"What Preachers Can Learn from Filmmakers" Part 2 (of 4): Impact Teams

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In the first blog of this series ("Nobody Goes to the Cinema to Read the Screenplay"), I noted that I've tried to boost my multimedia literacy by becoming a student of the cinema and seeking convergences between filmmaking and homiletics for the purposes of enlivening the preached word, communicating the gospel, and impacting hearers and their/our world.

One of the most delightful ways of boosting cinema literacy is by attending film festivals and their accompanying "talks." At a recent documentary film festival, I heard about "Impact Teams," and knew immediately that this is one of those impactful (!) convergences between filmmaking and preaching. Preaching professors guide students toward paying careful attention to their hearers and identifying what impact their preaching might have on them. Noted homiletician Thomas Long encourages preachers to identify a one-sentence "function statement" for each sermon.[1] This statement identifies what a preacher wants the sermon to *do* to/for the hearers in light of what the biblical text does and in light of what is known about the hearers and their lives. In other words, the preacher identifies the hoped-for impact of the

sermon on individual hearers, the church, and maybe even the world.

Often the first weeks of introductory preaching courses are dedicated to helping novice preachers get to a faithful function statement in order to craft a sermon that will do what the preacher (with the guidance of the Holy Spirit, of course) hopes it will accomplish (e.g., inspire, comfort, challenge, motivate, encourage, etc.). A good place to begin is to help preachers identify the impact sermons have had on them. Because this task does not come easy (surprising as that might be), getting some distance from the discipline of homiletics altogether is often a helpful starting place.

A Film's Impact on the Viewer

Have you ever wondered why the majority of people have a conversation with someone about the films they see and the majority of worshippers (so it seems) rarely talk about their worship experiences with another? Somehow, we've been culturally formed to identify a movie's impact on us beyond "I liked it" or "I didn't like it." We've developed a sense that movies are supposed to affect us and in this age of expanding cinematic literacy we've gained the capacity to articulate such effects. The preaching classroom is served by taking the discussion one step further and exploring with students what created the impact, e.g. lighting creates mood, camera angle forces point of view, the pace of dialog might create a sense of immediacy. "The filmmaker organizes shots, camera movement, editing, and music to elicit certain reactions so that viewers will respond right on cue precisely as intended."[2]

Learning the *techne* of filmmaking points to the intentionality of a filmmaker seeking (unapologetically!) a hoped-for impact on the viewer.

A Sermon's Impact on the Hearer

Grasping the cinematic intentionality of a filmmaker aids recognition of the homiletic intentionality of the preacher. What tools do preachers have to create mood or to adopt a point of view, for example? How can preachers choose and use these tools to accomplish the sermon's hoped-for impact?

Even beyond homiletical *techne*, students begin to develop an appreciation for the power of preaching. In other words, with some intentionality, sermons can do things. (It's worth noting that intentionality can be Spirit-led and, therefore, need not be equated with manipulation as some have been led to believe.)

Sermon Impact Teams

While many preachers learn to embrace the need to identify their sermon's hoped-for impact, far fewer preachers embrace the encouragement to find out what impact a sermon actually has had on their hearers. Preachers can learn from filmmakers in this regard as well. Not only do filmmakers work toward a desired impact, but they often have "impact teams" to find out how films affect their viewers. It doesn't take blockbuster budgets for preachers to adopt sermon

feedback practices in order to find out how their sermons are received by their hearers.

- • Consider soliciting responses to two or three written feedback questions posed on the back of the bulletin.
- • Designate one table at the coffee hour following worship as the sermon roundtable where members of the "sermon impact team" facilitate conversation.

It is important to remember that this is not the occasion for the preacher to receive ego strokes or ego strikes. Instead, consider asking simply, "What happened to you during the sermon today?," "What in particular made this experience happen for you?" With a bit of coaching, congregation members will soon embrace the power of the pulpit for their lives.

What has been said about the screen can most certainly true about the pulpit: Movies change us. . . We can benefit, in other words, from an honest dialog with movies that probe the affairs of life, even unpleasant or disturbing events and conditions. And we become better critics with deeper self-awareness through spirited post-movie discussions that make us consider our values and refine our point of view, and even sometimes challenge us to think differently.[3]

[1] Thomas G. Long, *The Witness of Preaching,* 3rd ed. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2016), chapter 4.

[2] William D. Romanowski, *Cinematic Faith: A Christian Perspective on Movies and Meaning* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2019), 55.

[3] As noted by Los Angeles film critic, Justin Chang. Romanowski, 26.

https://wabash.center/2020/02/what-preachers-can-learn-from-filmmakers-part-2-of-4-impact-teams/