



The Challenge of the Cinema

Communicating Values in a Media-Dominated Culture

The cinema was born in France in 1895 thanks to the creativity of Auguste and Louis Lumière, who, using a cinematograph (a film camera that also served as a projector), produced the world's first film, *The Arrival of a Train at La Ciotat Station*. Among the first ten "movies" they filmed were also *Workers Leaving the Lumière Factory* and a child at play. Hand-cranked through a projector, these 50-second films represented not only the beginning of the cinema but the realization of the human being's long-held dream to create a "parallel reality"—a journey realized over the years first with the help of conjuror's tricks, then special effects and today virtual reality.

Today the cinema shares the limelight with television and the Internet. Thanks to a fusion of instruments, films shown in a theater can also be watched on TV, on DVDs, on one's computer and even on cell phones by downloading them from the Internet. It is clear that we live in a time in which the cinema is striving to carve out a larger and larger place for itself in the "technological jungle." It is a time of change and also of crisis, the end of an era and the beginning of a new one. Who knows where it will all end? But against this background, the content of audiovisuals (cinema, TV, YouTube, etc.) continues to be the primary vehicle for ideas and the molders of consciences and behavior.

Our era is privileged because capillary diffusion of the media unites the world in global communication, dissolving the distances created by time and space. The cinema in particular is a creative instrument that is able to blend poetry, art and music to portray the world in which we live. It is not only "escapist entertainment" but also a powerful instrument for reflection and communication. From its very origins it has sought to recount the human story and the person's search for the Absolute. It is one of the "places" in which the most important phenomena characteristic of society, culture and customs all converge. If we are what we are above and beyond the normal formation we received from school and life, it is in part due to films that have portrayed every facet of human life: feelings, intelligence and commitment.

The cinema offers us the opportunity to grow in our daily lives. At the center of the person are gathered all the dimensions of human existence: religious experiences and the affective life, sufferings and joys, birth and death.

The cine-camera is an extraordinary instrument for penetrating and capturing the most mysterious facets of life in their many different expressions. A film can present us with the most noble and uplifting qualities of the human heart, but it can also exalt the most vile and distorted facets of human nature.

Thus the cinema is a form of communication that cannot do without religion, preserving and often transfiguring its vital moral truths through its own unique "language."

So then, what should be the characteristics of a film that truly communicates Christian values?

Fr. Alberione said that “the cinema should offer people only what is useful for them—the things that will teach them to be better human beings, citizens, religious.... It should offer them what is truly *good*.” This was our Founder’s dream.

I would like to quote here a beautiful excerpt from an address of Pope Paul VI on 6 May 1967 to writers and artists, which was then quoted word for word by Pope John Paul II in his speech to mass media workers during his apostolic visit to the United States and Canada in September 1987—the first time a Pope spoke to members of the communications industry. He said:

“Twenty years ago, my predecessor Pope Paul VI, speaking to a gathering much like this one, told that creative community in Rome: ‘It is a fact that when, as writers and artists [and here we can add directors, actors and cinema producers], you are able to reveal in the human condition, however lowly or sad it may be, a spark of goodness, at that very instant a glow of beauty pervades your whole work. We are not asking that you should play the part of moralist, but we are expressing confidence in your mysterious power to open up the glorious regions of light that lie behind the mystery of human life.’”

Inspired by these words, I like to think of the cinema as a field of light—a way of seeing things that goes beyond the physical to penetrate the mystery of the invisible. As someone writing about the cinema in the 1930’s once said: “Films make visible the invisible.”

The problem of how to present the world of the spirit—the invisible world—in images has dogged the cinema from the very beginning of its story. In some films, religious feelings, spirituality and the sacred nature of things are a clear manifestation of choices made by human beings.

On 18 March 1938, Blessed James Alberione gave two priests of the Society of St. Paul the order to launch the cinema apostolate, saying: “It is necessary to lay down the scissors of censure and take up the movie camera” because “the power of films surpasses that of the school, of the pulpit and of the press and is making an ever-greater impact.”

Thanks to the extraordinary power of images, the cinema—an instrument that communicates both culture and knowledge—is a universal language that is able to reach hearts and, because of its powerful visual impact, cannot leave a person indifferent. When used with responsibility and respect, the cinema can become a loudspeaker for disseminating the voice of God throughout the world.

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