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In search of enlightenment: Church or cinema?

Kirsten Dietrich

The cinema and the Church have a lot in common – they are both "storytelling organisations" as Julia Helmke (photo right), president of the Protestant film organisation, Interfilm, puts it. In an interview, she tells us what makes a good film and when it can be considered religious.

Kirsten Dietrich: As of Thursday, all eyes are on Berlin as the International Festival is underway. And the Church is also on location! An ecumenical jury is following the festival and won't just be watching films exclusively on the topic of faith. Though it looks like they'll have plenty to do considering the variety the Berlinale has to offer: from growing up in a strictly Catholic family – the film "Kreuzweg" – up to and including a film that accompanies a Buddhist monk for one hour as he walks through Marseille. So the Church is interested in film. But why?

Julia Helmke: Because they are both storytelling organisations. The Church is a storytelling organisation that has told the biblical stories from the very beginning, preserved them and passed them on, updated them and retold them. Cinema is also a storytelling organisation that tells tales of people, also accompanied by images. That makes it interesting for the Church, though it focuses more on the word.

The first cinemas had biblical names

Dietrich: Because both organisations have created stories together. The rituals are also similar: To go to church, to go to the cinema; we sit neatly in a row, look ahead where something transcendental might happen!



Helmke: In that case, I think cinema borrowed a bit from the Church or drew inspiration from it. The first cinema complexes that existed 100 years ago also had biblical names like "Gloria", "Excelsior" and were made to resemble cathedrals – there is a clear structural analogy. At church, you feel like you're at the cinema and vice-versa.

Dietrich: Can a film go so far as to take the function of a sermon?

Helmke: Yes, a sermon on its own wouldn't be exciting enough. A film that is said to preach a message invites a negative connotation. I would say, a full church service, yes, definitely. Hopefully, you leave feeling differently from when you arrived. You know what to expect and yet, hopefully, there is always an element of surprise!

Dietrich: That sounds like every trip to the cinema, every film you watch is automatically like that. Is the film entirely of secondary importance compared to what is shown?

Many feature films recount a "hero's journey"

Helmke: I think the ritual itself is important and is still important today even if more people stay home to watch films. But a visit to the cinema in company or the fact that you aren't always watching something alone, but with others and can share that experience afterwards, that's quite important. But of course, like a good sermon or church service, it is also important that the film itself is good.

Dietrich: Are there criteria that determine whether a film is religious or draw attention to religious aspects in an appealing manner?

Helmke: There are actually very few. For a long time, reference has been made to film analysis, film dramaturgy involving the journey of the hero, that is, a person abandons his or her familiar surroundings and embarks on a journey and changes as a result of what she or he encounters along the way. In the end, the hero returns transformed if he or she hasn't sacrificed him or herself for his community or for others. The story of salvation, of how Christ journeyed into the world, gave his life for the world, transforming people and the world as a result, can also be seen in this light.

But that is an archaic legend, a myth so to speak. As many feature films follow this pattern, you can also see religious aspects in every film. Of course, the content also conveys intriguing themes and motives. In that case, cinema, as a seismograph of our society, but also in expressing religious and cultural sentiment, is perpetually exploring the questions facing us in our lives. These are also questions of faith and religion.

Dietrich: I would like to take a moment to talk more about the hero's journey! So this means that films like large-scale epic fantasies such as "Lord of the Rings" or "Harry Potter" where there is a lot of action have an inherently religious structure?

A pastor in a film doesn't make it religious

Helmke: Yes, for sure. In the 1980s and 90s, there was even talk of the Hollywood religion. Films like "Terminator" with Schwarzenegger or "Matrix" very clearly replicated this pattern 1-1, replete with religious motives, just think of Names like "Trinity", "Neo" (the new saviour)...

Dietrich: How important is it to this concept if films also refer to genuinely religious themes in the stories they tell? Or if a pastor does appear, is he more an accessory or does this make the films particularly religious?

Helmke: The mere appearance of a pastor in a film is not a sign of a religious film. It is, of course, always a question of the themes dealt with in the film. What does the person on this journey encounter, what does he or she carry with him, what drives him or her? Today, I think that there are a lot of very interesting examples. Right now, I have the German film "Schwestern" by Anne Wild in mind. It deals with a sister who decides to join a monastery, for the rest of her life. Her entire family try to support her on the one hand, but on the other, they are incapable of coping with such a profound decision because all of them more or less avoid making decisions in their own lives or are still in the process of coming to a decision. I find that fascinating because it is a fundamental religious motif, the decision to turn to or to turn back to God, confessing ... and that this is done in a German film in a very light and yet touching way; I find that to be a very intriguing motif in a film that is itself interesting.

Dietrich: And also in a film that is very much inspired by the rituals and music that the viewer experiences. This means that the film very much draws on what religion has to offer!

Helmke: Yes, and I think that today it is almost a movement. Because being Christian or being religious for that matter is no longer a matter of course in our society. And filmmakers appear to be observing this phenomenon of someone wanting to be a Christian from the sidelines.

Seeing how Christianity is practised interests many filmmakers. So it is more of an outside view, which is very much appreciative and special. Be-

ing a Christian is no longer the norm and is an emerging theme for that very reason.

Dietrich: Can religion, can religious people learn something from film that they can't learn in other places where religion is conveyed?

Films are windows on another world

Helmke: It would be too simple if I recognise something in the film and say, aha, this person also believes or that's what I would do so I'm right, if the film was purely of an affirmative nature. That would be too simple and even cheesy. But continuing to be challenged and realising that people are confronted with decisions and how they deal with them; not just relying on myself but another force and eternal energy called God, is important.

For me, films have always been windows on another world. I immerse myself in something that I didn't know existed. Something that might be foreign to me and might enrich me and even lead to transformation.

I think this is particularly relevant when values and norms are concerned. But today as well, with respect to different lifestyles, films show me something that I might not be familiar with, but that can enrich me and can also question my own faith and in the end move me to adopt a broader, less restricted perspective. Of course, there's also exploring other religions where cinema very literally becomes a window on the world.

Dietrich: How aware are everyday viewers of this dimension? Well, do filmmakers not instil their films with something or suggest something to their audiences, which is not necessarily a genuine part of the film experience itself?

Helmke: The hero's journey, as I already mentioned, is also something that takes place beneath the surface. But I do think that a film does stir up more in the viewer than one might think. People talk about the film in their head and a good film is one that triggers something in me that I may not be aware of at the time.

Cinema is also an emotional machine: it reaches me first of all through feelings and I am sure that every viewer is also reached in this way and is also capable of change even though he or she may not be entirely aware of it at first. But that's why the conversation after the film or sitting down afterwards at a bar is really important so that you can talk and find out what the other person saw, thought was exciting or interesting to gain more insight. But, sometimes, films can also be relaxing, which is just fine and beneficial.

Dietrich: How can the Church connect with this broad film experience and be taken seriously, without merely using films to attract people they wouldn't otherwise be able to reach?

The Church takes a special look at films

Helmke: Protestant film work has attempted to do this in many ways for over 60 years. On the one hand, this is achieved with film discussions hosted after the film, which in some cases are led by experts. I think that's a great way of inviting people to go to the cinema as a church with a follow-up discussion that is moderated in some cases and where other aspects are discovered in the process. After all, hopefully for a long time to come there will continue to be magazines like *epd Film*, or in the case of the Catholic Church *Filmdienst*, where sophisticated critiques of film are offered.

Then there's a film company like EIKON that produces films covering special subject matter. And there are INTERFILM juries that also give prizes to films at the major festivals like the Berlinale, Cannes, and Venice but also small festivals, short-film festivals like the one in Oberhausen. I think this work is extremely effective and thorough.

Dietrich: To an increasing degree, churches or religious communities are becoming filmmakers themselves. Then there's the aspect of more and more religious persons producing religious films portraying, for example, moving stories of discovering faith. What does the church film commissioner, the Church film pro say about films like that?

Helmke: I actually don't end up watching them. That is, I very, very rarely encounter films of that kind. I very much support films being produced by members of the congregation as I know a number of them, young people in particular, who are trying their hand behind the camera. I think that's very exciting, but it is also an entirely different category and quality than films that come from professional producers. Films by religious people, as you mentioned, primarily tend to be produced in the USA as opposed to here in Germany by religious individuals but also film companies. They are intended for a very small, Christian audience.

I don't think that that sort of thing is shown in most Lutheran or Catholic parish halls or churches, but on the other hand, there are an increasing number of church services where a short film, feature films and documentaries are shown.

Dietrich: So what is the role of film in terms of the Church's exploration of art and culture? I know that ten years ago the Lutheran Church took a long look at how it dealt with culture and published a memorandum on the topic; the first draft omitted film altogether!

Helmke: It's a place for interaction. That's where Lutheran film work can still prod the official Church a bit, because in reality it was the one that also worked the longest and most intensively with culture. I think that was the mindset: on the one hand cinema and the Church's film work, which exists in any case, but on the other hand, cinema continues to stand for the arts and culture. I think many things have changed in recent years. Lutheran film work fortunately still exists, but just as in many other areas, and this needs to be said, it is really struggling to stay alive. n

This interview took place between Kirsten Dietrich (journalist, correspondent Berlinale for Deuschland Radio Kultur) and Dr Julia Helmke (Commissioner for Arts and Culture of the Hannoversche Landeskirche and President of the Protestant film organisation, Interfilm) at the time of the Berlin International Film Festival in 2014.

On the screen...

Warsaw (2013) Poland

At the 29th International Warsaw Film Festival (11-20 October 2013) the Award of the Ecumenical Jury of SIGNIS and INTERFILM went to the film *Ida* directed by Paweł Pawlikowski (Poland 2013).

Citation: "*Ida* is a strong and complex drama of a young girl brought up at a convent who undertakes a strange journey to find her true identity in the hard times of post-war communist Poland. This subtle and elliptic film, shot in an ambitious black and white cinematographic style, raises questions of family ties, forgiveness and mature faith."

Members of the 2013 Jury: Lukas Jirsa (Czech Republic); Jarosław Szoda (Poland); Jean-Michel Zucker (France).

Molodist Kiev (2013) Ukraine

At the 43rd International Film Festival Molodist Kiev (19-27 October 2013) the Ecumenical Jury of SIGNIS and INTERFILM awarded a Prize and two Commendations in the competition for full-length feature films and a prize in the competition for first professional short films.

In the competition for full-length feature films, the Ecumenical Jury awarded its Prize to *The Weight of Elephants* directed by Daniel Joseph Borgman (New Zealand/Denmark/Sweden, 2013). The film portrays the feeling of loneliness of an 11-year-old boy in a sensitive way. The acting of the characters depicts their vulnerable life credibly. Disappointment and betrayal are central experiences in the boy's life. Slowly the film manages to give the audience the feeling that goodness and hope can survive.