communication."

This chapter contemplates the place of film as a discussion platform in youth ministry. The first section of the chapter provides working definitions of film, young people and youth ministry. Subsequently, the role and impact of film in society and youth ministry are considered, after which the methodology is explained. The key findings are presented in a thematic manner, paving the way for a discussion of the implications of the study in youth ministry. The chapter concludes with some suggestions and a brief overview.

Defining Core Concepts

To ensure clarity and to delimit the material, this section offers some foundational definitions of concepts used in this chapter.

Film: The *Collins Online Dictionary* defines film as "consisting of moving pictures that have been recorded so that they can be shown at the cinema or on television. A film tells a story, or shows a real situation" (Collins Online Dictionary, n.d.). For the purposes of this chapter, film is defined as any moving picture that can be accessed via cinemas, television, YouTube and phones or other electronic devices. 'Film' and 'movie' may be used interchangeably.

Young people: The definition of young people varies from one context to the other. For the purposes of this chapter, young people are defined as those within the age bracket of 14-35 years, since various countries and various youth ministries differ in their definition of young people.

Youth ministry: Simply put, youth ministry is the Church's efforts to assist young people to grow personally and spiritually. Hence, the rationale of youth ministry should be to prepare young people for effective ministry within the context of a local church or a parachurch organisation. Bomas (2016:76) adds that training young people to champion the cause of Christ and to apply Christianity to every area of life is what 'youth ministry' is about. Youth ministry in the context of this chapter refers to every endeavour by the Christian community to reach out to young people with the love of God as disclosed to us in Jesus Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit.

The Role and Impact of Film in Society

The role and impact of film in society cannot be overemphasised. Film tells stories about our society and who we are, as well as record of what makes us human and what concerns us in the everyday. Even though the influence of new media technologies may seem to have changed the way we now watch films in that film are consumed not only in the cinema anymore, but also at home and online, films are still very much part of the media landscape. Film has played a major role in changing our society. Kubai (2002:14) notes that patriotic movies remind us to love our various countries. Comedy films have treated many a patient by means of laugh therapy. Adventure films have given many a sense of adventure and challenged them to explore new possibilities. In addition, film has impacted society in the following ways:

Film offers us a language to speak to each other across national, class, economic and racial lines, the bonding power of film produces unified understanding that normally cuts across boundaries. During the Second World War, film is said to have been a uniting factor between warring factions. Film is a reflection of society, both present and past. According to Gray (2010:68) film and its innovations sometimes has to catch up with society, but often it also leads society. Films are stories; films represent the people who come out with ideas about something they want to say, something they want to tell someone. Film is a form of communication and that communication tells stories coming from societies, not only about where a society is presently and what it is doing now, but also about where that society has been.

Film can be used for promoting national integration in that it usually embodies and conveys the values and beliefs of the culture within which and for which it was made. Additionally, film has the ability to help us to understand other cultures and people. Popular art forms such as film are of special importance because they speak to the most central of those values and beliefs. Furthermore, film has an extraordinary capacity to expand our reality, to deepen our moral sensibility, and to shape our self-understanding by moving us closer to cultures, problems and realities that are distant from those we know well. Gauntlett and Hill (1999:50) assert that film works so well because it conveys us into its world with barely any effort on our part. In a more reflective sense, film tells us something about ourselves and gives meaning to our lives. Even while apparently mindlessly absorbed in the film, we are delicately and instinctively washed with a coating of cultural values, unrealistic aspirations and an understanding of good and evil.

Correspondingly, film engages our vision, ideas and feelings. According to Staiger (1992:4), capitalising on the power of film to capture the environment and reality, many producers create structured experiences that engage us profoundly and sometimes change our awareness or feelings about our lives or the things around us. As an art form, film offers experiences that carry particular nuances and meanings that can be provocative, puzzling or euphoric. The emotional function of film also helps to teach the audience to adjust their emotional responses and reactions to certain aspects of their social lives. The overall form and style of presentation of the stories in the film work harmoniously and guide us into a new experience.

Biographical films of great philosophers and thinkers shed light on their way of living, which provide us with knowledge that we may not have obtained otherwise. This knowledge can shape the way we engage with the content of their work, and, at the same time, help us to develop new ideas that will enhance our engagement with their work. Films in the form of autobiographies help us to appreciate the heroes and heroines in our history and could encourage loyalty and nationalist sentiments. Richards (2003:341) argues that good films always have some theme and moral lessons. For example, we may have heroes, heroines and villains, with the villain usually being conquered in some way by the end of the film. Films can illustrate how bad actions lead to bad results.

Films can create debate, conversation and atmosphere. Lionel (2017:4) observes that film has provided a platform for young people to debate racism and extra-judicial killings by police in the wake of the 'black lives matter' movement in the USA. Film has also been a great tool in creating and sustaining conversations about pertinent issues in society. Anderson (1978:155) argues that in the early days of film in Europe, it was used to create conversation in public places, schools and even in churches. The widespread use of film as a source of conversation sparked meaningful exchanges in various communities, which resulted in value change and policy changes. Film has also proven to be a means of providing atmosphere for dialogue and reconciliation – for example, film was used as a means to bring about reconciliation and forgiveness after the Rwandan genocide.

Given the above, it can be argued that film still does have an impact in our society today. However, what remains pertinent is the ways and modes in which we can engage film to enhance meaningful discussion in our society and, more specifically, in youth ministry.

Methodology

Qualitative methods were used for data collection for this study. Focus-group discussions were employed to collect specific data, and the discussions were guided by Osmer's (2008) pragmatic task phase of "how might we respond?" Osmer (2008:28) describes the four tasks of practical theological research as follows:

1. The Descriptive-Empirical Task ("What is going on?"): Priestly Listening – This is established in a theology of being there, attending to others in their particularity within the presence of God.
2. The Interpretive Task ("Why is this going on?"): Sagely Wisdom – This is grounded in a spirituality of sagely wisdom: guiding others in how to live within God's royal rule.
3. The Normative Task ("What ought to be going on?"): Prophetic Discernment – This is built in a spirituality of discernment, helping others hear and heed God's Word in the particular circumstances of their lives and world.
4. The Pragmatic Task ("How might we respond?"): Servant Leadership – This is based in a spirituality of servant leadership, taking risks on behalf of the congregation to help it better embody its mission as a sign and witness of God's self-giving love.

The research described in this chapter embraced Osmer's (2008) pragmatic tasks to conduct focus-group interviews in order to investigate how film can be used as a discussion platform in youth ministry. According to Schurink, Schurink and Poggenpoel (in De Vos, 1998:324), focus-group interviews are useful for:

- ▶ conducting research at a relatively modest cost and in a relatively brief period of time;
- ▶ allowing the researcher to probe and create the flexibility that is so important for exploring unanticipated issues;
- ▶ developing themes, topics and schedules for subsequent interviews and/or questionnaires;
- ▶ providing speedy results;
- ▶ shedding light on little-known phenomena and social processes;
- ▶ developing concepts or theoretical explanations of what was observed (McMillan & Schumacher, 2001:14); and
- ▶ purposefully determine the perceptions, feelings and thoughts of participants. People are the product of their environment and are influenced by other people.

The participants in this research were youth pastors and youths ranging between the ages of 14 and 35 years. Gender was not considered in this study. A total of eight youth pastors and 14 young people in Nairobi participated in the study. All of them were from different churches and parachurch organisations. Although this was a convenience sample, with both pastors and young people selected on the basis of

their accessibility and willingness, all the participants were from the Nairobi district and represented evangelical and Pentecostal churches. Nairobi was chosen as the centre for the study because of its cosmopolitan nature and the role the city plays in influencing what happens in youth ministry in other parts of Africa.

Two focus-group sessions were conducted. The first focus group comprised a total of 8 youth pastors from the eight different churches that participated in the focus-group interviews. The second two focus-group interviews comprised young people (ten men and four women), focusing on the central research question. Homogeneity of the participants was considered in order to obtain their knowledge of film as a discussion platform in youth ministry. Permission was granted by both parents and youth pastors for those under the age of 18, and considerations regarding the ethics of the study were also explained to the participants, highlighting to them matters of confidentiality and permission to discontinue their participation whenever they felt like doing so.

The central question that guided the study was: What is the role of film in the facilitation of discussion in youth ministry? Other questions that guided the focus-group discussions were:

- ▶ How often do you use film as a discussion tool in youth ministry?
- ▶ What is the impact, (if any) of using film as a discussion platform in youth ministry?
- ▶ Mention specific areas that you think film has contributed to the formation of young people.
- ▶ What are some of the challenges of using film as a discussion platform in youth ministry?
- ▶ Which films have produced a major impact in your life as a young person?
- ▶ In your experience as a youth pastor, which films have produced the best discussion platforms?
- ▶ Where do you get the films that you use with your young people?
- ▶ What are the criteria for selecting the films you use for discussion?

The interviews were conducted over a period of two months, interviews were recorded with the permission of the participants, and the records were securely kept in the researcher's office on the premises of Pan Africa Christian University.

Key Findings

Thematic analysis was used to interpret and discuss the data of the findings in this chapter. Thematic analysis is a type of qualitative analysis that is used to analyse classifications and present themes (patterns) that relate to the data. It

illustrates the data in great detail and deals with diverse subjects via interpretations (Boyatzis, 1998:78). Thematic analysis was chosen because this method presents an opportunity to understand the potential of any issue more widely (Marks & Yardley, 2004:9). Six themes emerged from participant's narratives on how film can be used as discussion platform in youth ministry, which will be discussed below.

Film can Promote Spontaneous Modelling through Discussion in Youth Ministry

The participants, in particular the youth pastors, expressed that using film as a discussion platform in youth ministry provided an opportunity for spontaneous modelling. The participants were of the opinion that film as a platform for discussion could offer an opportunity for young people to model after positive characters. This is in line with Bandura's (1973:5) social cognitive theory of learning where he argues that young people learn behaviour change more efficiently through spontaneous modelling. New concepts and narratives provided in films give young people the opportunity through discussion to form new ways of responding to social issues in a constructive manner. In the words of the contributors:

Youth Pastors

A few years ago we watched the film *The Climb*. Afterwards I opened the floor for discussion with my youth ministry group. It was amazing to hear how most of the young people cited many positive lessons and characters that they would emulate in navigating the challenges of peer pressure.

Youth

It was through watching various films in my youth group that I choose to stand firm in my faith. I have several bible lessons, but they did not make enough sense to me, but the film brought the message home and I could identify with the characters in both their struggles and in their achievements.

The respondents were asked to identify one film character that has contributed to spontaneous modelling in their lives. Among the top names mentioned were Denzel Washington, Lupita Oyango, Richard Mofe Damijo, Edi Gatheji and Oliver Litondo.

Film can Promote Mentoring through Discussion in Youth Ministry

Particularly the youth pastors mentioned that using film as a discussion platform in youth ministry had the potential of providing young people with distant mentors. They added that teenage years were characterised by hero worship, and that many

young people would emulate the life styles of the movie stars that they perceived as successful. However, with proper discussion, young people could be guided to choose the right distant mentors – role-models that will add value to their lives.

One of the young people echoed exactly this sentiment:

Youth

I decided to choose the late Nelson Mandela as I my distant mentor, even though I have never met him. Through watching films about him and his life story, I thought I would want to emulate his lifestyle and would want to be like him throughout my life. His story about courage and resilience taught me how not to give up in school even when I was having difficult times with many of my teachers.

Another youth said that he has identified significant distant mentors in his life through film:

Youth

My youth pastor introduced me to positive distant mentors through film. We would go to the movie theatres and after the movie we would hang out with him over lunch to discuss the impact and the challenges in the movie. That introduced me to many strong Christian movie actors that I've never heard of in my life, and that prompted me to do a study about them and in the end their lives and their values contributed to shaping my live and my values today. I choose to call them my mentors even though we have never met, but they impacted my life.

From the aforementioned, it is evident that film, if used as a platform for discussion in youth ministry, has the capacity and the ability of introducing young people to distant mentors.

Using Film as a Discussion Platform in Youth Ministry can Inform and Deepen the Knowledge of Young People

Most of the participants have identified film as having the ability to deepen the knowledge of young people in different areas. The youth pastors alluded to the fact that films like *Courageous*, *Not without my Daughter*, and *The Jesus Film* have contributed immensely in deepening the spiritual knowledge and character of the young people they work with. They said that such films sparked meaningful conversations around spirituality and character development.

With regard to deepening knowledge and character, the youth respondents stated:

Youth	My character was really changed after attending a couple of youth meetings and watching and discussing The Jesus Film in my language. It truly brought about a turnaround especially in my relationships with my parents, my siblings and even my school mates. The desire to be like Jesus was ignited in my life like never before. I grew up in a Christian family and we got lessons about Jesus in our daily family devotions, but it never really hit me like the film did.
Youth	The reality of HIV/AIDS became so close to me after we watched a film about its spread in Uganda a couple of years ago. I have read books and have heard many talks about the pandemic, but our discussion after watching the film at our youth group deepened my knowledge about what HIV/AIDS is all about and not only how to avoid it, but also how to support those affected by the pandemic.

Robins (2004:541) points out that there is a connection between film and the awakening of young people's awareness of different matters. Film has a way of teaching them the lessons that we as youth workers struggle to teach. Film brings to life situations that we are not able to describe or even imagine when it comes to the deepening of knowledge of certain issues in youth ministry.

Film as a Discussion Platform can Encourage Thematic Discussions in Youth Ministry

According to Nicholas (2013:30), film provides an ideal opportunity for thematic discussion in youth ministry. There are strong connection points that we could often miss in an ordinary discussion, since our function usually is to take the lead in these discussions. Using film as the basis of the discussion we are engrossed in the conversation together with our young people, and that provides an opportunity for picking out themes for further discussion together and even for programming our youth ministry.

According to the youth pastors:

Youth Pastors	I was afraid to use film in my youth group because of the elders' and church leaders' perception of film, however after using one at the youth camp where it generated thematic discussion points for the whole year, it made my work easy. Even more so, it helped organise the teaching and learning process in our youth group.
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Youth Pastors	From the film <i>Never Walk Alone</i> , I was able to generate four themes for my life which I later shared with other youth members in my church. The themes enabled me to dig deeper in the Bible to be able to find verses that will encourage my Christian journey. The four themes that stood out for me from the film, were: we are here for each other; the Christian journey is all about compliment and not competition; we ought to bear each other's burden; and there is power in unity.
Youth Pastors	After showing the film <i>The book of John</i> , I couldn't believe the notes that my youth group generated from the discussion. We pulled out a series of points and asked each one of us to develop it for a personal and group Bible study. I was amazed at the themes that came out and the themes that stood out for the young people.

Film as a Discussion Platform can Provide Insights and Perspectives in Youth Ministry

According to the respondents, film as a discussion platform in youth ministry provided opportunity for insights and perspectives in youth ministry, especially in dealing with sensitive issues such as taboos, sexuality and culture. Koc (2016:108) affirms that when dealing with sensitive issues, film played a vital role in creating a safe space for discussion among young people and their teachers in Turkey. Many who were afraid to talk about certain issues used film to spark a conversation about it. This gave them courage to make a meaningful contribution about the subject, but they also admitted gaining new insights on the subject thanks to the discussions that were triggered.

According to the respondents:

Youth pastor	I have used film to initiate dialogue among young people who initially misunderstood either the subject or the person. Film created a huge space for discussing the LGBT issue in our youth group. At the end many of us were educated with a different perspective – different from the ones we had about the whole issue before.
Youth	Film gave me insight and new perspective about the culture and the people of Israel after watching <i>The Jesus Film</i> .
Youth	After watching a South African film about circumcision, I was totally blown away by the reality of the story as compared to the myths we have been told growing up about circumcision in South Africa.

Youth pastor

Because of pressure by church leaders and fear of authorities, it was sometimes extremely challenging for me as a youth pastor to discuss certain topics with my young people. However, after discovering the power of film to negotiate discussion, I was empowered to discuss every topic with my young people using film as the basis of the discussion. We had an extensive discussion for three weeks about sex and sexuality after watching the film *The Climb*.

Using Film as a Discussion Platform can Create Behaviour Change in Young People

The respondents said that:

Youth

After watching and discussing the film *Risen* in our small youth ministry group, I became completely aware of my arrogance and pride and decided to change for the better.

Youth

I used to struggle with a lot of anger, but the film *Men of Valour* taught me patience and I asked my friends to hold me accountable so that I can overcome that.

Youth pastor

The film *Courageous* taught me how to be a good husband today, the materials that we used to discuss the film are still on my shelf and I keep referring to them very often.

From the above it is clear that using film as discussion platform in youth ministry has an impact on young people in various ways. Both the literature and this empirical study have further confirmed that film is a helpful tool in creating meaningful discussion platforms in youth ministry.

Implications for Youth Ministry

The benefits of using film as discussion platform in youth ministry are manifold. The following implications are emphasised for the benefit of parents and youth workers:

1. Young people are in search of exhilaration, adventures and laughter, and using film as a discussion platform in youth ministry could help provide that. For example, Edwards (2007:6) cites that in the film, *Shadowlands*, C.S. Lewis is told that "one reads to know they're not alone". The same could be said of young people and film today; they watch films to know that they are not alone. Other peers are watching the same films too, and the stories that develop motivate, relieve and encourage young people in unique ways. Hence youth workers should embrace the use of film as a discussion platform in youth ministry.

2. Youth workers and parents should listen and watch to see what these films are saying. Often, young people identify with themes and stories, while they have no way of articulating their personal needs, dreams and hopes. Parents and youth workers should take care to pay attention and to gently enter a sphere often overlooked or judged by adults. In doing this they would win admiration and trust by simply caring enough to see what the young people themselves see and by providing them with an opportunity to ask questions and to even verbalise their own doubts.
3. There is a definite need for youth workers to help guide young people in this area. By using film as a discussion platform, young people can open up and share secrets they otherwise would not have. Information gathered from such discussions could be used to create lesson curricula in youth ministry.
4. Film should also be used to pique young people's interest in order to facilitate meaningful conversations and discussions. The creative use of popular films and video clips on topics ranging from sex, lying, adultery and homosexuality to anything else could challenge young people about their own beliefs and morals and create avenues for rich discussion. Spirituality can be discussed in the same way. Young people can be encouraged to use the discussions to create their own talk shows about such issues as sexuality, morality and religion.

Conclusion

This chapter has probed film as discussion platform in youth ministry. The role and impact of film in society was highlighted by means of an overview of the applicable literature, and the empirical study demonstrated that using film as a discussion platform in youth ministry can indeed enrich interaction and engagement between youths and their pastors. The key findings of the study described in this chapter revealed that film can facilitate discussion in youth ministry in the following ways: spontaneous modelling, mentoring, informing and deepening the knowledge of young people, encouraging thematic discussion, providing new insights and perspectives and by creating change in behaviour.

Film can thus play a major role in youth ministry if used effectively as a discussion platform. Film and other media are part and parcel of the lives of young people, having been born in this era of technology and most of them cannot imagine a life without media. Many of them depend on films for research, staying in contact with old friends and staying up to date on what was happening in their own circle, nationally or internationally. Hence it makes ultimate sense for youth workers to harness film as a discussion tool in youth ministry.

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