

Liberty University Baptist Theological Seminary

**Special Revelation in Cinema:
The Imago Dei and Divine Transcendence in Contemporary Film**

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Abstract

Cinema can motivate soul restoration, alter political views, and confirm or contradict personal religious beliefs. The intention of this dissertation is to show that it is plausible for the transcendent power of special revelation from God to be communicated through the medium of cinema in concert with the *imago Dei* in humankind. The relationship between a viewer and cinematic characters potentially becomes a visceral experience creating empathy in the viewer with the characters in the story. This relational interaction has the potential of instigating a transcendent experience as both viewer and the protagonist in a film share qualities of the *imago Dei*. That the cinematic experience triggers dramatic emotions in viewers is undeniable. This study proposes that narrative storytelling in cinema has the potential of functioning like the personal proclamation of the gospel and serving as a conduit by which a person may experience divine transcendence through the work of and an encounter with the Holy Spirit.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Identifying the Transcendence of God

This dissertation endeavors to make the argument for the plausibility that the transcendent power of special revelation from God can be communicated through cinema. It is principally concerned with how God might speak to a person through the narrative storytelling of cinema such that the transcendent power of the Holy Spirit might result in special revelation as the *imago Dei* in the viewer aligns with the *imago Dei* in the protagonist of the movie. This study will examine unique protagonist qualities that are revealed through protagonist choices in two artifacts: *The Passion of the Christ*¹ and *The Mission*.²

Also, identified are the attributes relevant in the protagonist qualities in each artifact: willful character, character empathy, and behavior contradiction. Each of these protagonist qualities reflect specific attributes of the *imago Dei* in human beings. The attributes of the *imago Dei* exhibited in the protagonist qualities are observed as humanity's free will to choose and act willfully, humanity's self-sacrifice for the sake of *koinonia*, or community, expresses character empathy, and humanity's moral responsibility reflected in protagonist behavior contradiction.

The motifs used in this research will include the following: (1) the Christian view of divine revelation, both general and special, (2) a survey of phenomenal acts of God, (3) connection between cinema and the *imago Dei*, (4) rhetoric of narrative storytelling, (5) the behavioral influence of cinema on the human spirit, (6) the reflection of the *imago Dei* in the protagonist qualities, and for further study, (7) a look at cinema as apologetic for cultural

¹ *The Passion of the Christ*, directed by Mel Gibson (Icon Productions, 2004), 2 hr., 7 min. DVD.

² *The Mission*, directed by Roland Joffe (Warner Bros. Pictures, Goldcrest Films International, Kingsmere Productions Ltd., Enigma Productions, 1986), 2 hr., 6 min. DVD.

engagement by the church. Additionally, particular authors will be recognized for their views of general and special revelation, phenomenal acts, *imago Dei* in human beings, the rhetoric of fiction, cinema persuasion, and cultural engagement by the church.

This work will endeavor to analyze whether or not special revelation may reasonably occur in cinema. A primary means of this analysis will be through the rhetoric of storytelling. Additionally, this study will recognize characteristic biblical accounts of God's communication with human beings through miracles in both Old and New Testaments by visions, dreams, and audible voices. To support the potential for divine revelation in film, evidential theories on the science of persuasion and its impact on the moviegoer will be explored.

Critical to this study is the recognition of the *imago Dei* as the transcendent heart of God on all human beings, setting them apart from all creation and being capable of having a personal relationship with their Creator. This study will attempt to reveal the potential for God to transcend the mediated communication of cinema and cause a spiritual awakening in a person even in the absence of the literally spoken Scripture. Consequently, an exploration into the sensory and interpretive persuasion of cinema on the human mind is fundamentally essential to this endeavor.

Karl Barth places Jesus Christ as the summation, "the absolute event, the beginning and the end of revelation, of God's ultimate purpose in His divine revelation for humanity."³ The blood of Christ was spilled because of the Father's love for His created children. Yet, there seems a contradiction when examined in relation to the following Scripture.

"By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food until you return to the ground, since from it you were taken; for dust you are and to dust you will return" (Genesis 3:19).

³ Karl Barth, "The Christian Understanding of Revelation," in *Against the Stream* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1954), 220.

These words do not seem appropriate for someone created for fellowship with the God of the universe. Yet, in Genesis 1:27, it is written: “So God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them.”⁴ This verse describes human beings as uniquely, specifically, and personally formed by the hands of God. The human being who is made of dust is so loved by God that He created him in His own image. Although God knew humanity would fall and create a chasm of sin between them, He provided for redemption. The Psalmist articulates this absurdness, “What is man that you are mindful of him?” (Psalm 8:4).

At the crux of human existence, each person wrestles with the inability to comprehend their own purpose and are enslaved and deceived by their own desires (James 1:14). Human beings, like the protagonist in cinema, appear to be on an inner journey, a quest for knowledge and wisdom.⁵ For the believer in Jesus Christ, from Augustine to Luther to Piper, there endures the desire to capture the seemingly unattainable concept of what it means to be made in the image of God. Christ alone is the bondage breaker and the one from whom wisdom comes by the Spirit to free the human mind.

Though the doctrine of the image of God is limited in Scripture, Carl F. H. Henry noted the need for an accurate understanding of the *imago Dei*.⁶ Yet, God exhorted in Genesis 9:6 that the image was critical to the reverence human beings should have for each other declaring, “Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed; for God made man in His

⁴ Unless otherwise noted, all biblical passages referenced are in the English Standard Version (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2016).

⁵ Christopher Vogler and Michele Montez, *The Writer’s Journey: Mythic Structure for Writers*, 3rd ed. (Studio City, CA: Michael Wiese Productions, 2007), 7-8.

⁶ Carl F. H. Henry, “Man,” *Baker’s Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Everett F. Harrison (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1973), 341; Carl F. H. Henry, *God of this Age or God of the Ages?* (Nashville, TN: Baptist Sunday School Board, 1994), 87.

own image.” Paul also affirmed the unique distinction of man’s position when he declared before the philosophers in Athens, “For we are also His offspring” (Acts 17:28).⁷

Barth, in reference to Genesis 1:26, suggests the unique and divine image formed in humanity, a reflection of God in man: “A genuine counterpart in God Himself leading to unanimous decision is the secret prototype which is the basis of an obvious copy, a secret image and an obvious reflection in the coexistence of God and man, and also of the existence of man himself.”⁸ The writers of the Bible itself do not seem concerned to resolve the “precise nature of man’s God likeness . . . the manifestation of a God who acts.”⁹

Aquinas suggests, “We must not attempt to prove what is of faith, except by authority alone, to those who receive the authority; while as regards to others it suffices to prove that what faith teaches is not impossible.”¹⁰ He affirms that human beings cannot know fully the implications of the essence of God. Whether or not theologians and philosophers agree on the exact meaning of the *imago Dei*, there appears to be a consistent agreement that no human being is capable of existing, in any aspect of life, as Jesus.¹¹ He is the Son of God, both fully human and fully divine. Therefore, this understanding of who Jesus is endorses what it means for human beings to be made in the image of God, while introducing the revealed presence of the *imago Dei*

⁷ See also James 3:8-9, “But no human being can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison. With it we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse people who are made in the likeness of God.”

⁸ Karl Barth, *The Doctrine of Creation: The Work of Creation*, vol. 3.1, *Church Dogmatics*, ed. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance, trans. J. W. Edwards, O. Bussey, and H. Knight (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1958), 183.

⁹ John Piper, “The Image of God: An Approach from Biblical and Systematic Theology,” *Studia Biblica et Theologica* 1, no. 1 (March 1971): 32; Helmut Thielicke, *Foundations*, vol. 1, *Theological Ethics*, ed. William H. Lazareth (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966), 165.

¹⁰ Thomas Aquinas, *The Summa Theologica of St. Thomas Aquinas*, trans. Fathers of the Dominican Province (New York: Benziger Brothers, 1911), 1.32.1: 169.

¹¹ Stanley J. Grenz, *The Social God and the Relational Self* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 144.

in fictional characters found in cinema as they are physically human in reality. It requires dedicated and intentional listening by human beings to open themselves to the voice and power of the *imago Dei*. The *imago Dei* in simple form means that human beings reflect their Creator. “The nobility, uniqueness, meaning, worth and significance of man all rest on his being made in the image of God and being placed over the world as God’s prophet, priest, and king.”¹²

Carl Henry states, “The awareness of biblical revelation as relevant to the whole of life grants contemporary civilization the living prospect of a rationally satisfying explanation of human aspirations and problems.”¹³ Francis Schaeffer noted that the *imago Dei* is revealed in the art even if the artist tries to suppress it. The truth of God remains ultimate truth whether revealed through a prophet or donkey.¹⁴

It is important to assert that the term *special revelation* in this study is not intended to include or presume the action of God delivering a specific declaration or calling upon an individual to become a prophet. It does not intend to suggest parallels in current culture to that of Old Testament events such as God supernaturally giving the two tablets of the Ten Commandments to Moses on Mount Sinai or the blinding transformation of Paul on the road to Damascus, or any other supernatural prophecies imparted to individuals by angels from God.

Conversely, it is not the intention of this study to assume fervent religious spectacle as evidence of God’s supernatural communication. Jonathan Edwards once journeyed along this path and found much need for a doctrine on religious affections and distinguishing signs of the work of the Holy Spirit. The world continues to strive for hope, love, zeal, and desire; yet, “take

¹² Robert A. Morey, *Death and the Afterlife* (Minneapolis, MN: Bethany House, 1984), 37.

¹³ Carl F. H. Henry, *Evangelical Responsibility in Contemporary Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1957), 65.

¹⁴ Francis A. Schaeffer and Charles Colson, *He is There and He is Not Silent* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 2001), xvii.

away affection, and the spring of all this motion would be gone; the motion itself would cease.”¹⁵
Humanity seeks to know God.

The crux of this endeavor is to emphasize that the power of the Holy Spirit, originated by God and through the *imago Dei*, is not confined to any particular time or place. As expressed in John 1:1-6, God illuminates every person with redeeming light. The Father may reveal himself to humanity as He chooses whether by the written Scriptures, His Son, or through signs and wonders as witnessed the book of Acts and in the world today. “Whatever the Lord pleases, He does, in heaven and on earth, in the seas and all deeps” (Psalm 135:6).

This dissertation will postulate *special revelation* as the supernatural communication from God to humanity for the purpose of making himself intimately known. Special revelation is God’s manifestation of himself for the purpose of redeeming a person’s soul. This study attempts to advance an understanding of special revelation as currently revealed by miracles, visions, dreams, and the still small voice of God who is the same yesterday, today, and tomorrow. To this end, verified testimonies are provided to support the plausibility of God communicating himself, His Son, and Scripture to a person whether in a sanctuary, mountaintop, or cinema. Accordingly, this study presumes a divine communication with humanity whereby God reveals His authority, His majesty through the Holy Spirit, the illumination of the risen Savior, and the supernatural disclosure of himself in this present darkness.

Purpose and Rationale of the Study

The presupposition of this study is that humanity, in general, lives in quiet desperation yearning for spiritual purpose and eternal significance. This statement does not exclude believers

¹⁵ Jonathan Edwards, “A Treatise Concerning Religious Affections,” in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 1, (1834; repr., Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2000), part I, sec. II.

of the Christian faith who, though may not doubt their eternal destiny, on occasion find themselves faced with a crisis of faith that requires deep inner reflection and submission to the will and compassion of the Father. The tragedy is that the prevailing culture of positive rationalism and religious subjectivism can drive a person from the church toward a more user-friendly religious experience. Many people say they leave the church because it does not serve their needs or they desire a more positive message from the pastor.¹⁶ Mike Willis claims, “The positive thinking philosophy has influenced preaching away from theology toward psychology. It encourages that preaching answers the so-called ‘felt human needs.’”¹⁷

Movies encourage the viewer to engage spiritually in a cooperative conversation in a somewhat emotional discourse, participating but without capability to adjust the events within the visual story. As Craig Detweiler claims, “The cinematic experience has the ability to transport a person back to the wonders of childhood, preserving our sense of security for a few, satisfying minutes.”¹⁸ Consequently, the moviegoer is informed through his or her interpretive lenses and applies judgment, moral perspective, and social and political biases and will either affirm or be persuaded to question current worldview stasis. Roy M. Anker suggests, “The camera makes known the reality of God by trying to portray what the character perceives and by tracking the visible consequences as the characters wrestle with it in mind, heart, and soul.”¹⁹

Thus, worldwide advertising media thrives on providing life fulfillment and personal

¹⁶ Tess Schoonhoven, “10 Reasons People Are Leaving Your Church,” *LifeWay: Facts and Trends*, June 19, 2019, <https://factsandtrends.net/2019/06/19/10-reasons-people-are-leaving-your-church/>.

¹⁷ Mike Willis, “The Positive Thinking Philosophy: Its Impact on the Church,” *Truth Magazine*, May 7, 1987, 274-79.

¹⁸ Craig Detweiler, *Into the Dark: Seeing the Sacred in the Top Films of the 21st Century* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academics, 2008), 52.

¹⁹ Roy M. Anker, *Catching Light: Looking for God in the Movies* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2004), 13.

achievement through the accumulation of and dependence on *things*, as opposed to a spiritual relationship. Though the public is generally aware of the blatant manipulation by the advertisers, they maintain a sense of pride in their subjective choices so as to allow the influences for the sake of self-importance. It is on this landscape of disparaging subjectivism and media influence that cinema has the opportunity to impact a person toward a spiritual encounter with Christ and knowledge of God.

Research Questions

It is into this fray that this research examines the evidence of divine revelation through the conduit of cinema. This investigation will consider the biblical and theological expressions of both general and special revelation and the theological implications of applying this information to the expression of characters in the narrative cinema.

This dissertation seeks to answer the questions: Is it possible for a person to experience special revelation in cinema while observing a protagonist having a personal encounter with Christ? How might the *imago Dei* be communicated in cinema? Are there documented testimonies of personal conversion of faith by a person through the cinematic event? Can the rhetoric of protagonist qualities cause a person to be swayed morally? In what ways may the cinematic experience transform, motivate, or persuade an individual's worldview? For each of these inquiries, recommendations will be explored in the literature review section.

Statement of Thesis

This dissertation proposes that it is possible for a person watching a film, whether viewing at home or in a theatre, to have a personal encounter with God as the Holy Spirit transcends the narrative storytelling in cinema resulting in a person's conversion of faith by

special revelation. It suggests that this event of special revelation in cinema is in association with the protagonist qualities revealed in the story and the reflective transcendence of the *imago Dei* shared by both viewer and protagonist in the film as part of God's created design.

The overarching theme of this study is that God communicates with humanity and reveals himself to all humankind in many ways and the communication is not in any way influenced by the work of any person.

Significance of the Study

The desire and intent of the author of this work is twofold. The first is to expose the possibility of special revelation to an individual as God communicates through film, and thus, to dismantle paradigms of the Christian faith that have limited belief in the redemptive work of God to only the spoken word of the Bible. The claim herein is based on the truth of God's unlimited ability to communicate beyond general revelation with anyone at any time in anyplace as He chooses. That is not to suggest this as a daily occurrence or to be misinterpreted as aligning with religious fanaticism, but to propose miraculous events are plausible and do occur to many people around the world through miracles, visions, and dreams.

Secondly, this work seeks to ignite the Christian church toward an engagement in a radical Christian apologetic around cinematic stories. The purpose is to expose the truth of God's design for humanity by revealing evidence of God's love through the human connection with the *imago Dei* in cinema. Martin and Ostwalt writes, "Religion, thanks in part to the cinema, is reaching more people than ever. As viewers look toward the screen they are 'seeing' religious themes, theologies, morals, myths, and archetypes represented in a visually compelling

medium.”²⁰ The persuasive power of cinema and the cultural consumption of media presents a dynamic opportunity for the Church not to disengage but to intervene as disciples for Christ alongside nonbelievers at the intersection of theology and cinema. The intent is to potentially influence the secular culture through cinema as a mission field for evangelism.

The Artifacts

This dissertation will examine two American artifacts as exemplars. Each artifact serves as a proposition to communication of the *imago Dei* in cinema and to the particular use of protagonist qualities exhibited in the rhetoric of narrative fiction.

The first is *The Passion of the Christ* directed by Mel Gibson detailing the final hours and crucifixion of Jesus Christ. It is a visually raw cinematic depiction of the passion of Jesus Christ intended to communicate God’s redemptive covenant of grace for all humankind.²¹

The second artifact is *The Mission* starring Robert De Niro and Jeremy Irons. The movie, set in the eighteenth century, is about two Jesuit priests in a South American mission during a time of extreme racism, religious and political corruption, and forced slavery that leads to a brutal massacre.

Methodology

The methodology for this study is to observe the subjective experience between the protagonist and the viewer in direct connection with the *imago Dei* realized in protagonist qualities and to elucidate foundations of narrative storytelling identified in conjunction with the

²⁰ Joel W. Martin and Conrad E. Ostwalt, Jr., ed. *Screening the Sacred: Religion, Myth, and Ideology in Popular American Film* (Bolder, CO: Westview Press, Inc., 1995), 120.

²¹ Clint Worthington, “Classic Film Review: ‘The Passion of the Christ’ Still Preaches to the Converted,” *Consequence of Sound*, Feb. 25, 2019, <https://consequenceofsound.net/2019/02/classic-film-review-passion-of-the-christ/>.

acts of personal divine transcendence in both artifacts: *The Passion of the Christ* and *The Mission*. Essential characteristics of the *imago Dei* are examined as the transportive gateways through which protagonist character qualities reveal the image of God in man. The supporting player in this drama is the power of cinema as a universal backdrop for persuasion.

In chapter 2, this study will explore God's divine revelation as revealed to human beings through natural and supernatural communication. To this research, several theologians are reviewed on their ideas of divine revelation and the reflection of *the imago Dei* in human beings. The rhetoric of storytelling and protagonist qualities expressed in cinema will also be observed as it pertains to persuasion in communication.

Chapter 3 offers a synopsis of each artifact, *The Passion of the Christ* and *The Mission*, to provide a basic overview of the protagonists and the narrative story to be examined. Chapter 4 narrows the focus on the transcendence of the *imago Dei* in cinema as the crux of this study. First, the artifacts are examined through the lens of the transcendence of the *imago Dei* observed in specific moments of God's communion with humanity and divine revelation exposed through the reflection of *the imago Dei* in the protagonist qualities. Second is a summary of the *imago Dei* in each artifact and the potential for the occurrence of special revelation due to the *imago Dei* in the viewer connecting supernaturally with the *imago Dei* in the protagonist. The final section provides an exposé of personal testimonies to special revelation in cinema. Noted are documented accounts of personal spiritual transformations during and after viewing *The Passion of the Christ*, as well as other films that have promoted the gospel message through the narrative of cinema. These testimonies, which are the result of witnessing the truth of Christ and the work of the Holy Spirit, are reported in an array of articles by noted professionals in various fields of media, including: filmmakers, authors, journalists, evangelists, and film critics. Such testimonies

align with Scripture and reveal the presence of the *imago Dei*.

This study identifies McKee's protagonist character qualities manifested in the drama of each artifact. The protagonist qualities surveyed in each artifact include willfulness, empathy, and behavior contradiction.²² A willful character is identified by McKee as a character who "owns a powerful will that drives"²³ the protagonist to pursue the task and affect change. Character empathy is the shared humanity with which the viewer identifies with the protagonist. Shared humanity is defined here as the qualities of God's image, of which human beings possess because all human beings are made in the image of God. This is the locus of the identification between a fictional character and a viewer. McKee's concept of behavior-contradiction is the viewer's perception of the protagonist's contradiction to his conscious desire to fulfill the goal.²⁴

This study focuses these particular qualities of the protagonist as he or she moves through the main action of the narrative. The protagonist qualities are revealed and examined through the rhetoric of the narrative story giving focus to the protagonist journey. Noted here is humanity's ongoing journey with the protagonist. Just as the protagonist in the story is called into an adventure, the viewer joins in a visceral, emotional cinematic adventure alongside the protagonist. No matter the call, the protagonist is infinitely set on a course of action even if the action is to refuse to act.²⁵

The task is to locate the *imago Dei* qualities in the protagonist that potentially connect with the *imago Dei* of the viewer. The protagonist qualities will be observed through the

²² Robert McKee, *Story: Substance, Structure, Style, and the Principles of Screenwriting* (New York: Harper-Collins Publishers, 1997), 139.

²³ *Ibid.*, 138.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 137-141.

²⁵ Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, 3rd ed. (Novato, CA: New World Library, 2008), 48-49.

dialogue and action of the protagonist. Action is the movement of choices the protagonist makes throughout the story by which the viewer becomes intrinsically and emotionally joined with the protagonist until the story climax and resolution. It is in the symbiotic relationship between character and viewer that this study proposes the presence and action of the *imago Dei*. The protagonist actions can be understood as physical action (a fight scene, running after a train, or reading a newspaper) or emotional action (laughing, crying, yelling, and persuading someone). Dialogue can be defined as communication by the protagonist to another character in the story or even to himself.

This study examines the concepts of the *imago Dei* in a viewer and their empathy with and reflection of the protagonist's *imago Dei* leading to special revelation of Jesus Christ. Pertaining to this interaction is the work of the Holy Spirit, who transcends the knowledge of God to the viewer.

Assumptions

The assumptions herein do not align with current philosophical and cultural skepticism that all things are determined and those things that happen in the world happen due to natural causes and are thus uniquely determined within the natural universe.²⁶ Furthermore, this study does not intend to “prove” divine phenomena or the conversion of a person experiencing revelation through film. However, this study does intend to show that it is highly probable that special revelation can be encountered by a person through the viewing of a film by the transcendent power of the Holy Spirit in conjunction with the presence of the *imago Dei*.

²⁶ A Pew Forum on Religion report shows that 26 percent of American millennials do not believe that God heals people. Allison Pond, Gregory Smith, and Scott Clement, “Religion Among the Millennials,” Pew Research Center: Religion & Public Life, February 17, 2010, <http://www.pewforum.org/2010/02/17/religion-among-the-millennials/>.

Another assumption held herein is the belief that God, the Creator of the universe, through divine actions, brings about a state of affairs that would not have occurred if only natural causes were involved. These divine actions, referred to as miracles or phenomena, are God's intentional appointments for communion with humankind through the redemption of His Son Jesus Christ. This act of love is God's relentless pursuit to maintain His covenant with Israel and all those who are adopted by faith in the Lord Jesus. In regard to phenomenal acts, individuals may have a sincere conviction that God speaks and communicates with them for particular purposes, and that God does so through divine actions that are outside the physical and logical laws of nature.

Summary

This dissertation explores the transcendent power of special revelation from God as communicated through cinema whereby a person viewing a movie may be spiritually transformed to the point of redemption. Specifically, it investigates the Christian view of divine revelation, the phenomenal acts of God, character expressions of the *imago Dei*, rhetoric of narrative storytelling applied in cinema, the behavioral influence of cinema, critical background and theological and philosophical reviews on special revelation, and the protagonist's journey in story as prime revelation of the *imago Dei* observed in the emotional and physical actions of the protagonist. Additionally, this study presumes that God discloses himself to humanity through divine communication. The prime artifacts for this study are *The Passion of the Christ* (2004) and *The Mission* (1986). A few additional artifacts characterized as secular, mainstream films will also be mentioned for the purpose of corroborating the persuasive power of the cinematic storytelling experience.

The synthesis of the cinematic experience is observed through Robert McKee's concepts

of protagonist qualities in the examination of divine revelation expressed by the *imago Dei* in the films *The Passion of the Christ* and *The Mission*. The intention is to show it is probable that an individual may experience the phenomenal act of special revelation as God reveals himself to a person through the cinematic experience. Key to this endeavor is the understanding of the fundamental power of story and the reflection of the *imago Dei* through protagonist qualities conveyed in cinema, the attributes of the *imago Dei* exhibited in the protagonist qualities, and the documented evidence of personal testimonies.

This work will focus on divine revelation as communicated to a person by God through the expression of the *imago Dei* in the visual and aural cinematic experience. This particular experience by a person through the cinema is not to be confused or corresponded to supernatural events recorded in Old Testament of the Bible. The significance here is to show that a person might be transformed by the power of the Holy Spirit while experiencing a movie as the *imago Dei* is reflected in the protagonist qualities. This is not to assert that cinema is a requirement for the revelation any more than to assert a sermon is a requirement. The intention of this dissertation is to illustrate that a person may be spiritually transformed to the point of conversion of faith while experiencing the cinematic narrative and thus this conversion be considered an act of special (supernatural) revelation. It is not the intention of this study to assume fervent religious spectacle as evidence of God's supernatural communication. This event is defined as special revelation in harmony with the transcendent power of the Holy Spirit as God reveals himself to an individual.

CHAPTER 2: BACKGROUND AND LITERATURE REVIEW

Review of Theoretical Background and Literature

The first section of this chapter outlines and defines the work of God's divine revelation as revealed to human beings through natural and supernatural communication. The second section observes divine revelation witnessed by human beings through miracles and visions. Both Old and New Testament writings are considered here in regard to phenomenal acts. The third section considers the expressions and transcendence of the *imago Dei* in human beings and explicate the gateway of communication between the Creator and humankind. It will attempt to clarify what modes God uses to communicate His Image in and through humankind. The fourth section examines the rhetoric of storytelling in cinema as an act of communication. No matter the genre, the story represents at least one worldview, often many, whether or not it was intended by the filmmaker. Next is a survey of media persuasion and the use of persuasive strategies to impact public opinion and, by consequence, individuals' moral choices through the cinematic experience. The final section considers several theologians on the idea of divine revelation in cinema through the reflection of *the imago Dei* in the person viewing the film.

Divine Revelation

This section examines how God communicates with human beings and the plausibility that God communicates supernaturally through the Holy Spirit directly to a person. The overarching term for this phenomenon is *divine revelation*. Divine revelation is the objective expression of God's personal interaction with human beings revealed through the Holy Spirit. Carl F. H. Henry asserts, "When revelation gets through, man has an ultimate and final word.

Revelation is mystery dispelled and conveys information about God and His purpose.²⁷ Daniel Evans speaks of revelation as “the experience of the disclosure of the divine reality in the human soul.”²⁸ The ultimate revelation of God for human beings comes from God’s deliberate communication.

The intent of this section is to establish that God solely determines to whom He reveals himself, and this communication is not subject to the human efforts of a person. Examining various sources, this section will consider the idea that God alone authors knowledge, and He communicates through symbol systems that incorporate all of a human being’s senses, and not solely through written or spoken language. It is the combination of general and special revelation that this study intends to show as evidence for the transcendence of God through cinema.

Divine revelation refers to the activity whereby the hiddenness of God is unveiled to human beings. Karl Barth considers God to be hidden to humanity until He makes himself known: “The true God is the hidden God.” Barth continues, “Divine revelation is knowing the true God in His revelation, we apprehend Him in His hiddenness. And just because we do this, we know the true God in His revelation.”²⁹ Barth understood revelation to be God’s self-revelation to humankind revealed by the Word of God: Jesus, Scriptures, and proclamation of the gospel. God’s ongoing revelation to humankind expresses God’s desire to reveal himself as Lord to the world.³⁰ According to Barth, revelation refers to “the knowledge of God through God and

²⁷ Carl F. H. Henry, *God Who Speaks and Shows*, vol. 2, *God, Revelation and Authority* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1999), 73, 213.

²⁸ Daniel Evans, “The Divine Revelation and the Christian Religion,” *The Harvard Theological Review* 5, no. 3 (July 1912): 304, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0017816000013535>.

²⁹ Karl Barth, *The Doctrine of The Word of God*, vol. 1.1, *Church Dogmatics*, trans. G. W. Bromiley, ed. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance (New York: T&T Clark, 2004), 193.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 314.

from God,” particularly, “it means that the object becomes the subject ... it is God’s work in us.”³¹

Two classical distinctions of divine revelation include *general revelation* and *special revelation*, also referred to as “natural” and “supernatural.” General and special revelation are both personal and concern unique information revealed to each individual as communicated by God for the purpose of revealing himself.³² It is an intimate communion between God and the individual and cannot be manipulated through humankind’s efforts or exhaust the incomprehensibility of God.³³

Bruce Demarest suggests, general revelation, or natural, is the disclosure or phenomena of God in nature that is observed as the course of events happening in the natural realm.³⁴ General revelation is activated or revealed through the providential act of God whereby a person is no longer blind to the truth of God.³⁵ Special, or supernatural, revelation refers to that which occurs and intervenes in nature that is considered an act by which God communicates with humanity. Emil Brunner claims divine revelation illuminates the eyes of the human heart to the knowledge of God: “It is knowledge in the dimension of personal encounter: God Himself

³¹ Karl Barth, *The Göttingen Dogmatics: Instruction in the Christian Religion*, ed. Hannelotte Reiffen, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1991), 12.

³² Evans, “The Divine Revelation and the Christian Religion,” 306.

³³ Karl Rahner, *Christian at the Crossroads*, trans. V. Green (New York: Seabury Press, 1975), 11-18.

³⁴ Bruce A. Demarest and Gordon Lewis, *Knowing Ultimate Reality: The Living God*, vol. 1, *Integrative Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1987), 61.

³⁵ Robert L. Thomas, “General Revelation and Biblical Hermeneutics,” *The Master’s Seminary Journal* 9, no. 1 (Spring 1998): 13.

discloses Himself.”³⁶ These two forms of revelation are not in opposition; they are in unison as part of the whole of God’s revelation toward humanity and provides awareness of the Creator.

General revelation is understood in Christianity to mean that God makes himself known to all people everywhere by the glory of His creation. Scripture says, “The heavens declare the glory of God; the sky above proclaims His handiwork” (Psalm 19). Human beings can have an awareness of God as the Creator of the universe through the existence of a simple flower, the intricate constellations of stars and galaxies, or the complexities of the single cell.

Benjamin B. Warfield declares that God intervenes intimately with humankind for the purpose of unveiling himself in the explicit and the ordinary.³⁷ This unveiling is the mystery of God’s intervention with humanity and the grace of God’s pronouncement of himself through the Holy Scriptures. He relentlessly continues to manifest himself by general and special revelation to mankind. Even in man’s sinful nature, God reveals His divine grace to those who acknowledge Him and confess Jesus Christ as Lord.³⁸

Special revelation is the disclosing of the knowledge of God, a bridge across the chasm of fellowship between God and humankind brought about by the Fall of Man.³⁹ The image of this is seen in John the Baptist’s recognition of Jesus as He approached the Jordan river where John was baptizing others. God revealed to John that Jesus was the Messiah.⁴⁰ This act of revelation, then

³⁶ Emil Brunner, *Revelation and Reason: The Christian Doctrine of Faith and Knowledge* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 1946), 179.

³⁷ Benjamin B. Warfield, *Revelation and Inspiration*, vol. 1, *The Works of Benjamin B. Warfield* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2000), 3.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ Thomas, “General Revelation and Biblical Hermeneutics,” 14.

⁴⁰ Matthew 3:13-14.

and now, is something “other than and distinguishable from the reasoning process.”⁴¹ Scripture affirms God’s mysterious ways, “He has made everything beautiful in its time. He has put eternity into man’s heart, yet so that he cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end” (Eccl. 3:11).

Revelation comes by Spirit-filled interaction between God and human beings as His self-disclosure through specific means to specific people at a specific time.⁴² He who gives life is under no requirement to fulfill His revelation; just as preaching is unnecessary for the completion of God’s communication. In this sense, God communicates with humanity as a unity of revelation, Scripture, and proclamation. It is in this context that revelation is revealed through the Holy Spirit and the fulfillment of grace is imparted to humanity. The Divine Giver is not in wait of the discernor or listener.

Karl Barth contends that human talk is talk about God whether indifferent or fervent.⁴³ “There is human talk which ... is truly and concretely distinguished from other human talk. Yet, the special utterance about God which consists in the action of this man is primarily and properly directed to God and not to men.”⁴⁴ Therefore, divine revelation through the action of speaking about the knowledge of God in Jesus Christ may be fulfillment under any circumstance. A person merely needs to submit to the will of God.⁴⁵ Thus, location or venue is inconsequential to the divine appointment.

⁴¹ Thomas F. Tracy, ed., *God Who Acts: Philosophical and Theological Explorations* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1994), 27.

⁴² David S. Dockery and David P. Nelson, “Special Revelation,” in *A Theology for the Church*, ed. Daniel L. Akin (Nashville, TN: B&H Academic, 2007), 118-20.

⁴³ Barth, *The Doctrine of The Word of God*, 3.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 46-7.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 24.

Barth explains special revelation as threefold: the revealed Word of God as proclaimed by the Church, the written Word of God fulfilled by revelation, and the preached Word of God known through the revelation attested in Scripture.⁴⁶ This study proposes that each of these examples of divine revelation are orchestrated by God as He gives the interpretation. Therefore, it is conceivable that God may transcend by the Holy Spirit through such conduits as the cinema of *The Passion of the Christ* and *The Mission* to reach the human soul.

Jonathan Edwards, one of America's great revivalists, spoke of divine revelation, which he called "supernatural light," as a regeneration of man by an act of God's grace instigating the sanctification of those who walk in submission to the Lord.⁴⁷ Edwards claimed divine revelation to be the communication and work of the Holy Spirit as an unveiling that can be observed as divine love. It exists and is designed to penetrate the hearts of humanity with the glory, authority, and supremacy of God.⁴⁸

I have, many times, had a sense of the glory of the Third Person in the Trinity, and His office as Sanctifier; in His holy operations, communicating divine light and life to the soul. God in the communications of His Holy Spirit, has appeared as an infinite fountain of divine glory and sweetness; being full, and sufficient to fill and satisfy the soul; pouring forth itself in sweet communications; like the sun in its glory, sweetly and pleasantly diffusing light and life.⁴⁹

Similar to Edwards' "supernatural light," Thomas Aquinas noted the challenge arising from suggesting rational creatures are naturally able to see the divine essence.

It is impossible for any created intellect to see the essence of God by its own natural power. For knowledge is regulated according as the thing known is in the knower. But the thing known is in the knower according to the mode of the knower. Hence the knowledge of every knower is ruled according to its own nature. Therefore, the created

⁴⁶ Barth, *The Doctrine of The Word of God*, 120-1.

⁴⁷ Edwards, "A Treatise Concerning Religious Affections," vi-viii.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 48-49.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

intellect cannot see the essence of God, unless God by His grace unites Himself to the created intellect, as an object made intelligible to it.⁵⁰

Aquinas suggests the glory of God may be expressed in the idea of *lumen gloriae*—the gift of intelligibility of the incomprehensibility of God for all human beings. Thus, *lumen gloriae* is completed by God’s self-communication to humankind as the enlightened condition according to the Scripture.⁵¹ “When He shall appear we shall be like Him, because we shall see Him as He is” (1 John 3:2). Barth asserts that God has made himself apprehensible by the revelation in Jesus Christ. It is through the dispensing of the gift of faith by God that a person is capable of receiving revelation and the knowledge of God.⁵² It is through the *imago Dei* in man that God provides the locus wherein communication with God is possible.

Therefore, divine revelation does not eliminate God’s essential mystery, but invites human beings into the mystery as an act of affection. As Carl F. H. Henry illuminates, “Divine revelation palpitates with human surprise. Like a fiery bolt of lightning that unexpectedly zooms toward us and scores a direct hit, like an earthquake that suddenly shakes and engulfs us, it somersaults our private thoughts to abrupt awareness of ultimate destiny.”⁵³ These affectual and often spectacular events attest to the death and resurrection of the Messiah as disclosure of the love of God toward His children. Divine revelation is not comprehended by human subjectivism, but by the power of the Holy Spirit through the *imago Dei* in each person and the gift of faith

⁵⁰ Aquinas, *The Summa Theologica of St. Thomas Aquinas*, 1:127.

⁵¹ Karl Rahner, “Thomas Aquinas on the Incomprehensibility of God,” in “Celebrating the Medieval Heritage: A Colloquy on the Thought of Aquinas and Bonaventure,” edited by David Tracy, Supplement, *The Journal of Religion*. 58 (1978): S114, <https://doi.org/10.1086/jr.58.41575984>.

⁵² Barth, *The Doctrine of The Word of God*, 179-204.

⁵³ Henry, *God Who Speaks and Shows*, 17.

that brings the follower of Christ “into all truth” (John 16:13).⁵⁴

It is at this intersection of supernatural divine grace and an individual’s cinematic experience that this study supposes the transcendent glory of God in the human soul, made in the image of God, and the power of story, has the potentially for transformative power in an individual.

General Revelation

This survey of general revelation is designed to set the stage and support the work of special revelation in film. Bruce Demarest suggests that general revelation is the manifestation of God’s glory revealed in creation of the natural world by which a person might witness of God.⁵⁵ It can be understood as self-disclosure provided by God to human beings as revelation of himself that leads the individual to reunion with his Creator. General revelation provides an “order and design of the natural creation and the nature and identity of human creatures” that echoes throughout Scripture.⁵⁶ “For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. For His invisible attributes, namely, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made” (Rom. 1:19-20). Through general revelation, humanity discovers the basic understanding of God as Creator in the world and that He exists to be known by humanity. It provides the substance, a sense of dignity, to the connectiveness of God to His created beings.

Thomas Aquinas held that God’s existence is not self-evident. He claimed, “It must be

⁵⁴ 2 Corinthians 3:18, “We all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit.”

⁵⁵ Bruce A. Demarest, “General Revelation,” in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Walter A. Elwell (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1984), 944-45.

⁵⁶ Russell D. Moore, “Natural Revelation,” in *A Theology for the Church*, ed. Daniel L. Akin (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing Group, 2014), 93.

said that to see the essence of God there is required some similitude in the visual faculty, namely, the light of glory strengthening the intellect to see God.”⁵⁷ “In Thy light we shall see light” (Psalm 36:9). By this understanding, or reason, a person is motivated to seek God beyond the natural and into the supernatural of transformation. Demarest adds that general revelation discloses “God in nature, in providential history, and in the moral law within the heart, whereby all persons at all times and places gain a rudimentary understanding of the Creator and His moral demands.”⁵⁸

Cinema has the potential as art to stir the soul in the same way nature points to God’s creation. After all, the camera is surveying and capturing nature in all of its beauty, complexity, and wildness. And so, entering the stage or appearing on screen is the hero, a person, playing the role of a character created by another person using the craft of writing which on all points represents art—art that can only exist because God, the grand Creator, embedded His image in each of these roles from which the movie screen comes alive and reflects the mystery of God in human beings in all their wonder and frailty.

God can communicate His image through divinely inspired art whether the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel or a child’s finger painting. “Before I formed you in the womb, I knew you, before you were born, I dedicated you” (Jeremiah 1:5). Art does not exist without the Artist who nurtures His children with His Spirit. As expressed in Genesis 1:26, “Then God said, ‘Let us make man in our image, after our likeness.’” Art and image of God are uniquely bound by the creative nature of God. The spiritual nature of the *imago Dei* in humanity expresses the personality, intellect, emotion, and will that set human beings apart from other creations. “The

⁵⁷ Aquinas, *The Summa Theologica of St. Thomas Aquinas*, 1.12.4.

⁵⁸ Demarest and Lewis, *Knowing Ultimate Reality*, 61.

point here is that God in His model of creativity has embedded both aesthetic and functional ‘goodness’ in the micro-macro structure of the universe.”⁵⁹

Millard Erickson writes, “General revelation is God’s communication of himself to all persons at all times and in all places.”⁶⁰ The distinguishing features between general revelation and special revelation is that general revelation is communicated in nature to all people, whereas special revelation is communicated by the Spirit of God through the Scriptures and miracles. However, the act of God in general revelation should not be subcategorized as communication of lesser value. As such, the cinematic experience allows for the personal conveyance of God’s divine revelation and the certainty of His existence.

God desires to communicate with all humankind. The gift of mankind is the invitation to be in the presence of God and the glory of His Spirit. Lewis suggests in *Miracles: A Preliminary Study* that God may speak in the still, small voice as reported in Scripture; yet, that is not to assume He will not speak loudly if He so desires.⁶¹ The revelation God gives Elijah in 1 Kings 19 expresses special revelation; yet, it is often described as the quiet voice of God’s general revelation in the hearts and minds of men and women. “These things God has revealed to us through the Spirit. For the Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God” (1 Cor. 2:10).

John Calvin, in his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, asserts the knowledge of God exists in the human mind, a consciousness of the presence of God.⁶² The idea that human beings are made in the image of God affords a person an awareness of his Creator. A natural

⁵⁹ Barry W. Liesch and Thomas J. Finley, “The Biblical Concept of Creativity: Scope, Definition, Criteria,” *Journal of Psychology and Theology* 12, no. 3 (1984): 194, <https://doi.org/10.1177%2F009164718401200303>.

⁶⁰ Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2013), 153.

⁶¹ C. S. Lewis, *Miracles: Preliminary Study* (1947; repr., New York: Touchstone Books, 1996), 148.

⁶² John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Henry Beveridge (Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1846), I.3.1.

predisposition exists in humankind to seek a deity to worship, and as such, conveys confirmation of the impression of the majesty of God on the conscience of humanity.⁶³ Similarly, R. C. Sproul agrees that general revelation is God-given through nature. Yet, he affirms *sola Scriptura* as acknowledging the divine authority of Scripture and its special revelation.⁶⁴ Thus, both general and special revelation are an infallible action of God and are not in conflict but serve the sufficiency of Scripture.⁶⁵

Swinburne supports the idea of internal and external evidence of God that serve to answer the needs of humanity's depravity. External evidence are those unusual moments surrounding a particular traditional event. Internal evidence provides personal confirmation that the event is truly from God as exhibited from general revelation which align with those generated by natural theology.⁶⁶ Thus, general revelation signifies information about God and His relationship to the world as found "in creation, human conscience, and the overall pattern of history."⁶⁷

Demarest adds, "General revelation, meditated through nature, conscience, and the providential ordering of history, traditionally has been understood as universal witness of God through general revelation as a reminiscent knowledge of God, an intuitional knowledge of

⁶³ Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, I.3.1.

⁶⁴ R. C. Sproul, *Scripture Alone: The Evangelical Doctrine* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2013), 21.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 22.

⁶⁶ Richard Swinburne, *Revelation: From Metaphor to Analogy*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 110-21.

⁶⁷ R. Douglas Geivett, "The Evidential Value of Miracles," in *In Defense of Miracles: A Comprehensive Case for God's Action in History*, ed. R. Douglas Geivett and Gary R. Habermas (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 1997), 302.

God.”⁶⁸ Scripture affirms the image of God as having permanent residency in humanity even in their fallen nature.

Benjamin B. Warfield posits general revelation demonstrates God’s sovereignty; however, “from the gate of Eden onward, God’s general revelation, in the strict sense, ceased to be supernatural.”⁶⁹ Although that may be true in the strictest sense, there is legitimate argument asserting that communication of any kind is miraculous, making the possibility of transcendent effects of cinema a wonderful event. Consequently, general revelation is for many scholars insufficient as a means to bring an individual to salvation. Inversely, Bruce Demarest writes, “The fact that man interprets his own existence outside of his relationship to God does not negate the fact that God’s revelation, also in man, comes to us. Only in the light of revelation is revealed who this man essentially is.”⁷⁰ Mankind’s relationship with God is a personal one, overflowing by grace of reconciliation with God.

Imperative to this discussion is the understanding that God chooses to make himself known to humankind by revealing himself through nature and knowledge in the conscience of humanity. Carl F. H. Henry claims, “revelation occurs on God’s R-Day as an act of transcendent disclosure. It pulses with the surprise of foreign invasion and opens before us like the suddenly parted Red Sea waters.”⁷¹ The concept of God’s handiwork in creation of the universe provides for an understanding of general revelation as humankind observes the creativity and purpose of

⁶⁸ Bruce Demarest, *General Revelation: Historical Views and Contemporary Issues* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1982), 14.

⁶⁹ Benjamin B. Warfield, *The Inspiration and Authority of the Bible* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1980), 10.

⁷⁰ G. C. Berkouwer, *Studies in Dogmatics: General Revelation* (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 1955), 227.

⁷¹ Henry, *God Who Speaks and Shows*, 18, 20.

God expressed throughout Scripture. Specifically, this is expressed by Paul when he asserts, “For since the creation of the world God’s invisible qualities—His eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that people are without excuse” (Rom. 1:20). Divine revelation provides humankind a way of escape from the distraction and hindrances that attempt to block the redemptive intersection of God’s grace with humanity.

Bruce Demarest and Gordon Lewis claim that general revelation serves to “disclose God in nature, in providential history, and in the moral law within the heart, whereby all persons at all times and places gain a rudimentary understanding of the Creator and His moral demands.”⁷² It is the claim of this study that this moral law within the heart of all humankind is evidence of the *imago Dei* in each person and as witnessed in the protagonist character in cinema. Consequently, general revelation provides mankind the opportunity to witness the character of God and experience a moment of clarity while, as Paul claimed, “we see through a glass darkly.”⁷³

It should be noted that not all Christian denominations align on understanding or even semi-agreement on the workings of general revelation when it comes to the natural. In fact, some “neo-orthodox” theologians such as Karl Barth, Emil Brunner, and Rudolph Bultmann do not wholly support the idea of general revelation as it relies too heavily on a person’s individual interpretation.⁷⁴ The fear among many theologians and church leaders is the challenge of discerning that which is genuine in context of the testimony given by the individual who has expressed such revelation.

Bruce Demarest recognizes the difficult task of determining the validity of general

⁷² Demarest and Lewis, *Knowing Ultimate Reality*, 61.

⁷³ 1 Corinthians 13:12.

⁷⁴ D. L. Mueller, *Makers of the Modern Theological Mind: Karl Barth* (Peabody, MA: Hendricksen, 1972), 88; Brunner, *Revelation and Reason*, 3.

revelation seated in humanity's ongoing avoidance of the communication acts of God. "Mankind uniformly repudiates the knowledge of God afforded by general revelation man not only spurned the knowledge of God, but he proceeds to fashion lifeless gods."⁷⁵ The result of this statement is the acknowledgment that individual interpretation is the crux of one's personal connection with the Creator. It is not whether human beings are aware of God; it is whether they will acknowledge their dependence on God.

William Masselink in his book *General Revelation and Common Grace*, claims that the knowledge of God's existence can come to an individual by way of the Holy Spirit giving evidences of God in nature and by means of testimonies by believers. "By means of these 'theistic proofs' it is not difficult to show the atheist not only the weak points of his system, but the hollow emptiness of his whole philosophy."⁷⁶ Ultimately, it is not by reason alone that one comes to believe in the extraordinary revelation provided by the Spirit to mankind. Scripture in Romans 1:19 provides an assurance that God makes known His existence and communicates a universal revelation that displays His power through natural or particular revelation.

Kenneth Kantzer contends that general revelation may adequately provide humankind with the responsibility to worship God through the experience of wonder in nature; however, general revelation is not sufficient for the knowledge of salvation.⁷⁷ Likewise, Genesis 2-3 display God instructing Adam about the tree of knowledge and Adam's role as caretaker of the animals and the garden. The Scriptures also reveal God frequently communicating with Adam and Eve. It seems evident that God has always intended to have communication with humanity.

⁷⁵ Demarest, *General Revelation*, 244-247.

⁷⁶ William Masselink, *General Revelation and Common Grace* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company 1953), 119.

⁷⁷ Kenneth Kantzer, "The Communication of Revelation," in *The Bible: The Living Word of Revelation*, ed. Merrill C. Tenney (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1968), 67.

God's original plan for special revelation as distinct from general revelation is verified within the Scriptures.

Carl Henry offers that the essence of revelation "is that God steps out of His hiddenness to disclose what would otherwise remain secret and unknown. Revelation is God's unmasking of himself, His voluntary act of disclosure. It comes from eternity, from beyond an absolute boundary that separates man from God."⁷⁸ General revelation only reveals God as Creator, not as Redeemer. It has a specific purpose. It functions to provide knowledge of the Creator through creation from which knowledge of God can be attained.⁷⁹

Erickson suggests, "A correct understanding of general revelation precludes that God is infinite and man is not."⁸⁰ For humanity to know God, God must make himself known. Human beings can, by general revelation revealed in the natural, comprehend the greatness of God and on some level grasp the *imago Dei* though dimmed by sin in hearts of all human beings.

Warfield claimed the Christian faith is founded on the "supernatural origin of Scripture. The religion of the Bible is a frankly supernatural religion."⁸¹ And, the darkest of heart, such as Paul's heart prior to his encounter with the risen Christ, remains the lost sheep in God's pasture. Thus, it is critical to this discussion of transformation of a person through cinema to acknowledge that general revelation and special revelation are discernable from one another, yet they represent a whole and not in opposition to one another; each incomplete without the other.

Warfield claims in light of Romans 1:20, without general revelation, special revelation

⁷⁸ Henry, *God Who Speaks and Shows*, 17-21.

⁷⁹ Jack Cottrell, *What the Bible Says About God the Creator* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1983), 347.

⁸⁰ Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 153.

⁸¹ Warfield, *Revelation and Inspiration*, 3.

would be deficient in its expression of the knowledge of God.⁸² It is by His grace that He seeks to grant human beings in their depravity the revelation of himself first through general revelation and ultimately special revelation through the Scripture and the revealing work of the Holy Spirit. It is not only the reflection of redeeming acts of God, but a realigning of humanity's understanding of the knowledge of God's redemptive nature for the world. "Miracles are not merely credentials of revelation, but vehicles of revelation as well."⁸³

Warfield offers three steps, or stages, of revelation: theophany, prophecy, and inspiration. Theophany is represented by physical phenomena such as the miracle of the burning bush. The Prophetic age is characteristic of God's revelation to human beings by His address to specific prophets. The concept of prophecy presupposes a word or vision given to a prophet often by a physically revealed vision and/or voice of "The Lord Jehovah." Inspiration refers to that which is revealed to man as an internal method by and through the Word of Scripture and the Holy Spirit. Warfield is quick to note that in regard to revelation through dreams and visions they should never be assumed as to be a lower level or a less-than other form of God's revealed knowledge.

There is no age in the history of the religion of the Bible, from that of Moses to that of Christ and His apostles, in which all these modes of revelation do not find place. One or another may seem particularly characteristic of this age or of that; but they all occur in every age. And they occur side by side, broadly speaking, on the same level. No discrimination is drawn between them in point of worthiness as modes of revelation, and much less in point of purity in the revelations communicated through them.⁸⁴

Likewise, the potential for cinema to provide fertile opportunities for divine encounters should be no less significant.

Human existence is predicated on the provisions of divine revelation otherwise

⁸² Warfield, "The Biblical Idea of Revelation," *Works*, 8.

⁸³ Warfield, *The Inspiration and Authority of the Bible*, 84.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 83.

humankind would be without grace, redemption, and knowledge of God. Yet, human beings, in their sinfulness and willfulness, have the choice to deliberately suppress the truth of the God's existence. God, however, remains marvelously graceful in His revelation allowing humankind to celebrate and encounter a glimpse into His hiddenness even in their rebellious state.⁸⁵

The religious perspective, specifically the Christian faith, understands divine revelation as the supernatural, transcendent influence of God through His Holy Spirit. Evidence is shown in the Bible that "all Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness" (2 Timothy 3:16). Warfield claims, "Without general revelation, special revelation would lack that basis in the fundamental knowledge of God."⁸⁶ It is through supernatural revelation that God has made a way for His created children to participate in His grace toward restoration and communion. The prophets and the apostles were instrumentally used and spoken through by God to become bearers, impressed upon by the Holy Spirit in service of God's revelation. It was by this means that the disciples were witness to the living Word as they followed Jesus throughout His ministry. However, those who do not allow or accept that God communicates at times supernaturally and gracefully to humanity for His purpose of grace to humanity have no other recourse than to assume the phenomena as merely fairy tales.

Therefore, general revelation in the cinematic experience can be likened to a moment of revelation of God on the human heart. The narrative cinematic narrative story can expose timeless truths and bring tears to even the most hardened hearts. R. C. Sproul asserts, "If God's

⁸⁵ Hendrikus Berkhof, *Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Study of Faith* (Grand Rapid, MI: Eerdmans Publishing, 1986) 54, 63-63.

⁸⁶ Benjamin B. Warfield, "The Biblical Idea of Revelation," *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, ed. James Orr (Chicago: Howard-Severance Co., 1915), 4:2573-82.

general revelation is in fact ‘general,’ in that it is plain enough for all to see clearly without complicated cosmological argumentation, then it may even be said to be self-evident.”⁸⁷

Special Revelation

This section proposes the identifying marks of the *imago Dei* are active in God’s self-revelation whether the Spirit speaks through the burning bush or the cinematic image of the human condition. This is an exploration of a unity between general and special revelation through which a person may be drawn from the natural to the special as God reveals himself. As Detweiler contends, “General and special revelation are complementary gifts for navigating the complexities of life, for fueling our dreams, and for enduring our disappointments.”⁸⁸ Likewise, Berkouwer offers, “We must insist that general revelation does not and cannot mean an attack upon the special revelation in Jesus Christ.”⁸⁹ Jesus is always the cornerstone, the absoluteness of Christianity.

Craig Detweiler distinguishes special revelation from general revelation by the “genuine” spiritual awakening that happens to a person. He says “genuine, life altering revelation arrives as a gift of God, mediated by the Spirit.”⁹⁰ Cinema can offer the occasion for personal transformation as universal truths and God’s nature are revealed in the cinematic reflection of the human spirit. This is not to claim mediation in the divine revelation as Barth emphatically

⁸⁷ Robert Charles Sproul, John Henry Gerstner, Arthur Lindsley, *Classical Apologetics: A Rational Defense of the Christian Faith and a Critique of Presuppositional Apologetics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1984), 47, 51.

⁸⁸ Sproul, Gerstner, Lindsley, *Classical Apologetics*, 263.

⁸⁹ G. C. Berkouwer, “General and Special Divine Revelation,” in *Revelation and the Bible: Contemporary Evangelical Thought*, ed. Carl F. H. Henry (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1958), 16.

⁹⁰ Detweiler, *Into the Dark*, 261.

expressed.⁹¹ Human beings cannot adopt God; He adopts human beings and has done so since He created humanity in His image. “Revelation means the knowledge of God through God and from God.”⁹² Barth’s position aligns with this study’s proposal that no matter what the venue, it is always God who opens the eyes of any person. Divine transcendence herein refers to the occurrence of special revelation whereby God makes himself known to person the point of spiritual transformation as the *imago Dei* in the viewer connects supernaturally with the moral choices and consequences of the protagonist.

Jürgen Moltmann suggests general and special revelation serve as one expression of God’s transcendence to human beings.⁹³

The real phenomenon is to be found in God’s immanence in human experience, and in the transcendence of human beings in God. Anyone who stylizes revelation and experience into alternatives, ends up with revelations that cannot be experienced, and experiences without revelation.⁹⁴

God’s Spirit encompasses us from all sides and wherever we are (Psalm 139).

Special revelation is given to specific persons at specific times and in specific places.⁹⁵ The forms of special revelation include miracles, prophesy, the life of Christ, and the Scriptures. Bernard Ramm observes, “General revelation is for all to see and observe if they are spiritually discerning, special revelation has been given to a particular people by the offering of the message of salvation.”⁹⁶ Francis Schaeffer says, special revelation is the divine revelation of the God who

⁹¹ Barth, *The Göttingen Dogmatics*, 61.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 88.

⁹³ Jürgen Moltmann, *God in Creation: A New Theology of Creation and the Spirit of God* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1993), 59.

⁹⁴ Moltmann, *Spirit of Life: A Universal Affirmation* (Philadelphia, PA: Philadelphia Press, 1992), 7, 179.

⁹⁵ Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 178.

⁹⁶ Bernard Ramm, *The Witness of the Spirit: An Essay on the Contemporary Relevance of the Internal Witness of the Holy Spirit* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1959), 66.

is there and who is not silent.⁹⁷ Pertaining to this study, the cinema experience may provide the conduit for special revelation similar to the modes of special revelation that includes visions, dreams, and prophecy. It is on this foundation that special revelation demonstrates the potential for God's transcendence to all humankind, even using the cinematic image as the conduit.

Whatever methods God chooses to reveal himself supernaturally to an individual, He does so that humankind might receive a personal invitation to know God. Jack Cottrell contends, "Some of the mightiest acts of all were performed not for the purpose of revelation but for the sake of redemption"... the miracles witnessed by the Israelites and the miracles of Jesus and the resurrection itself.⁹⁸ Special revelation reveals God's interaction and desire for fellowship with humankind despite their fallen nature.

Don Thorsen affirms that special revelation is intended for all human beings and "sufficient for salvation," but "they must somehow be told. The purpose of special revelation is to elicit saving faith through one's encounter with divine truth found in Scripture."⁹⁹ Without this knowledge of God, comprehension of the Scriptures and revelation of Jesus Christ as the Son of God is impossible. Human beings do have a moral awareness by the illumination of the *imago Dei* in humankind, but the full and true light is Jesus Christ.¹⁰⁰ It is precisely at this juncture, moral awareness, one of the qualities of the *imago Dei*, where a viewer engaging in the cinematic experience, empathizing with the protagonist, may experience special revelation—a spiritual awakening by God's self-disclosure to the viewer. As Paul claimed, "That I may know Him and

⁹⁷ Schaeffer and Colson, *He Is There and He Is Not Silent*, 17.

⁹⁸ Cottrell, *What the Bible Says About God the Creator*, 356.

⁹⁹ Don Thorsen, *An Exploration of Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008), 17, 28.

¹⁰⁰ Jack Kettler, "The Importance and Necessity of Special Revelation," *Contra-Mundum*, 2000, https://www.contra-mundum.org/essays/kettler/jk_pagan2.pdf; John 1:9; Acts 17:28.

the power of His resurrection, and may share in His sufferings, become like Him in His death” (Phil 3:10). Here Paul exemplifies the redemptive power of God’s special revelation.

No matter the event that enlightens an individual to the knowledge of God, it remains the work of the Holy Spirit to reveal the depravity and need for redemption to all humankind. Humanity is unresolved without the revelation of the resurrection and atonement through Jesus Christ. In the divine drama of man’s wandering, he is eternally dead without redemption and reconciliation provided by the Father. “Sin diminished man’s comprehension of general revelation, thus lessening its efficacy. Therefore, special revelation had to become remedial with respect to both man’s knowledge of and his relationship to God.”¹⁰¹

Carl Henry insists, “Apart from God’s self-unveiling any affirmations about the Divine would be nothing more than speculation. . . . The only confident basis for God-talk is God’s revelation of himself.”¹⁰² The Word of God is the ultimate source of God breathing into the hearts and minds of humanity. In chorus with the Word are the miracles, visions, and prophecies through which God has chosen to make evident to some in Scripture and in the present world. Only by God’s willful choice to reveal himself does humanity experience revelation.

David Dockery offers three stages of special revelation: (1) God’s redemptive work in history through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. “From infancy you have known the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus; (2) The written revealed word of God in the Bible as evidenced in the Psalm. “The law of the Lord is perfect, reviving the soul; the testimony of the Lord is sure, making wise the simple” (Ps. 19:7); and, (3) The work of the Holy Spirit that applies God’s revelation and illuminates the

¹⁰¹ Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 177.

¹⁰² Henry, *God Who Speaks and Shows*, 18.

Word to draw individuals to receive Jesus as Lord and Savior.¹⁰³ “But when He, the Spirit of truth, comes, He will guide you into all truth” (John 16:13).

Bernard Ramm explains, “Special revelation is remedial because it is God’s means of reaching the sinner with saving, restorative truth. It is the knowledge of God adjusted for, and given for, sinners.”¹⁰⁴ The sermon proclaimed in the sanctuary is not of itself special, but by the witness of the Scripture and the Spirit, it is revelation. Nicholas Wolterstorff, in his book, *Divine Discourse*, posits that God communicates with humanity by special revelation. The very nature of human speech is of no salvific truth; it is the speech-act of God, “the Word of God,” through which human beings may proclaim boldly the truth of the Gospel.¹⁰⁵

Wolterstorff argues that the speech of God to human beings is a special revelatory act and may be *literal speech*, not necessarily metaphorical.¹⁰⁶ The idea is similar to considering the literal God-speak via a child’s voice that dramatically impacted Augustine’s life, specifically God’s command for him to read a copy of St. Paul’s epistles.¹⁰⁷ After doing so, Augustine subsequently makes the decision to serve God for the rest of his life. What he found was a desire and devotion to God that was beyond the temporal. He writes, “Thou hast formed us for Thyself, and our hearts are restless, until they find their rest in Thee.”¹⁰⁸

¹⁰³ David S. Dockery, “Special Revelation,” *A Theology for the Church*, ed. Daniel L. Akin (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing Group, 2014), 105.

¹⁰⁴ Bernard Ramm, *Special Revelation, Revelation and the Word of God*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1971), 20.

¹⁰⁵ Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Divine Discourse: Philosophical Reflections on the Claim that God Speaks* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 84.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 9-10.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 4; Saint Augustine, *The Confessions of Saint Augustine*, trans. E. B. Pusey (403; repr., Urbana, IL: Project Gutenberg, 2013), <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/3296/3296-h/3296-h.htm>.

¹⁰⁸ Philip Schaff, ed., *The Confessions and Letters of St. Augustine*, vol. 1, *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers: First Series* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2007), 45.

According to Ramm, “The proper principle of authority within the Christian church must be . . . the Holy Spirit speaking in the Scriptures, which are the product of the Spirit’s revelatory and inspiring action.”¹⁰⁹ The Bible is authoritative because it is the ultimate vehicle through which the Holy Spirit of God has chosen to speak to humanity. Thus, God communicates to a person, the *imago Dei* in a person, through the revelation of God’s Word and through other means He chooses, including cinema.

B. B. Warfield upholds, “Without special revelation, general revelation would be for sinful men incomplete and ineffective.”¹¹⁰ Warfield proposes three methods by which special revelation is experienced: external manifestations (supernatural intervention), internal suggestion (prophetic signs), and concursive operation (God through the Holy Spirit communicates with human beings).¹¹¹ Nonetheless, though Warfield contends “supernatural signs are inevitably related to special revelation,” he repudiates miracles beyond the New Testament.¹¹²

Comparatively, Augustine’s divine encounter is illustrative for the focus of this study on God’s communication and revelation in cinema. A character in cinema has the ability to disclose the often-truthful reality of human existence and disparity of knowing one’s ultimate end. The moviegoer can realize along with the character a renewed sense of wonder at the moment she/he finds new hope for life and overcomes personal character flaws. As Paul Tillich stated, “Everything that expresses ultimate reality expresses God whether it intends to do so or not.”¹¹³

¹⁰⁹ Ramm, *The Pattern of Religious Authority* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1968), 28.

¹¹⁰ Warfield, “The Biblical Idea of Revelation,” 9.

¹¹¹ Warfield, *The Inspiration and Authority of the Bible*, 83.

¹¹² B. B. Warfield, *Counterfeit Miracles* (London: Banner of Truth Trust, 1972), 25-26.

¹¹³ David John Graham, “Uses of Film in Theology,” in *Explorations in Theology and Film: Movies and Meaning*, ed. Clive Marsh and Gaye Ortiz (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), 37.

This is not to presume cinema itself has the potential to exhibit special revelation, but it is reasonable to assert the real plausibility that which is transferred by the Holy Spirit through the cinematic story and the collective visual and audible expressions can facilitate the stage for the phenomenon of special revelation. A similar event could occur in the desert or in a bedroom closet. God's revelation cannot be hindered or contained by the restrictions of human assumptions.

Wolterstorff points out that there must be the objective truth that God *does* communicate, not that God *could* communicate. Scripture claims God does speak. "Call to me and I will answer you and will tell you great and hidden things that you have not known" (Jeremiah 33:3).

Wolterstorff likens God's communication as a parallel between the Gospels with narrative stories as found in cinema, specifically, the dramatic nature of non-fiction and fiction writing in the context of form and structure. A movie such as *Noah* may be on one level of content uniquely based on actual events in history; however, many scenes in the movie are completely fictional. Wolterstorff suggests that for the study of the biblical narrative, it would be wise not to view it through the lens of contemporary culture or religious orthodoxy.¹¹⁴

Through the ages "the church has wanted to be so formed by the very phrases and images of scripture, the narratives and songs, the preachments and visions, that it sees reality and imagines possibilities through those phrases and images, through those narratives and songs, through those preachments and visions. [A good poem] provides stuff for our meditation, offers words for our voice, gives form to our consciousness, shapes our interpretations of life and reality."¹¹⁵

Cinema, like the poem, provides story by which special revelation may be disclosed.

Detweiler confesses that "movies moved me deeper into Scripture, nearer into God, and closer to

¹¹⁴ Wolterstorff, *Divine Discourse*, 243.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 186.

the elusive integration of faith and experience.”¹¹⁶ Karl Barth affirms that the Word of God is an *act* of God not the human being. Similarly, the event of revelation through cinema should reflect Jesus Christ and His deity. The grace for humanity is only through Jesus Christ by whom God provides redemption.¹¹⁷ This event becomes the certification whereby a person moves from mere knowing to knowledge of God. Through this occasion a person becomes a responsible witness to the communication and existence of his Creator.¹¹⁸ For Barth, revelation is bound in the character and beauty of God.¹¹⁹

Mankind’s knowledge of God is what he gains through faith and revelation as revealed through Scripture and the Spirit. Thus, mankind’s knowledge of God is that which God permits to be exposed of himself. Barth explains these concepts of revelation proceeding from God by showing “divine spontaneity and human receptivity in revelation.”¹²⁰ God is not contained or restricted from revealing himself through revelation to humanity. Likewise, God is not bound to serve and appease humanity; it is an act of His freedom that He chooses to engage in the lives of humanity. Barth suggests that for mankind to encounter, or experience the illumination, the mystery of “revelation itself is needed for knowing that God is hidden and man is blind.”¹²¹ This revelation is the encounter that bridges God and humanity together and, though human beings are without full knowledge of God, they are invited to commune with God. Tillich views the

¹¹⁶ Detweiler, *Into the Dark*, 267.

¹¹⁷ Barth, *The Doctrine of The Word of God*, 120-1.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 214.

¹¹⁹ Barth, *The Doctrine of God*, Vol. 2.1, *Church Dogmatics* (New York: T&T Clark, 2004), 651-6.

¹²⁰ Barth, *The Doctrine of The Word of God*, 2.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, 29.

revelation encounter as being utmost important. “The mystery which is revealed is of ultimate concern to us because it is the ground of our being.”¹²²

Richard Swinburne supports a “principle of credulity” in regard to the argument from religious experience. He suggests that it is a “principle of rationality that if it seems (epistemically) to a subject that x is present, then probably x is present.” A person typically claims that which is perceived by them, therefore, then what the person claims is probably true. Thus, what seems to be is likely so. Inductive reasoning for God’s existence provides for and supports the personal experience in the absence of special consideration. Thus, the personal testimony of a divine supernatural encounter, in the absence of special considerations, whether in the cinema or in the church, is a reasonable religious experience.¹²³

All revelation, whether general or special, is at the heart of God’s desire to reveal and communicate himself to humanity. Thus, even in the prophetic word, vision, dream, and miracle that is given to human beings, it is never brought about by the will of a person. It is a revelation born fully by the Holy Spirit with the *imago Dei* as the point of contact. God is author and provider over all humankind and He alone releases the Holy Spirit who stirs a person’s heart to salvation whether on the mountain top or potentially in the cinema.

Special revelation is a personal interaction between God and humankind. Though a person is invited into the special revelation of God for the purpose of redemption and grace, the decision to accept or deny the invitation is by individual will. The encounter of the outpouring of the Spirit (say during a cinematic event) can immediately loose the bondage of sin on the life of the person to the point that the person comprehends the call of God. The receiving of God’s

¹²² Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1973), 1:110.

¹²³ Richard Swinburne, *The Existence of God* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979), 254.

grace is not a transcendent *alter ego* upon the person.¹²⁴ “It is not a presence which leaves blind eyes blind or deaf ears deaf. It is a presence which opens them. God’s glory is the indwelling joy of His divine being which as such shines out from Him, which overflows in its richness.”¹²⁵

Revelation claims that the Word of God is inspired through God’s authority placed on the authors of the Bible. There is a narrative that flows through Scripture and continues through the stories of cinema. The Scripture itself testifies to the doctrinal truths of revelation as validated by the writers and historical significance of testimony by the authors and recipients of both the Old and New Testaments. The unity of the whole of Scripture testify to the work of the Holy Spirit across history. Similarly, general revelation is available to all persons, and special revelation is communication of truths and facts otherwise indiscernible by mere human intellect or common means of human information. All human beings are recipients to God’s grace, revelation, and redemption.

Revelation Through Phenomenal Acts

It is essential to the defense for the plausibility of special revelation through cinema to evaluate and substantiate how God intervenes through miraculous events in the affairs of humankind. This study acknowledges that phenomenal acts, public or private, are not compatible with modern society and often stir dissention among Christians. Theologian, philosopher, and priest, John Macquarrie writes, “Traditional conception of miracle is irreconcilable with our modern understanding. The scientific conviction is that further research will bring to light further factors in the situation, but factors that will turn out to be just as immanent and this-worldly as

¹²⁴ Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, 265-6.

¹²⁵ Barth, *The Doctrine of God*, 647.

those already known.”¹²⁶ Science and history have wedged a block of doubt against the plausibility of miracles as the world conforms to subjectivism and rebels against orthodox Christianity.

Thus, supernatural phenomena pose an uncomfortable contradiction to the church due to the inability to isolate and validate true experiences from God with those experiences that may simply be sensations of the moment and not necessarily of spiritual nature. Some theologians support the opinion that divine intervention is unintelligible and meaningless.¹²⁷ Given the sustaining challenges of confrontation with those who choose to avoid or deny the truth of God’s present interaction with mankind, the research herein will presume the truth and validity of the plausibility divine phenomenal acts. Robert Larner, suggests that the miraculous act “is brought about by a rational agent who transcends nature ... an agent not bound by nature.”¹²⁸

Phenomenal acts are typically defined and understood from the Latin for *phaenomenon* (“appearance”) and from Ancient Greek, *phainómenon*, (“thing appearing to view”). In the current cultural context, a phenomenon may refer to an extraordinary occurrence, miracle, marvel, anomaly, paradox, and an appearance or object of awareness in experience. This premise suggests that an individual may experience the “phenomena.” Samuel Clarke suggests a phenomenon (miracle), as defined in the theological sense, “is a work effected in a manner *unusual*, or different from the common and regular method of providence, by the interposition of

¹²⁶ John Macquarrie, *Principles of Christian Theology*, 2nd ed. (New York: Scribner’s 1977), 248.

¹²⁷ Tracy, *God Who Acts*, 47. Gordon Kaufman claims that a phenomenal act without finite antecedents is impossible to conceive. “In such a world, acts of God are not merely improbable or difficult to believe: they are literally inconceivable. One cannot make the concept hang together consistently.” Gordon Kaufman, “On the Meaning of ‘Act of God’,” in *God the Problem* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1972), 248.

¹²⁸ Robert A. Larner, *Water into Wine? An Investigation of the Concept of Miracle* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1988), 9.

God himself for the proof or evidence of some particular doctrine.”¹²⁹ Similarly, the cinematic event may present within the story an occurrence of a phenomenal act such as the character of Jesus Christ rising from the dead in the movie *The Passion of the Christ*. Though the visual event on the screen is fictional, the story is the retelling of the actual occurrence of the event from history. Thus, there is no one diagnostic position as to the way the experience might be received or interpreted. The Old Testament attests to such reveling acts as instances of God speaking, such as through Balaam’s donkey (Num. 22:21-41), through fire in the tabernacle (Exod. 40:34-38), and God speaking to Moses through the burning bush (Exod. 3:2-3).

As noted by Swinburne and Moltmann, personal testimony to divine phenomenon, specifically to that of conversion of a person to Jesus Christ during such event in cinema, or elsewhere, is a reasonable spiritual occurrence. Support to this assertion is the idea of *sensus divinitatis* put forth by Plantinga and Calvin suggesting sufficient knowledge that serves as belief-producing experience whereby God has made himself know to an individual. Thus, even in the prophetic word, vision, dream, and miracle that is given to human beings, it is never brought about by the will of a person. It is a revelation born fully by the Holy Spirit in concert with the *imago Dei*. No matter when or where the event of conversion to Christianity occurs, the result and evidence of the conversion is a life transformed by the blood of Jesus.

Phenomenal acts are subjective, inexplicable, and are mostly disengaged from valid reasoning and are not grounded in the natural sciences. The wonder of these acts is found in the accessibility of the presentation when God chooses to bless the event upon a people, yet these very acts are inaccessible to the individual by way of human actions. The phenomenal act is fully

¹²⁹ Samuel Clark, *A Discourse Concerning the Being and Attributes of God*, 5th ed. (London: James Knapton, 1719), 311–12.

initiated by the nature of God who cannot be manipulated to perform such acts.¹³⁰ The act is an event that exceeds the productive power of nature and has a supernatural cause and purpose.

Supernatural events function as signs and indicators of God's persistent desire to communicate with His children. These phenomenal acts are perceived through the human senses similar to the cinema experience. Therefore, God transcends the phenomenon of the cinematic experience to communicate His special revelation. It is in this spiritual realm provided by the *imago Dei* that the Holy Spirit brings transformation. Robert Larmer observed that "the contexts in which [miracles] occur enable them to serve as revelatory of God's nature and purposes."¹³¹

The conjecture of phenomenal acts poses a blatant disregard to the natural laws of science. Miracles are illogical to the critic who demands evidence beyond personal testimony. Anthony Flew argues, "If something occurs inconsistent with some proposition previously believed to express this occurrence is not an occasion for proclaiming a miraculous violation, but as a reason for confessing the error of the former belief."¹³² However, Swinburne claims the events exhibited through miracles lay a foundation within nature that justify their existence.¹³³

J. L. Mackie proposes a way to move around the miracle as a violation of nature is to redefine the laws of nature. He claims, "The laws of nature ... describe the ways in which the world works when left to itself, when not interfered with. A miracle occurs when the world is not left to itself, when something distinct from the natural order as a whole intrudes into it."¹³⁴

¹³⁰ Craig S. Keener, *Miracles: The Credibility of the New Testament Accounts* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2011), 1:84-114.

¹³¹ Robert A. Larmer, *The Legitimacy of Miracle* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2013), 32.

¹³² Anthony Flew, *God and Philosophy* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2005), 150.

¹³³ Richard Swinburne, *The Concept of a Miracle* (London: MacMillan and Co., 1970), 9.

¹³⁴ J. L. Mackie, *The Miracle of Theism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), 19-20.

Mackie's adjustment to the definition allows for a miracle that surpasses the power of nature while not disrupting the laws independence.

Robert Larmer holds that miracles are designed to specifically violate nature and thereby disclosing the glory of the Creator who may achieve as He wishes a world that serves His purpose not man's.¹³⁵ At some point, it would appear that *prima facie* supposition favors the best rational explanation which is the divine phenomena. Aquinas noted, "Miracles are of such nature that God alone can work them ... especially, in the affairs of this world, the secrets of our hearts, which God alone can know and contingent future events which also come only under divine cognition, for He sees them in themselves because they are present to Him."¹³⁶

Swinburne suggests that if one considers, from natural theology, that there is strong evidence for the existence of God who is the creator of the universe, then there is an established "prior probability that God would produce a revelation," through which He might choose to reveal himself and communicate to humankind by the miracle of phenomenal acts.¹³⁷ As the apostles witnessed during their ministry with Jesus, miracles were manifest on such numerous occasions that it would seem peculiar to them to not believe. In fact, it was in the light of special revelation that Simon Peter was able to declare, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God" (Matt. 16:16). The evidence is revealed as God choses to allow. Swinburne maintains there is enough physical evidence in the world that there exists a grand Creator, then arguments that acknowledge the possibility of the existence of God allows for the plausibility that there can be

¹³⁵ Larmer, *The Legitimacy of Miracle*, 18.

¹³⁶ St. Thomas Aquinas, *Providence*, Vol. 3, *The Summa Contra Gentiles*, ed. Charles J. O'Neil (London: University of Notre Dame Press, 1975), 154.

¹³⁷ Richard Swinburne, *Faith and Reason* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2005), 180.

revelation from God to His created beings.¹³⁸ Assuming that natural reason can show the possibility of God's existence and that God is a good God, it follows that God would desire to reveal matters that might bring good and purpose to human beings. Thus, there exists an essential need for revelation on the part of God and on the part of His created beings.

Steven Davis argues that the Scriptures maintain a universal presupposition that supports revelatory acts of God, past and present, wherein God attempts to influence and draw near humanity, purposely fulfilling man's need for redemption. This divine action includes the following: "(1) God brings the world into existence; (2) God sustains or upholds the world in existence; (3) God acts through natural causes in the world; and (4) God acts miraculously or outside of natural causes in the world."¹³⁹

Moltmann suggests, "The real phenomenon is to be found in God's immanence in human experience, and in the transcendence of human beings in God. . . . Anyone who stylizes revelation and experience into alternatives, ends up with revelations that cannot be experienced, and experiences without revelation."¹⁴⁰ The spiritual experience should not be the endeavor, nor should one seek to conjure up a physical action for the purpose of wooing oneself into a religious. This type of self-creation of a phenomenon is not biblically sound. As Paul warned, "I appeal to you therefore, brothers by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship" (Rom. 12:1). Spiritual worship is the intimate expression of humanity's desire to draw near the Father and in return, as the Holy Spirit moves, a person receives revelation of God and is invited to move into the

¹³⁸ Swinburne, *Revelation*, 80.

¹³⁹ Stephen T. Davis, "God's Actions," in *In Defense of Miracles: A Comprehensive Case for God's Action in History*, ed. R. Douglas Geivett and Gary R. Habermas (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 1997), 165.

¹⁴⁰ Moltmann, *The Spirit of Life*, 7.

phenomenon of spiritual gifts. It is out of the overflowing joy of God's communion and transcendence that a person may witness the glory of God, not the other way around. The Spirit arouses in the hearts of human beings beyond the conscious level which permeates the whole person in the moment of expression.¹⁴¹

J. P. Moreland claims, "If my mind conforms to the nature of the object itself, I will not only grasp it truly but also gain a certain power that comes from a correct understanding of reality."¹⁴² John Locke asserts that revelation of any supernatural kind deserves the support of reason:

Reason must be our last judge and guide in everything. I do not mean, that we must consult reason, and examine whether a proposition revealed from God can be made out by natural principles, and if it cannot, that then we may reject it: but consult it we must, and by it examine, whether it be a revelation from God or no: and if reason finds it to be revealed from God, reason then declares for it, as much as for any other truth, and makes it one of her dictates.¹⁴³

Everyone begins with a notion and desire to understand and possibly long to believe, yet humanity's natural and conventional beliefs are grounded in logical skepticism, thus easily reject the supernatural over the natural.

Given the dangers of presuppositions which impact Christian theology, Swinburne cautions that all discernment of revelation must pass through the work of the Holy Spirit.¹⁴⁴ All consideration of presuppositions influenced by genre, linguistics, metaphor, and analogy must be subject to that which is beyond human understanding and lean upon that which is divinely

¹⁴¹ Moltmann, *The Spirit of Life*, 162.

¹⁴² J. P. Moreland, *Love Your God with All Your Mind: The Role of Reason in the Life of the Soul* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2012), 95.

¹⁴³ John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Roger Woolhouse (London: Penguin Classics, 1998), 621.

¹⁴⁴ Swinburne, *Revelation*, 136.

authored in love by the Father.

It is in this linguistic quagmire of message transference in cinema that the central question of how one might recognize a revelation from God becomes central to this research. Observation of an event, whether considered by the participant as a phenomenal act, is at first only a purported statement which singularly does not verify any more than that a statement has been made as to the event. However, though no proof may be shown that the event is true or false, there exists the possibility that the claim might be true under certain circumstances.

Swinburne implies, all humanity is fallible, and since the church is included in this humanity, there remains the uncertainty of exactness to the interpretation of revelations.¹⁴⁵ Man's fallibility will always challenge moral propositions intended by God, yet not be completely fulfilled due to mankind's flawed nature.¹⁴⁶

It is sufficient to claim these flaws are inherently found in all mankind and thus reflected in the man's image as human and living after the Fall. The human fallibility allows for the cinema audience to recognize its own flaws in simulation with the character flaws of the protagonist in the story. Because of the *imago Dei* in man, he cannot hide from his own desperation to be fulfilled and in communication with his Creator.

The move beyond skepticism of phenomenal acts does not mean the avoidance of logical investigation. Once the existence of God has been revealed and established in the human heart, Warfield claims human beings have the capacity to know his Creator and "the accessibility of knowledge concerning Him."¹⁴⁷ Therefore, phenomenal acts in the universe may be logically

¹⁴⁵ Swinburne, *Revelation*, 337.

¹⁴⁶ "For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, slander" (Matthew 15:19); "The heart is deceitful above all things and desperately sick" (Jeremiah 17:9).

¹⁴⁷ Benjamin B. Warfield, "Apologetics," in *Studies in Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1931), 11.

comprehended as caused by the Creator who produces and acts within the universe through events not caused by the universe.¹⁴⁸ These claims for the existence of miracles are then logically coherent and probable. C. S. Lewis claims “reason is our starting point. A proof that there are no proofs is nonsensical, so is a proof that there are proofs”¹⁴⁹

The phenomenal act of God transcending through special revelation to a person for the purpose of making himself and His Son known is the crux of this study. Accordingly, the following reports from the Middle East help support God’s continuing divine intervention as people have testified to converting to Christianity after seeing Jesus appear to them in a dream or in person by a vision.¹⁵⁰ Their confessions of faith to the one true God are undeniable as many of them will be persecuted or killed for their testimony. Scripture affirms the proposition of the revealed knowledge that God to humankind as He illuminates Jesus by the Holy Spirit to people around the world. God may disclose himself through personal encounters with Jesus, dreams, visions, the Scriptures, verbal communication, healing, and prophesy. The ultimate purpose of God’s special revelation is for an individual to personally know God.

This unconditional view of God’s acting among humans in the supernatural is acknowledged by Aquinas. He insists a miracle is “beyond the order of the whole created nature. God alone can do this, because whatever an angel or any other creature does by its own power is according to the order of created nature, and thus it is not a miracle. Hence, God alone can work

¹⁴⁸ William L. Craig, *Reasonable Faith: Christian Truth and Apologetics* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2008), 263.

¹⁴⁹ Lewis, *Miracles*, 33.

¹⁵⁰ See Janelle P., “Muslims Converting to Christianity in Unprecedented Numbers,” Open Doors, June 28, 2017, <https://www.opendoorsusa.org/christian-persecution/stories/muslims-turn-to-christ-in-unprecedented-numbers-pt-1/>; David Garrison, “Why More Muslims Are Turning to Jesus,” *NewsWeek*, June 28, 2019, <https://www.newsweek.com/christianity-islam-turning-jesus-1446327>; Chris Mitchell, “Visions of Jesus Stir Muslim Hearts,” *Christian Broadcasting Network*, accessed December 11, 2015, <https://www1.cbn.com/onlinediscipleship/visions-of-jesus-stir-muslim-hearts>.

miracles.”¹⁵¹ Aquinas also claims God’s manifest power may be that which is His assigned providence since all creation is subject to His divine will for all humanity. Likewise, Charles Hodge assigns similar events, as proposed in this study, “due to the influences of the Holy Spirit upon the hearts of men, such as regeneration, sanctification, spiritual illumination, etc. A miracle, therefore, may be defined to be an event, in the external world, brought by the immediate efficiency, or simple volition of God.”¹⁵²

Cinema and the *Imago Dei*

The *imago Dei* is the locus, the means, through which the connection, the communication, is made with humankind even in the cinema. William Romanowski suggests that the storylines of most movies express the inherent dignity of the human race, “which is not dependent upon who we are or what we might accomplish and . . . comes in its fullest sense with being created in the image of God.”¹⁵³ The *imago Dei* is not something an individual creates independently, or at all, but is a gift from God, which is marvelously the place where special revelation is initiated and fulfilled. Noting the potential raised eyebrow produced by the presumed theological leap in regard to special revelation through the conduit of cinema, this study seeks to explicate particular aspects in the rhetoric of cinema and demonstrate the power of revelation.

Robert McKee asserts that if the protagonist is not consistently fascinating with

¹⁵¹ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theological*, vol. 1, *Basic Writings of Saint Thomas Aquinas*, ed. Anton C. Pegis (New York: Random House, 1944), Question 110, Art. 4.

¹⁵² Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1940), 1:594-5.

¹⁵³ William D. Romanowski, *Cinematic Faith: A Christian Perspective on Movies and Meaning* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2019), 46.

behavioral contradictions, “the fictional universe flies apart; the viewer loses balance.”¹⁵⁴ In order for a cinema viewer to be riveted to the story, the protagonist must be a multi-dimensional character with whom the viewers empathize and find themselves looking into the portal of their own souls. It is critical to the hypothesis of this study that a character in a film, albeit fictional, represents the *imago Dei* in a person, or is presumed by the writer to be made in God’s image, whether or not he or she is a Judeo-Christian theist. These observations offer the backdrop to the investigation of the *imago Dei* in human beings while observing the protagonist qualities throughout cinema.

Critical to the examination of revelation in cinema is the caveat that the religious person should not enter the cinematic experience with ridged ideological values imposed upon the storyline. John C. Lyden writes, “If we position our own theological or ideological framework on cinema we may fail to understand how it conveys its message to its viewer and how it functions religiously or filmically.”¹⁵⁵ Therefore, one’s religious predispositions may deter an honest examination of the revealed transcendence of God’s knowledge through cinema.

Grudem states that humans, by being created in the image of God, are the most credible witness to the existence of God. “Whenever we meet another human being, we should (if our minds are thinking correctly) realize that such an incredible intricate, skillful, communicative living creature could only have been created by an infinite, all-wise Creator.”¹⁵⁶ Daniel Migliore claims, “Being created in the image of God is not a state or condition, but a movement with a

¹⁵⁴ McKee, *Story*, 378.

¹⁵⁵ John C. Lyden, *Film as Religion: Myths, Morals, and Rituals* (New York: New York University Press, 2003), 34.

¹⁵⁶ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1994), 142.

goal: human beings are restless for fulfillment of life not yet realized.”¹⁵⁷

Cinema, whether fairy tale or a true-life story, “exposes the real world for what it truly is. It makes the familiar strange and the strange familiar by telling a story in which the others are the heroes. It urges us not simply to be better humans but to be more deeply human.”¹⁵⁸ This closes identification suggests the presence of the *imago Dei* in both the protagonist and the viewer. It is this connection that seems to cause an emotional swelling in the viewer’s chest as deep passions are expressed by the protagonist on the screen. The contemplation and vulnerability of the viewer on the journey of the protagonist provides the opportunity to expose universal truths that the viewer may not have considered otherwise.

Craig Detweiler, in his book *Into the Dark*, shares his testimony of how a violent and profane R-rated movie provoked in him “a spiritual search.”¹⁵⁹ The movie was *Raging Bull* and the Scripture passage at the end of the cinema was “All I know is this, once I was blind, but now I can see.” Detweiler affirms it was general revelation through the cinema that challenged his restless heart and empty faith as he witnessed grace expressed to the protagonist in the film. For Detweiler, the story was a warning of how his life might turn out given his current path. The revelation granted to Detweiler was near, personal, and brought about a spiritual transformation of faith in Jesus Christ.

J. R. R. Tolkien supports the experience of cinema as more than merely an escape from the world. “This joy, which is one of the things which fairy-stories can produce supremely well, is not essentially ‘escapist,’ nor ‘fugitive.’ In its fairy-tale—or otherworld—setting, it is a sudden

¹⁵⁷ Daniel L. Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding: An Introduction to Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmanns Publishing Company, 2004), 128.

¹⁵⁸ Robert K. Johnston, Craig Detweiler, and Kutter Callaway, *Deep Focus: Film and Theology in Dialogue* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2019), 185.

¹⁵⁹ Detweiler, *Into the Dark*, 30.

and miraculous grace: never to be counted on to recur.”¹⁶⁰ Thus, a person’s leap into the drama of cinema provides the fantasy on the larger scope of human desires and dreams as human beings long for love and loyalty though often perceived by as unattainable in the present world. The cinema gives the momentary escape from this reality. Human desires indicate evidence of the *imago Dei* in man and humanity’s understanding that more exists beyond the mere surface of human life.

Tolkien suggests this otherworldliness is the powerful grace and mercy that brings about redemption or “eucatastrophe.” Eucatastrophe, as Tolkien explains, is the “consolations of the happy endings” in a story or fantasy. “In the eucatastrophe we see in a brief vision . . . a far-off gleam or echo of evangelium in the real world.”¹⁶¹ The evangelium, the Good News, is the evidence of the *imago Dei* in all human beings. As Tolkien claims, “the resurrection is the eucatastrophe of the story of the incarnation, a sudden glimpse of the underlying reality of truth.”¹⁶² The truth that God continues to draw the world into communion with himself which is of a higher order than mere religion, it is the phenomenon of redemption by revelation.

Detweiler notes that the phenomenon of general revelation can and has been witnessed by moviegoers viewing such R-rated movies as *Magnolia*, *Fight Club*, *Million Dollar Baby*, and *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*. “Movies serve religious functions for filmgoers, offering them time for contemplation, a change in perspective, a glimpse of the divine . . . a sacred space.”¹⁶³ The viewing of a movie has the potential to provide a unique opportunity for God to

¹⁶⁰ J. R. R. Tolkien, “On Fairy-Stories,” *Essays Presented to Charles Williams*, ed. C. S. Lewis (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1966), 81.

¹⁶¹ J. R. R. Tolkien, *Tolkien on Fairy-Stories*, ed. Verlyn Flieger, and Douglas A. Anderson (London: HarperCollins Publishing, 2014), 75.

¹⁶² Tolkien, “On Fairy-Stories,” 83.

¹⁶³ Detweiler, *Into the Dark*, 30.

speak and transform a life through general revelation while the viewers “religious” guards are down. The distinct moral choices made by the character in cinema draws a person closer to the unfolding drama as the protagonist is forced to make (hopefully) the right choice even if it be the most painful one.

Detweiler, Tolkien, and Lyden emphasized their assumptions that God reveals himself to mankind through both general and special revelation. Each of these avenues of divine revelation are supported by either natural revelation or God’s special transcendence to human beings. Given the historical narrative of the Scriptures, the life of Jesus Christ and the work of the Holy Spirit, the following analysis will examine how cinema has the power to reveal the knowledge of God to mankind.

Then God said, “Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground” (Genesis 1:26-27).

Wayne Grudem suggests there has been excessive controversy among theologians regarding the meaning of these Scriptures. He explains the Hebrew words and their meanings as “image” (*selem*) and “likeness” (*demût*) “simply informed the original readers that man was *like* God, and would in many ways *represent* God. Therefore, the “scripture would have meant to the original readers ‘Let us make man to be *like* us and to *represent* us’.”¹⁶⁴ Evident in this would suggest that God had purposed human beings to share in a personal relationship with each other and with Him. Grudem adds that to comprehend the depth of meaning within the image of God idea, one must narrow focus to the “biblical indications” that precedes the fall of man. The analysis of God’s image in man should point to the garden when all was good in God’s eyes.¹⁶⁵

¹⁶⁴ Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 443.

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 444.

Paul speaks of the characteristics of the divine image of Jesus and the fragmented nature of humankind. “In their case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God” (2 Corinthians 4:4). Yet, humanity shares a unique and mysterious relationship “so that when humanity sinned the natural order was itself deeply afflicted.”¹⁶⁶ Yet, in this blinded affair with self, God reveals His glory and knowledge through divine revelation so that human beings may witness the grace of God. Paul’s unbelief is vanquished by the power of the revealed Christ. The *imago Dei* is the “glory-Christology” of Paul’s message to the church and is evident throughout the New Testament.¹⁶⁷

Much speculation exists among theologians and biblical commentators as to the precise understanding of God’s intention and explanation of the *imago Dei*. James Garrett perceives expressions of the *imago Dei* within theological circles include (1) humankind’s erect bodily form, (2) human dominion over nature, (3) human reason, (4) human prelapsarian righteousness, (5) human capacities, (6) the juxtaposition between man and woman, (7) responsible creaturehood and moral conformity to God, and (8) some composite view.¹⁶⁸

D. J. A. Clines argues for the idea that in Genesis 1 man was not made *in* the image of God, but man *is* the image of God. “Man is created not in God’s image, since God has no image of His own, but as God’s image, or rather to be God’s image, that is to deputize [man] in the created world for the transcendent God who remains outside the world order. ‘Likeness’ is an

¹⁶⁶ H. D. McDonald, “Doctrine of Man,” in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Walter A. Elwell (Carlisle, England: Paternoster, 1995), 730.

¹⁶⁷ Grenz, *The Social God*, 210.

¹⁶⁸ James Leo Garrett, *Systematic Theology: Biblical, Historical, and Theological* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1990), 1:392.

assurance that man is an adequate faithful representation of God on earth.”¹⁶⁹

Millard Erickson writes, “The image is something in the very nature of man, in the way in which he was made. It refers to something man is rather than something he has or does. By virtue of his being man, he is in the image of God; it is not dependent upon the presence of anything else.”¹⁷⁰ This expression of the image of God includes the nature of moral accountability that appears to be present in all human beings. Free will permits the opportunity for a possession of power to either obey or disobey God’s instructions and to reject His communication. There exists an innate sense of right and wrong within the spiritual aspect that enables humans to perceive feelings of doubt and guilt.

D. A. Carson offers in his book, *The God Who Is There: Finding Your Place in God’s Story*, that human beings reflect God’s image through the ability to compose and deliver a dialogue with God, to have the capacity to engage in work and creativity, and even to participate in the divine drama in which all humankind endures toward eternity.¹⁷¹ The *imago Dei* is the center piece of the divine drama. The *imago Dei* is the distinguishing mark of special revelation characterized by the creation of human beings: God “breathed into his nostrils the breath of life” (Genesis 2:7). The living created human being is the representation of the expression that employs the soul. Thus, the soul is that which God’s Spirit animates.¹⁷²

Paul affirms, “For we are God’s handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do” (Ephesians 2:10). This is what separates human

¹⁶⁹ D. J. A. Clines, “The Image of God in Man,” *Tyndale Bulletin* 19 (1968), 101.

¹⁷⁰ Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 513.

¹⁷¹ D. A. Carson, *The God Who Is There: Finding Your Place in God’s Story* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2010), 22-23.

¹⁷² Herbert C. Leupold, *Exposition of Genesis* (Grand Rapids, MI: Christian Classics Ethereal Library, The Wartburg Press, 1942), 1:62.

beings from the animals. It appears the logical deduction is that the *imago Dei* comprise in man's will, morality, and self-sacrifice for the good of the community of humanity. Barth affirms this emphasis on the *imago Dei* and *koinonia* as the intended essence of God's design in creating man in His image.¹⁷³ The *imago Dei* in human beings proliferates and confirms God's design. In fact, the adequacy of man's existence is contingent on man being the property of God since "being in God's image is what it means to be human."¹⁷⁴

J. I. Packer makes this statement regarding God's character: "God as personal, rational, creative, competent to control the world He has made, and morally admirable, in that all He creates is good."¹⁷⁵ The *imago Dei* in human beings represents the spirit of God as it is reflected in a human's essential non-material properties. These properties, or characteristics, are realized in a person's ability to be individual, spiritual, moral, relational, rational, emotional, and creative beings. God displayed His creativity and His love for human beings through His desire to create man and woman. He also displayed His desire to have fellowship with His creation and as such exhibits His intimate plan of communion with all human beings.

Carl Henry affirms the expression of the *imago Dei* as represented in the ability for human beings to have moral and rational aptitude. This nature of the *imago Dei* encompasses a humanity's awareness of the truth of God. Henry explains, "Man's ethical responses are not disjoined from intellection, however; his comprehension of truth is not sealed off from conscience, nor are his knowledge of the truth and his moral insights divorced from an awareness

¹⁷³ Barth, *The Doctrine of Creation*, 2.

¹⁷⁴ Joshua R. Farris, "An Immaterial Substance View: *Imago Dei* in Creation and Redemption," *The Heythrop Journal* 58, no. 1 (January 2017): 113, <https://doi.org/10.1111/heyj.12274>.

¹⁷⁵ J. I. Packer, *Concise Theology: A Guide to Historic Christian Beliefs* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale, 1993), 55.

of answerability to God.”¹⁷⁶ Similarly, these characteristics are consistent with human experiences due to the created *imago Dei* existing formally in human personality. Henry continues, “Humanity is made for personal and endless fellowship with God, involving rational understanding (Gen. 1:28-29), moral obedience (2:16-18), and religious communion (3:3).”¹⁷⁷ In this humble privilege of eating and drinking, as do the beast of the field who also perish, all that we do is honor to God.¹⁷⁸ Bertram S. Kraus noted: “It seems most likely that man could not have produced, sustained, and altered culture without the ability to transmit his experiences and knowledge to his offspring other than by example.”¹⁷⁹

Humanity, at its most basic human existence, meaning base needs and desires, practices communication to secure these core needs. Therefore, a person’s ego toward these base needs also reflects a person’s attitude toward God as creator of the universe. Human beings will communicate to God by request, demand, or rejection (often all within the same moment) while unwittingly in their desperate dialogue reveal their assumed *faith* in God’s existence and power.

Vanhoozer states that God’s relatedness to man is also preserved in the “communitive agency” through the *imago Dei*.¹⁸⁰

Humans are like God in their ability to go out of themselves and enter in to personal relations through communicative activity. What it means to be in the image of God is best grasped by an auditory rather than a visual analogy. Self-knowledge comes about not through reflection but through responding to the call of God. Communicative capacity corresponds to the ‘formal’ image which constitutes the human creature as human;

¹⁷⁶ Henry, *God Who Speaks and Shows*, 125.

¹⁷⁷ Carl F. H. Henry, “Image of God,” in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, 2nd ed., ed. Walter A. Elwell (Grand Rapid, MI: Baker Academic, 2001), 591-594.

¹⁷⁸ A. W. Tozer, *Culture: Living as Citizens of Heaven on Earth—Collected Insights from A. W. Tozer* (Chicago: The Moody Bible Institute, 2016), 12.

¹⁷⁹ Bertram S. Kraus, *The Basis of Human Evolution* (New York: Harper & Row, 1964), 282.

¹⁸⁰ Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical-Linguistic Approach to Christian Theology* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), 177.

communicative excellence—right relatedness with others and with God—corresponds to the ‘material’ image by which the creature is conformed to the image of Christ.¹⁸¹

Drawing on Vanhoozer, human nature constitutes the *imago Dei* as the catalyst through which human communication provides for the observation of God’s image. This point is acute to the heart of this study as the *imago Dei* is exhibited in fictional characters in cinema. In their human-ness, the fictional characters are caricatures of the “real” created beings. Though some disagreement exists among scholars on specific aspects, most agree that the image of God is “located within humans as a resident quality or capacity. Although conferred by God, the *imago Dei* resides in humans whether or not they recognize God’s existence and His work.”¹⁸²

Identity and Dignity in the Image of God

Though fallen and marred, humanity remains to express the *imago Dei*. Ryan S. Peterson, in his book, *The Imago Dei as Human Identity: A Theological Interpretation*, claims “Everyone’s ‘fundamental orientation’ is established in the fact that they are made by God to represent God in the world. This reality provides the context for understanding the Christological fulfillment of human identity and ethical implications of the *imago Dei* as they are described in both the Old and New Testament.”¹⁸³

Brendan Byrne observes Paul’s connection of the image of God with humanity as an Adam-Christ typology. “Paul asserts that, as we have borne the image (*eikōn*) of the earthly one (Adam), we shall also bear the image of the heavenly one (Christ).”¹⁸⁴ Augustine affirms, “This

¹⁸¹ Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine*, 177-178.

¹⁸² Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 523.

¹⁸³ Ryan S. Peterson, “The Imago Dei as Human Identity: A Theological Interpretation,” in *Journal of Theological Interpretation*, JTISup 14 (2016): 3.

¹⁸⁴ Brendan Byrne, *Sacra Pagina: Romans*, ed. Daniel J. Harrington (Collegeville, MI: The Liturgical Press, 1996), 268; 1 Corinthians 15:49; Romans 8:10.

is the debt that all are held by. This is a debt we are all going to pay, having inherited it from Adam.”¹⁸⁵ The foundational understanding in the study of Christology and the image of God is surmising Jesus as the “new man” without sin and the ultimate image of God.

Daniel Akin has noted human life “demands the rejection of practices like abortion and euthanasia which devalue the most vulnerable lives within society.”¹⁸⁶ This view of appreciation of human life is recognized in the character of all human beings and thus is represented in the heroes of literature and movies. It is only when individuals realize fully that they are built to fulfill a specific destiny, no matter how trivial one may view the calling, it is on the highest honor and order for their created purpose. “The *imago Dei* is the basis for human dignity.”¹⁸⁷ Therefore, understanding the relationship between God and the expression of His image in humankind leads to understanding the value of human life. This design and desire are the expressions present in cinema no matter the genre of storytelling. The story of man in the Bible is reimagined in fiction and showing man’s struggle to overcome evil, selfishness, pride, rebellion, lust, and the varied sins that arise in all descendants of Adam. In regard to potential for man’s self-knowledge, John Calvin suggested that man can achieve “true knowledge of himself only after he has contemplated the nature of God.”¹⁸⁸

Charles Taylor nearly aligns with Calvin by way of a more liberal assertion that there is an “essential link” that orients mankind to his identity whereby he exists in a “moral space, a

¹⁸⁵ Augustine, *Work of St. Augustin: A Translation for the Twenty-First Century*, vol. 3, trans. Edmund Hill, ed. J. E. Rotelle (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 1995), 40; Romans 8:3. God, in sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful human beings, though He without sin, is able to fulfill the atonement for all human beings.

¹⁸⁶ Daniel L. Akin, ed., *A Theology for the Church* (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2014), 263-264.

¹⁸⁷ John Hammett, “Human Nature,” in *A Theology for the Church*, ed. Danny Akin (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2007), 381.

¹⁸⁸ G. C. Berkouwer, *Man: The Image of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing, 1962), 22.

space in which questions arise about what is good or bad, what is worth doing and what not, what has meaning and importance.”¹⁸⁹ Taylor leans heavily here on a person’s subjectivity to evaluate the moral questions of right and wrong as best observed from one’s turn inward toward God’s image in human beings. Taylor’s assertion implying a universality of identity through this “space” within each person, even though humanistic, nonetheless helps support the potential connection between a viewer and a protagonist who likewise has this “space” within.

Paul’s own conversion experience indicates a lifting of the veil, or blindness, as God seized Paul to submission for the purpose of the gospel message. C. K. Barrett comments that Paul, writing in 2 Corinthians 4:6, resolves that the person who believes in Jesus Christ as the Son of God is witness to the glory of the Lord “as a mirror” and the mirror is the *imago Dei*.¹⁹⁰

John Piper writes the following:

Historically, people have said to be made in God’s image is our morality, our sense of right and wrong. Our rationality. Our ability to reason. Our spirituality, our ability to relate to God. Our aesthetic sense—you don’t find too many monkeys creating *Mona Lisas*. Our judicial sense, the whole legal system, a sense of right and wrong and justice and injustice. And I think, frankly, all of those are true and aspects of what it means to be in God’s image.¹⁹¹

The cinematic experience allows for the expression of moral choices of a personified, fictional character that perhaps a viewer can make a personal connection. Fictional protagonists in stories most often do not reference Jesus or the concept of “putting on a new self” as they

¹⁸⁹ Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), 28.

¹⁹⁰ C. K. Barrett, *A Commentary on the Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, vol. 8, *Harper’s New Testament Commentaries*, ed. Henry Chadwick (NY: Harper and Row, 1973), 124-5. Barrett suggests that as Paul moves from the main theme of ministry to a focus on freedom in the Spirit of the Lord which the interpretation and usage suggest the reflection as well as the idea of the veil that is lifted for the believer. The word *image* seems to suggest the reflection or glass through which one may see the face of Jesus.

¹⁹¹ John Piper, “What Does It Mean to be Made in God’s Image?” *Desiring God*, August 19, 2013, <http://www.desiringgod.org/interviews/what-does-it-mean-to-be-made-in-god-s-image>.

attempt to conquer the story's antagonist. Yet, these characters, more often than not, do reach deep within themselves to overcome extreme obstacles for the love of country and family. In this moment of self-sacrifice, they have exhibited the example of Jesus and therefore have demonstrated the existence of the *imago Dei*. Erickson notes, “[Jesus] had glorified and would glorify the Father, and the Father had glorified and would glorify Him.”¹⁹²

The communion that Jesus had with the Father while on earth demonstrates an additional dimension of God's desire for communication with human being. Paul Ricoeur suggests the *imago Dei* is evidenced by “the idea of God is in me as the very mark of the author upon His work, a mark that assures the resemblance between us. I then have to confess that I perceive this likeness . . . by the same faculty through which I perceive myself.”¹⁹³ However, Dietrich Bonhoeffer interprets man's freedom relationally and tied eternally to the *imago Dei*.

Freedom is not a quality a human being has; it is not an ability, a capacity, an attribute of being that may be deeply hidden in a person but can somehow be uncovered. Anyone who scrutinizes human beings in order to find freedom finds nothing of it. Why? Because freedom is not a quality that can be uncovered; it is not a possession, something to hand, an object; nor is it a form of something to hand; instead it is a relation and nothing else.¹⁹⁴

The apostle Paul writes, “The Son is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For God was pleased to have all His fullness dwell in Him and through Him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through His blood, shed on the cross” (Colossians 1:15,19-20). Mankind is created in the image of God, bears His likeness, and is heirs with Christ Jesus through immortality and into the glory of heaven. This transformation is expressed once again by Paul: “And we all, who with unveiled

¹⁹² Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 533.

¹⁹³ Paul Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, trans. Kathleen Blamey (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 9.

¹⁹⁴ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall*, ed. John W. deGruchy, trans. Douglas Stephen Bax (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004), 62-63.

faces contemplate the Lord's glory, are being transformed into His image with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit" (2 Corinthians 3:18).

Paul speaks often of the regeneration of man and how the *imago Dei* is, at least partially, at resident within man especially present by the Holy Spirit. Jesus is the true image of humanity; thus, its destiny is oriented in the *imago Dei* as is Christ. "In Him was life, and the life was the light of men" (John 1:4). Jesus Christ is the divine light, the *imago Dei*, that is never extinguished in the human soul. The passage from John says, "The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it" (John 1:5). The *imago Dei* is not flesh but the exalted wisdom to apprehend God as the Holy Spirit illuminates His glory to humanity.

Karl Barth, in an effort to define man, directs the focus on God. In this way, the *imago Dei* is an aspect or condition of the human being sustained by God and not a property possessed by man. "What man does not possess he can neither bequeath nor forfeit."¹⁹⁵ He regards Jesus as the revealed image of God. Therefore, "Our task is to understand this exaltation of human essence as it has taken place in Jesus Christ with the greatest possible precision and with all the necessary delimitations."¹⁹⁶ Barth suggests that it is through the revelation of Jesus that humankind is able to have any possible notion of God. It is in the being of Jesus Christ that God serves the human race with His gift of grace.¹⁹⁷

The identity and dignity in the image of God is expressed through the *imago Dei* in the existence of all human beings. Humanity's innate moral code and their particular wrestling with sin ultimately exposes the truth of spiritual warfare and reveals their Heavenly Father. The *imago*

¹⁹⁵ Barth, *The Doctrine of Creation*, 200.

¹⁹⁶ Karl Barth, *The Doctrine of Reconciliation*, vol. 4.2, *Church Dogmatics* (Edinburgh: Bloomsbury/T & T Clark, 1958), 70.

¹⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 30.

Dei is humanity's inherent dignity established by God's grace as offspring of the Creator.

Transcendence Through the Secular

Like the parables of Jesus, cinema provides the viewer something akin to an existential encounter to appraise their purpose and ultimate existence and possibly gain a rational perspective of their human condition. Robert Benne shares the notion that the biblical narratives “help people interpret what is happening to them and their compatriots, they relate persons that receive them to larger realities beyond themselves, and they provide a model for the way they should act.”¹⁹⁸

Thomas Martin suggests that the idea of knowing God is an ever-present quest on the hearts of most human beings, a necessary “probing of the human identity.”¹⁹⁹ The nature of human beings and their desperation for religion is evidence of their pursuit of the Divine. Jesus stated, “This is life eternal, that they might know thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom thou hast sent” (John 17:3).

Robert Johnston claims, “In an increasingly visual culture, film images have become an important source of knowledge.”²⁰⁰ Richard Viladesau suggests, “Aesthetic experience seems to play a major role—at least for some people—in the exercise of the practical judgment for belief in God—perhaps a great deal more than the traditional ‘proofs’ of God’s existence set forth in apologetic theology.”²⁰¹ This is certainly the case on the occasion of cinematic arts and their

¹⁹⁸ Robert Benne, *Seeing Is Believing: Visions of Life Through Film* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1998), 11.

¹⁹⁹ Thomas Martin, *Images and the Imageless: A Study in Religious Consciousness and Film* (East Brunswick, NJ: Bucknell University Press, 1981), preface.

²⁰⁰ Robert K. Johnston, *Reel Spirituality: Theology and Film in Dialogue*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2006), 89.

²⁰¹ Richard Viladesau, *Theological Aesthetics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 104.

ability to transform a person's political, moral, and theological worldviews through the individual's empathetic journey with the film hero.

The cinema experience provides an honest attempt at telling the story of the human condition, fallen in its nature, but showing a glimpse of the divine. It is through this experience that a person can witness his relationship to humanity and possibly confront the nagging consciousness that seeks a taste of the magnificence of Christ. "The most important spiritual truths are often embedded within seeming debased settings or sources," notes Craig Detweiler.²⁰²

Detweiler suggests, human beings are living in the divine drama and cinema exposes the wonder of God's love and humanity's brokenness. "Movies diagnose our problems and posit our futures."²⁰³ Whether the Word is read, performed in a church, or spoken in a movie, it remains the Word of God which "is living and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the division of soul and spirit, and of joints and marrow, and is a discerner of thoughts and intents of the heart" (Heb. 4:12). Thus, cinema may be a medium of contemplation and exploration of the human spirit; it provides the opportunity for a moment-to-moment participation by the viewer with the characters in the story. A moment in the story of a movie can be a means of God's grace speaking directly or indirectly to an individual.

J. I. Packer states, "God as personal, rational, creative, competent to control the world He has made, and morally admirable, in that all He creates is good."²⁰⁴ Therefore, the characteristics of the human spirit seated in the *imago Dei* provide expressions of God and His desire to ignite the human spirit even through the actors of a film. The cinematic characters are crafted as

²⁰² Detweiler, *Into the Dark*, 29.

²⁰³ Ibid., 256.

²⁰⁴ Packer, *Concise Theology*, 55.

reflections of all humanity. If the reason for human existence lies in the intention of God's ultimate plan, as Millard Erickson suggests, then the existence of all human beings serves also His ultimate purpose.²⁰⁵ Likewise, whether in the baptismal bath or on the silver screen, human beings illuminate the created image of God.

John Piper claims the *imago Dei* in human beings reveals God's desire to place humanity above all other creatures. "God is the reality and we are the image. Images are created to set forth the reality."²⁰⁶ It can be said that the very image of God in the human being is revelation of a phenomenal act. Transcendence in cinema draws the eye and ear "combining channels of information that must be grasped simultaneously in what is sometimes a rich tapestry of images, sounds, and words."²⁰⁷ John Walsh shares a story describing the impact of film on his young life: "Going on in my mind had hijacked the real world at this moment and substituted some vivid otherworld in its place. [Movies] offered an alternative to the life I was living and tried to persuade me I was someone else. It was a strange form of substitution because it made no sense."²⁰⁸

Eric Rohmer recognized, "cinema is the cathedral of the twentieth century."²⁰⁹ Actor Martin Sheen shares a personal sentiment that is a fairly consistent worldview in the film industry, "I'm interested in spirituality, not religion. Religion creates barriers between people,

²⁰⁵ Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 436.

²⁰⁶ John Piper, *A Holy Ambition: To Preach Where Christ Has Not Been Named* (Minneapolis, MN: Desiring God Foundation, 2011), 41.

²⁰⁷ Carl Plantinga, "Are Movies Fundamentally Inferior to Books?" *Christianity Today: Books and Culture Corner*, May 1, 2003, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2003/mayweb-only/13.0b.html>

²⁰⁸ John Walsh, *Are You Talking to Me? A Life Through the Movies* (New York: HarperPerennial, 2004), 12.

²⁰⁹ Leah Anderst, ed., *The Films of Eric Rohmer: French New Wave to Old Master* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2014), 120.

spirituality transcends barriers between us.”²¹⁰

Henry charged evangelicals at this very philosophical threshold of despair. “The Church of Jesus Christ is here. We must march and sing our faith again in the public arena—in the streets and on the mass media—not hide our light under church buildings and inside seminary walls. It was in the open marketplace that the Apostle Paul engaged Stoic and Epicurean philosophers in debate.”²¹¹

Henry’s recurring sermon to the evangelical community was that the church be insistent and calculated in its approach to serve the social concerns of society. So heavy was this notion on Henry’s heart that he wrote, “The biggest threat to the American Way of Life is constituted by the profound moral and spiritual indefiniteness of the public-school system.”²¹²

“It is that God’s image in mankind is deposed whenever one murders a fellow human being, and that “there is no other name under heaven whereby we must be saved.” That God speaks, God commands, God promises, God threatens, God invites—that is the Church’s evangelistic message to the world. The Church must proclaim that message from the pulpit and through the media not merely to the people of God, but especially to worldlings who remain

²¹⁰ Lewis Beale, “Martin Sheen Spurns Star’s Glitter,” *San Diego Union*, July 3, 1988.

²¹¹ Carl F. H. Henry, *Twilight of a Great Civilization: The Drift Toward Neo-Paganism* (Westchester, IL: Crossway Books, 1988), 19.

²¹² Augustus Cerillo, Jr. and Murray W. Dempster, “Carl F.H. Henry’s Early Apologetic for an Evangelical Social Ethic, 1942-1956” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 34, no. 3 (September 1991): 365-379. Additionally, Henry announced a plea to educators for “a restoration of the Bible to its proper place in our schools; for a halt on teachers workshops and institutes conducted on the basis of that naturalistic philosophy of Dewey and Kilpatrick which renounces all absolutes in advance; for at least the same emphasis on our historic Hebrew-Christian tradition as on non-Christian and anti-Christian speculative views; for greater definiteness in classroom instruction concerning the moral and spiritual realm; for more teachers personally identified with our great Christian heritage; for an end to the preference shown on public occasions to clergymen aligned with theologically inclusive and syncretistic organizations over evangelical Protestant clergymen whose theological convictions do not go out of fashion every fifty years.” Included in journal and text taken from Henry’s “Three Threats to Our American Way of Life,” *United Evangelical Action* (January 1, 1952), 3.

living prospects for redemptive rescue and renewal.”²¹³

The moral and theological significance of phenomenal acts in film are capable of causing a person to experience, or at least imagine the moral or emotional anguish of the characters on the screen. As the individual submits to the story, imagery, lights, sound, and action persuade a person toward an active interpretation and empathy for the character. Bryant suggests, cinema now supplies the public with a popular religion that “provide us with archetypal forms of humanity—heroic figures—and instruct us in the basic values and myths of our society.”

A suggestion of God’s revelation can be found in Karl Barth’s confession upon hearing Mozart’s *The Magic Flute*. “The golden sound and melodies of Mozart’s music have from early times spoken to me not as gospel but as parables of the realm of God’s free grace as reveal in the gospel—and they do so again with great spontaneity and directness.”²¹⁴ Barth understood the depth of visceral stimulation of a divine nature. The music of Mozart led Barth to the assumption that “all creation praised its maker not because He was trying to prove something, to make points—that is the way of natural theology—but because He simply allowed the music to do its own work.”²¹⁵

Barth’s witness to something of a miracle provides for the idea of revelation as witnessed in the Bible through parables and the historicity of the resurrection of Jesus. Similarly, Robert K. Johnston conducted a study on the transcendence through film by providing approximately 150 college students a viewing of various films and then asking them to respond by short essay on their experiences. Some students claimed the film-going experience had led them to meet God.

²¹³ Henry, *Twilight of a Great Civilization*, 32.

²¹⁴ Karl Barth, *How I Changed My Mind*, ed. John Godsey (Edinburgh: The Saint Andrew Press, 1969), 72.

²¹⁵ Colin E. Gunton, *A Brief Theology of Revelation* (New York: T & T Clark, 1995), 62.

Other students said they had experienced God and had an awakening in the spirits that was transformative. Another group of students said they had not necessarily encountered God. A few others recounted that their lives had been transformed in significant ways—even to the point of transforming a girl who had been plagued with suicidal thoughts.²¹⁶

Johnston tells of another testimony of a young man who had been spiritually transformed in 1969 after watching the movie *Easy Rider*. The illumination of grace and spiritual truth expressed by the characters in the movie provoked the man to immediately take a bus to Washington, D. C. to join a Jesus People event. The man said he had encountered God in the movie theatre and wanted now to know God personally. He soon became a pastor and forty years later continues to pastor a church.²¹⁷

Steve Turner writes, “I don’t expect art to convert people. I am saying . . . debates are taking place in cinema . . . where Christians have something to say.”²¹⁸ The parables found in both Christian and secular films can serve as dramatic metaphors of God’s calling His children to redemption. The mystery of God’s presence by the Holy Spirit can genuinely provide revelation through the storytelling enterprise of cinema.

Humanity and Divine Transcendence

As expressed herein, cinema has the ability to reveal the mystery of the incarnation of God in Christ through the *imago Dei* and provide for a union between humanity and the Divine, a union brought about through special revelation. “Cinema is one of the privileged places that

²¹⁶ Robert K. Johnston, “Is Reel Spirituality a Real Spirituality?” in “Groaning Too Deep for Words: Engaging the Senses in Worship, Theology, and the Arts,” *Theology, News & Notes* 58, no. 1 (Spring 2012): 9-11.

²¹⁷ Ibid.

²¹⁸ Steve Turner, *Imagine: A Vision for Christians in the Arts* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2017), 29.

reveal the functioning of human psychology *à propos* of the ‘imaginary’, which itself merits greater precision because of its intimate connection with the religious.”²¹⁹

Carl F. H. Henry conveys a view that “revelation is a divinely initiated activity, God’s free communication by which He alone turns His personal privacy into a deliberate disclosure of His reality.”²²⁰ Henry suggests a symbiotic relationship between God and humanity’s ability to reason and therefore sufficiently capable of comprehending God’s revelatory acts.

By the unannounced intrusion of its omnipotent actuality, divine revelation lifts the present into the eternal and unmask our pretenses of human omniscience. Confronting us with a sense of cosmic arrest, it makes us ask whether the end of our world is at hand and propels us unmasked before the Judge and Lord of the universe.²²¹

Appropriate to this study of special revelation, Henry describes his own conversion experience in 1933 while sitting in his car in a violent thunderstorm.

A fiery bolt of lightning, like a giant flaming arrow, seemed to pin me to the driver’s seat, and a mighty roll of thunder unnerved me. When the fire fell, I knew instinctively the Great Archer had nailed me to my own footsteps. Looking back, it was as if the transcendent *Tetragrammaton* wished me to know that I could not save myself and that heaven’s intervention was my only hope.²²²

It could be inferred that Henry’s polemic supports the plausibility of special revelation through the cinematic experience. This view places God’s plan for His image in all human beings as the utmost covenant action from the Old through the New Testaments expressed from the beginning of time.

²¹⁹ Joseph Marty, “Toward a Theological Interpretation and Reading of Film: Incarnation of the Word of God – Relation, Image, Word,” in *New Image of Religious Film*, ed. John R. May (Franklin, WI: Sheed & Ward, 2000), 131.

²²⁰ Carl F. H. Henry, *God Who Speaks and Shows*, 8.

²²¹ *Ibid.*, 17.

²²² Carl F. H. Henry, *Confessions of a Theologian* (Waco, TX: Word, 1986), 45-46; Matthew Hall and Owen Strachan, ed., *Essential Evangelicalism: The Enduring Influence of Carl F. H. Henry* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2015), 11.

C. S. Lewis testifies to the personal communion and power of God's transcendence, "It was as though the voice which had called to me from the world's end were now speaking at my side. It was with me in the room, or in my body, or behind me. If it had once eluded me by its distance, it now eluded me by proximity—something too near to see, too plain to be understood, on this side of knowledge. That night my imagination was, in a certain sense, baptized."²²³

The *imago Dei* is at work in the personal revelation received from God through the Holy Spirit to an individual. It is this essence of the *imago Dei* that provides human beings with the ability to reflect on his own existence and his separation from the Creator. The *imago Dei* in man suggests that the man is responsible and remains answerable to God for his choices.²²⁴ It stands to reason, if human beings are image-bearers, the first step toward demonstrating the presence of the *imago Dei* in the protagonist is to consider that every protagonist serves a character created by a writer who is also an image-bearer. Thus, the protagonist, Christ follower or not, retains the *imago Dei* and shares a connection with the *imago Dei* in the viewer.

David S. Cunningham believes that storytelling through cinema can resonate truth as provided for in reading the Scriptures brings about believing. These avenues can explicitly reveal the most central beliefs of Christianity while inspiring a better understanding of the faith. Most people, Cunningham suggests, "come to the Christian faith through other people—and often primarily through actions rather than words."²²⁵ In view of the *imago Dei* in man and the engagement of the viewer of the hero's experience, the primary metaphor can be the Christ-figure driving the defining theme or worldview within the narrative. "Jesus himself is revealed

²²³ C. S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Haverst Books, 1955), 238, 180-1.

²²⁴ Emil Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of Creation and Redemption* (London: Lutterworth, 1952), 59.

²²⁵ David S. Cunningham, *Reading Is Believing: The Christian Faith Through Literature and Film* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2002), 23-24.

anew in the Christ-figure” by the cinematic expression of human nature.²²⁶

Jürgen Moltmann suggests that there is a transcendence in art since to experience God in all things would include man’s creative nature and expressions of the *imago Dei* through storytelling. “To experience God in all things presupposes that there is a transcendence which is immanent in things and which can be inductively discovered. It is the infinite in the finite, the eternal in the temporal, and the enduring in the transitory.”²²⁷ The uniqueness of being human promotes the conscious necessity for self-revelation, purpose, and meaning. As Moltman claims, the challenge of man to embrace the call of God for an impossible task is the beginning of self-knowledge. It is through the *imago Dei* that man can perceive God.²²⁸

Reinhold Niebuhr suggests that human beings come aware of the Creator through the presence of the *imago Dei* revealing thought and recognition of the work of God in natural and special revelation.²²⁹ The transcendence of God and communication of God to human beings brings about the recognition of that which is incomplete in their fallen states. The unique and peculiarity of the human spirit is the fullness and expression of the *imago Die*.

One may believe in God but not move into a position of humility and repentance. Nonetheless, God’s love abounds and remains present in the general and the special revelation moments and a knowledge of God. Calvin suggests that the Holy Spirit acts as the initiator of

²²⁶ Lloyd Baugh, *Imaging the Divine: Jesus and Christ-Figures in Film* (Kansas City, MO: Sheed & Ward, 1997), 112.

²²⁷ Moltmann, *The Spirit of Life*, 35-6.

²²⁸ Jürgen Moltmann, *Man: Christian Anthropology in the Conflicts of the Present* (London: SPCK Publishing, 1974), 16, 93.

²²⁹ Reinhold Niebuhr, “Our Responsibilities in 1942,” *Christianity and Crisis* 1, no. 24 (January 12, 1942): 1-2.

man's recognition and response to the person of Jesus Christ and the revelation of Scripture.²³⁰

Calvin's pneumatology observes the Holy Spirit is the *fons vitae*, the well of life, and if this is so, then every experience of life can be a discovery of this living source. Calvin argues the *imago Dei* remains the motivating force.

There is within the human mind, and indeed by natural instinct, an awareness of divinity. This we take to be beyond controversy. To prevent anyone from taking refuge in the pretense of ignorance, God himself has implanted in all men a certain understanding of His divine majesty. There lies in this a tacit confession of a sense of deity inscribed in the hearts of all.²³¹

Alvin Plantinga aligns with Calvin in the context that *sensus divinitatis* can be properly basic with respect to a person's sufficient knowledge that serves as a "belief-producing faculty (or power, or mechanism) that under the right conditions produces belief that isn't evidentially based on other beliefs." An individual's cognitive capabilities are foundational for the function of *sensus divinitatis*.²³²

In the case for the plausibility of special revelation through cinema, one might consider how improbable such an encounter would have to be for (x) encounter to have not occurred. Following Swinburne's proposition, the more (x) encounters testified by reliable sources, the greater the prima facie case for the plausibility of truth of (x) encounter. Defining (x) encounter as a special revelation experience in cinema, it may then be considered within the plausibility of a personal encounter with God by the work of the Holy Spirit regardless of confirmation by

²³⁰ Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Beveridge, 359.

²³¹ Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. J. T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960), 1.3.1.

²³² Alvin Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 178-9. William Alston also acknowledges that it is rational for an individual to form "beliefs about God on the basis of experience of God, or more exactly perception of God." See William Alston, *Perceiving God: The Epistemology of Religious Experience* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991), 194.

anyone other than the person with whom God has chosen to reveal himself.²³³

Continuing with Swinburne's Principle of Credulity and Calvin's *sensus divinitatis*, and Plantinga's warrant of basic belief, it is not unreasonable to advance the plausibility of personal transformation unto conviction by the Holy Spirit during the witness of and reflection of a cinematic moment. If, by God's providence, such a person were to be placed in an environment that would cause the person to be immersed into the hero's journey and deeply and sympathetically identify with the hero, God could choose to use the person's submissive position at such a specific time to reveal himself to that person.

The human being restlessly searches for the knowing, meaning, and purpose while still defending against the evil that brings the fight to every soul. Human beings cannot exist without the light that indwells them by the Creator. Brunner suggests, it is not human strength or intellect that makes a person human. It is a person's "responsibility-in-love," the ability to love others that makes a person genuinely human.²³⁴ A person's original divine destiny is the reflection of Jesus by the Incarnation. "True community is the ground and the content of Christian humanity."²³⁵ Therefore, Jesus in the common force of human and superhero desires to overcome evil for the sake of community. Charles Spurgeon shares, "Everything, the most minute as well as the most magnificent, is ordered by the Lord who has prepared His throne in the heavens, whose kingdom

²³³ Swinburne, *The Existence of God*, 291. Using Swinburne's Principle of Credulity for the argument of special revelation in cinema as Swinburne applies this concept to the existence of God. Much like Jonathan Edwards developed a catalogue of "Religious Affections" and applications by which to test the legitimacy of a Holy Spirit impression on a person. Though the person accepts the event completely a genuine encounter, Edwards sought to press the person toward accuracy of the conversion and/or confession.

²³⁴ Emil Brunner, *Man in Revolt: A Christian Anthropology* (Philadelphia, PA: The Westminster Press, 1947), 105.

²³⁵ *Ibid.*, 106.

rules over all.”²³⁶ The history of God’s hand on creation throughout the Scriptures serves as proof of His design and love for humanity and reflected in the gift of the *imago Dei*. Peterson claims, the *imago Dei* “should be understood as the underlying identity of humanity which shapes humanity’s end, shaped in the likeness of Christ by the Spirit in God’s image.”²³⁷

Rhetoric of Narrative Storytelling

In the beginning was the Word. The creation story and the image of God in human beings set the precedent that all humankind would be not only a part of the story but storytellers by their very nature of being of the Creator. “The story of our lives is a central part of our self-talk and of the conversations about us. We live our lives as stories—or as narratives.”²³⁸ This concept of connectedness of a person to their own story and to the Creator through the *imago Dei* is at the heart of the conversation around revelation of God in cinema. It is the story that connects a person to the decision to accept Jesus as the Son of God rather than view Him only as a central and interesting character in history.

An individual’s personal story thrives on a confidence that he or she is the hero, the protagonist, of their story. Therefore, the individual assumes the role of writer and director of their own story. In Freudian terms, the individual endures in a dance between the id, ego, and super-ego in order to serve his or her needs toward fulfillment. From the Christian perspective, a person’s story was set in motion before conception and created for a purpose. Thus, there is a life-thread that did not start at birth but in the mind of the Creator. Whether the person accepts

²³⁶ Charles H. Spurgeon, “Providence – As Seen in the Book of Esther” (Sermon, The Metropolitan Tabernacle, Newington, UK, Nov. 1, 1874), <https://answersingenesis.org/education/spurgeon-sermons/1192-providence-as-seen-in-the-book-of-esther/>.

²³⁷ Peterson, “The Imago Dei as Human Identity,” 126.

²³⁸ Johh Rodden, “How do Stories Convince Us? Notes Towards a Rhetoric of Narrative,” *College Literature* 35, no. 1 (Winter 2008): 148, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1353/lit.2008.0007>.

this truth, the origin of the person's hero story remains and is eternally continuing. Similarly, the hero of a story in a cinema reflects the human being, or character, they play.

Robert McKee, author of *Story*, suggests seven qualifying characteristics of the hero archetype. The hero or heroine should be willful, desire something deeply, have a self-contradictory unconscious desire, have a chance to achieve the desire, have the capabilities to pursue the object of desire, has limits to the hero inherent by the setting and genre, and must be empathetic.²³⁹ These facets of the hero's personality encompass and resonate in the same way with the individual moviegoer. The hero is the reflection of what could happen to a person if they were to make similar choices as the hero in the cinema. These choices could be morally right or wrong, and the outcomes might exemplify similar choices and outcomes witnessed by the moviegoer. The cinematic hero will experience a personal transformation of understanding in the course of his journey and typically should experience a self-realization by the end of the movie. McKee argues, "The revelation of true character in contrast and contradiction to characterization is fundamental. Life teaches what seems is not what is."²⁴⁰ If the cinema accomplishes presenting the story in its most dramatic and emotional way, the individual watching the movie should realize an immersion into the magical world and also be challenged with an honest self-realization. This moment of self-realization shared, yet separate, between the hero and the moviegoer provides the opportunity for the individual to embrace a deeper and profound revelation of the knowledge of God.

Joseph Campbell in his book, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, suggests the hero is on a quest of self-discover, which is what man's spiritual journey is about. He desires to discover his

²³⁹ McKee, *Story*, 137.

²⁴⁰ Ibid., 103.

ultimate destiny driven by the *imago Dei* at his core. Wayne Booth in his book *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, the true author of a story “created not merely an ideal, impersonal ‘man in general’ but an implied version of himself that is different from the implied authors.”²⁴¹

Fictional stories transcend across cultures and time and are universal in that they have the ability to imitate life at its most emotional core. Goodman suggests the symbols projected through art, or cinema, often provide an esthetic beauty that draws people to God as modeled by the *imago Dei* in humanity.²⁴² The rhetorical approach in cinema is a narrative construct that permits persuasion through exposition of story and empathy of character. Yet, the reader, or viewer of cinema, will maintain the author as the “official scribe” of the story as the author/screenwriter attempts to establish empathy by creating as authentic a human being as possible, and, one way to do that is give them qualities of the *imago Dei*.

Good stories are always *about something*, whether they be a nursery rhyme, a folk song, a movie, or a parable. “Narratives make story-shaped points that cannot always be paraphrased in propositional statements without losing something in translation.”²⁴³ Stories, in their most basic existence, are an examination of the human condition and reflect how human beings should or should not live. In the final analysis, stories are about the redemption of humanity.

N. T. Wright suggests, “All worldviews are at the deepest level shorthand formulae to express stories.”²⁴⁴ From this perspective, the use of parables by Jesus provided personal, in the moment, revealed, and relational expressions of God’s truth in the world. “There is no single

²⁴¹ Wayne Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961), 71.

²⁴² Nelson Goodman, *Language of Art: An Approach to a Theory of Symbols* (Indianapolis, IN: Bobbs-Merrill Publishers, 1968), 246.

²⁴³ Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine*, 50.

²⁴⁴ N. T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 77.

person, entity, organization, institution, or power in our society today that even comes close to rivaling the power of film and television to shape our faith, values, and behavior.”²⁴⁵

It is upon the technological platform of contemporary media that the moral condition is present in the culture examined. Filmmakers are specific in their intent to influence culture through the values and moral expressed by characters portrayed in movies and television.²⁴⁶ For a basic example of values expressed in movies, *Liar Liar* and *Ocean’s 11* clearly present opposing morality views. In *Liar Liar*, Jim Carrey’s character learns that lying hurts others and that family is more important than career. Conversely, *Ocean’s 11* shows that crime pays and being cool is more important than obeying the law.²⁴⁷

Interestingly, the naturalist worldview found a solid dimension in movies for delivery of their farce propaganda against religion by weaving into story that there is no true spiritual reality. Steven Spielberg’s *A.I.: Artificial Intelligence* offers that there is no divine reality and that humanity can be found in the manufacturing of mechanics and science. “The truths contained in religious doctrines are after all so distorted and systematically disguised that the mass of humanity cannot recognize them as truth,” so says Freud.²⁴⁸

Carl Jung argued that all humans share certain innate unconscious psychological forces, which he called archetypes and that these similarities between the myths from different cultures reveal the existence of universality. Joseph Campbell, known for his work in comparative mythology and comparative religion, says, “God is a luminous vision. The image of God is

²⁴⁵ Bryan P. Stone, *Faith and Film: Theological Themes at the Cinema* (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2000), 7.

²⁴⁶ Michael Medved, *Hollywood Versus America* (New York: HarperCollins, 1992).

²⁴⁷ Godawa, *Hollywood World Views*, 24.

²⁴⁸ Sigmund Freud, *The Future of an Illusion*, trans. James Strachey, ed. Peter Gay (Standard Edition, XXI: London: Hogarth Press, 1961), 44-45.

equivalent to the dream vision. Your god is a manifestation of you own level of consciousness. All of the heavens and all of the hells are within you.”²⁴⁹ Existentialism appears to be a beacon of hope for many in the postmodern, post-religious culture by simply finding a sense of covert solidarity on an emotional wave offered through media, especially in cinema.²⁵⁰

Cinema’s Cultural and Behavioral Influence

The purpose of this section is to examine and review the influence of media persuasion and suggest how it promotes a sensibility by the moviegoer toward the protagonist in the narrative story of cinema. This is important as a means of discerning the *imago Dei* relationship between the protagonist and the viewer. In the same way a Christian church service may offer music, singing, liturgy, and various sensory performances for the purpose of worship and posture a person toward a sensitivity to the Spirit, so the cinema experience has the power to seduce the viewer toward emotional submission whether or not the viewer is aware. Neuroscience and psychological studies have shown and validated that particular types of movies elicit similar particular emotions for people viewing these films. Erotic film clips elicited arousal and excitement; fear clips elicited high anxiety; and sadness clips elicited distress and angst.²⁵¹ When observing these scientific studies, it appears human nature reacts emotionally in similar ways as

²⁴⁹ Joseph Campbell and Diane K. Osbon, *Reflections on the Art of Living: A Joseph Campbell Companion* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1991), 123.

²⁵⁰ Raymond Boisvert, “Walker Percy’s Postmodern Existentialism,” *Soundings: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 71, no. 4 (Winter 1988): 639-44.

²⁵¹ Antonio Maffei and Alessandro Angrilli, “E-Movie-Experimental MOVies for Induction of Emotions in Neuroscience: An Innovative Film Database with Normative Data and Sex Differences,” *PLoS One* 14, no. 10 (October 2, 2019), <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0223124>. “Indeed, film clips allow a multimodal stimulation of the viewer, with a simultaneous and coherent engagement of both the visual and the auditory sensory systems. In the context of mood induction, they are suitable for elicitation of basic emotions, like Fear or Disgust, as well as for the induction of more complex feelings. Furthermore, the recent diffusion of modern video editing software applications has made very easy to select and edit video clips for experimental use.”

the protagonist; thus, affirms the viewer relationship with the protagonist qualities of willful character, character empathy, and behavior contradiction.

Kenneth Burke stated, “Whenever there is persuasion, there is rhetoric. And, wherever there is ‘meaning,’ there is persuasion.”²⁵² Burke suggests the primary function of language is to be rhetorical, and to be rhetorical is to persuade—for the purpose of identification.²⁵³ Human beings desire to discover who they are and in the discovery through cinema, the *imago Dei* in the viewer may connect with the *imago Dei* in a cinema character even if it is only visual.

“Nonverbal conditions or objects can be considered as signs by reason of persuasive ingredients inherent in the meaning they have for the viewer to which they are addressed.”²⁵⁴ The journey into the mind and soul of a person through cinema has become invasive and sensually numbing to many individuals.²⁵⁵ Bryant states, “Due to the capacity of the camera to record, reproduce, and represent the natural, social, and human worlds—with a degree of realism unprecedented in the history of art—we, its audience, are vulnerable to being re-created by it.”²⁵⁶

Carl Henry claims, “The so-called Christian West was the context in which this secular tide gained early momentum. During the past half-generation secular humanism has widened its influence in America through the mass media, public education, and political theory.”²⁵⁷ Mass

²⁵² Kenneth Burke, *A Rhetoric of Motives* (Oakland: University of California Press, 1969), 172.

²⁵³ *Ibid.*, 24.

²⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 161.

²⁵⁵ Craig A. Anderson et al., “Violent Video Game Effects on Aggression, Video Games, Empathy, and Prosocial Behavior in Eastern and Western Countries: A Meta-Analytic Review.” *Psychological Bulletin* 36, no. 2 (March 2010):151-73, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/a0018251>; Fanti KA, Vanman E, Henrich E, and Avraamides MN, “Desensitization to Media Violence Over a Short Period of Time,” *Aggressive Behavior* 35, no. 2 (March/April 2009):179–187. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1002/ab.20295>.

²⁵⁶ M. Darrol Bryant, “Cinema, Religion, and Popular Culture,” in *Religion in Film*, ed. John R. May and Michael Bird (Knoxville, TN: University of Tennessee Press, 1982), 103-4.

²⁵⁷ Henry, *Twilight of a Great Civilization*, 25.

media of itself has no message; however, it is the vehicle by which truth and deception—evangelicals and secular—share the same paths of influence into the heart and mind of a society.

Clive Marsh claims, “Cinema-going and film-watching . . . are undoubtedly functioning as alternatives to religion in Western cultures today. Both for those who are identifiably religious, and those who are not, they are fulfilling at the very least a religion-like function.”²⁵⁸ Cinema currently seems to function as a religious experience. This function, as noted by John Hick, represents human beings’ desire to understand one’s purpose in the universe and the connection with spirituality.²⁵⁹ Marsh acknowledges the religious-like aspects for the cinema-going ritual.²⁶⁰

To this idea, George Miller, producer of the movies *Babe* and *Mad Max*, asserts “I believe cinema is now the most powerful secular religion and people gather in cinemas to experience things collectively the way they once did in church. The cinema storytellers have become the new priests.”²⁶¹ Eric Rohmer recognized, “cinema is the cathedral of the twentieth century.”²⁶² Cinema has the ability to serve society with escape and fantasy that can lead a person toward anxiety and worthlessness, or it can move a person toward redemption of the soul. In some ways, film directors are the preachers and the movie theatre is the pulpit. Nonetheless, God may choose to convict and redeem a person through cinema as a personal connection is made with the viewer by the *imago Dei*.

²⁵⁸ Clive Marsh, *Cinema and Sentiment: Film’s Challenge* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2014), 9.

²⁵⁹ John Hick, *God and the Universe of Faiths: Essays in the Philosophy of Religion* (Oxford: Oneworld Publication Ltd., 1993), 133.

²⁶⁰ Ibid.

²⁶¹ Johnston, *Reel Spirituality*, 28.

²⁶² Anderst, *The Films of Eric Rohmer*, 120.

Andrew Greeley offers, “The pure, raw power of the film to capture a person who watches it, both by its vividness and by the tremendous power of the camera to concentrate and change perspectives, is a sacramental potential that is hard for other art forms to match.”²⁶³ The cinematic event provides for the viewer to empathize with the protagonist and to some extent, imagine oneself in a similar situation as the character in the story. It is this connectedness between the viewer and the protagonists that seems to expose the presence of the *imago Dei*. Greeley continues to say that “film is especially well disposed for the making of sacraments, for the creating of epiphanies, because of its inherent power to affect the imagination.”²⁶⁴

Cinema can provide humanity a reflection of its own demise in the absence of Christ and its desperate need for communion with his Creator. Mike Frost writes, “Mainstream cinema has presented us with some powerful, complex, and authentic depictions of devout Christians.”²⁶⁵ Furthermore, many influential films have conveyed general revelation through powerful images of man’s lust to false idols juxtaposed to the clarity and truth found in Christ. *The Lord of the Rings*,²⁶⁶ *The Apostle*,²⁶⁷ *The Tree of Life*,²⁶⁸ *The Shawshank Redemption*,²⁶⁹ *Tender Mercies*, *The Dark Knight*²⁷⁰ and many others cry into the souls of many people shaking the very root of

²⁶³ Andrew Greeley, *God in Popular Culture* (Chicago: Thomas More Press, 1989), 251.

²⁶⁴ Ibid.

²⁶⁵ Mike Frost, “Christians in the Movies: The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly,” *Mike Frost: Arts & Popular Culture*, Aug. 16, 2019, <https://mikefrost.net/christians-in-the-movies-the-good-the-bad-and-the-ugly/>.

²⁶⁶ *The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring*, directed by Peter Jackson (New Line Cinemas, 2001), 3 hr., 28 min., DVD.

²⁶⁷ *The Apostle*, directed by Robert Duvall (New Films International, 1997), 2hr., 14 min., DVD.

²⁶⁸ *The Tree of Life*, directed by Terrence Malick (Fox Searchlight Pictures, 2011), 3 hr., 8 min. DVD.

²⁶⁹ *The Shawshank Redemption*, directed by Frank Darabont (Castle Rock Entertainment, 1994), 2 hr., 22 min. DVD.

²⁷⁰ *The Dark Knight*, directed by Christopher Nolan (Warner Brothers, 2008), 2 hr., 32 min., DVD.

their personal worldviews. Cinema can creatively unleash on man's consciousness the plight of humanity by exposing the disparaging emptiness in the human soul.

The impact of media is evident by the millions of dollars spent on commercial advertising during the annual televised Super Bowl Game that media which has been proven to have a dramatic impact on the behavior of consumer spending.²⁷¹ The suggestive power of media across various platforms seems to have superseded personal imagination with a bombardment of visual stimuli that propels the mind to a place of submission. Perse and Lambe show evidence of the effects of movie entertainment on individuals. The use of cinematic entertainment might be compared to the peripheral route to persuasion.²⁷² "People think about the content, elaborate on the implications of what is presented, and think about how the content relates to what they already know. So, effects derived from media content are more likely."²⁷³ During this transfixed state while the imagination is unencumbered by personal or spiritual contemplation, a person's heart and mind become open conduits to the moral and ethical views promoted in the medium being observed. The irony is that the human race welcomes the seduction with little awareness of the heart transformation. It is possible that a persistent worldview asserted within mass media has led to a moral drift in the American culture. Philosophies are being promoted to a society through cinema and television that can lead to radical reconstruction of their ideals.

²⁷¹ Kyle O'Brien, "Super Bowl 2020: The Ins and Outs of the Big Game's Advertisers," *The Drum: News*, Jan. 31, 2020, <https://www.thedrum.com/news/2020/01/31/super-bowl-2020-the-ins-and-outs-the-big-games-advertisers>.

²⁷² Elizabeth M. Perse and Jennifer L. Lambe, *Media Effects and Society* (New York: Routledge, 2017), 228.

²⁷³ E. M. Perse, "Involvement with Local Television News: Cognitive and Emotional Dimensions," *Human Communication Research* 16, no. 4 (June 1990): 556-581, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2958.1990.tb00222.x>.

Science of Media Persuasion in Cinema

Before drafting a proposition as to the power of media and its integration and influence specifically in cinema, it would be advantageous to look at the landscape of contemporary media as a whole and to define persuasion in this arena. Scholars have identified at least three dimensions of persuasion that help to answer this question. First, when a person is persuaded, there is a change in attitude. The individual feels differently about something as a result of being exposed to a message.²⁷⁴ Smoking for example has long held a persuasive, and addictive, power over many consumers. Many people reach a point of no longer feeling good about smoking and truly desire to stop. Yet, when asked if they have stopped, they confessed they have not. This illustrates that a change in attitude is only part of what is involved in persuasion.

Behavioral change is the truly substantial result of a consistent impact of persuasion that ultimately leads to a persistent change. “Persuasion really involves a transaction between a source and a receiver – transaction that is quite deliberate on the part of the source. Media messages exert persuasive influence on people.”²⁷⁵ This is evidenced by the provocative marketing campaigns that track people’s internet search queries and in return attempt to solicit them with similar product ads.

Cinema has the power to invade one’s ideal. It is the vehicle by which truth and deception, virtue and vice, share the same paths of influence into the heart and mind of an individual. Cinema may promote humanist philosophy or the Christian worldview through its narrative story and cinematic expression. Ronald Holloway writes regarding cinema, “Cinema, or the motion picture, is the outer expression of a philosophy of procession. A theology of

²⁷⁴ Glenn Sparks, *Media Effects Research: A Basic Overview*, 4th ed. (Boston: Wadsworth, 2013), 174.

²⁷⁵ Sparks, *Media Effects Research*, 175.

motion must have both a past and a future. A theology of cinema not only records and documents; it projects into the future.”²⁷⁶ Thomas M. Martin contends cinema has a profound impact on a person’s religious sensibilities. “Where images are generally in response to immediate situations, imaginative constructs are geared more toward absorbing direction as a whole. [Human beings seek to] work out the issues of the self in dramatic forms, not necessarily to fit some established order but to establish some emotional order.”²⁷⁷

Cinema offers a visual landscape, even a prescriptive antidote for correcting an individual’s brokenness. Jacques Ellul affirms the power of visual imagery on human action.

Vision works exactly like a camera, which provides me with dozens or hundreds of snapshots that are connected only if my mind relates them. And, because of this information, I can take part and involve myself in this reality by means other than sight. Sight has made me the center of the world because it situates me at the point from which I see everything and causes me to see things relative to this point. But, now I am tempted, as the center of this world, to act on this spectacle and transform this setting. Sight moves to action.²⁷⁸

Ellul regards cinema as an influencer of propaganda and agitation in order to guide the opinions of a viewer toward a particular direction. He suggests that the filmmaker often expresses, even unintentionally, personal propaganda elements within the cinematic event.²⁷⁹ The filmmaker’s worldview permeates the content of the visual story.

The imprint of future behavioral change subjected on an individual through media is not typically a sudden “Ah hah!” moment, but more a subtle, unconscious adaptive move toward a

²⁷⁶ Ronald Holloway, *Beyond the Image: Approaches to the Religious Dimension in the Cinema* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1977), 11.

²⁷⁷ Martin, *Images and the Imageless*, 17, 21.

²⁷⁸ Jacques Ellul, *The Humiliation of the Word* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1985), 6.

²⁷⁹ Jacques Ellul, *Propaganda: The Formation of Men’s Attitudes* (New York: Vintage Books, 1965), 32, 64.

cause and effect (i.e.: a juicy burger ad involving attractive models that is designed to trigger base human needs of sustenance and sexual fulfillment). Contemporary society is truly held captive through all five senses by suggestive, subjective, and often subversive messages that over time have the power to effect behavior. Media is often accused by the public as contributing to the decay of moral standards in society. In a national poll “70% of Americans say they are very or somewhat worried that popular culture, as depicted in television and movies, is lowering moral standards in the U. S.”²⁸⁰ Yet, this same public has become addicted to cinematic imagery. “Our relationship to media is akin to a snake eating its tail, and we just can’t help ourselves.”²⁸¹ Cinema provides a rich landscape for the use of persuasion whether it be for political, religious, or economic maneuvering in a society.

The Center for Public Leadership at the Harvard Kennedy School hosted a panel discussion that joined Harvard Faculty with celebrated Hollywood filmmakers in an attempt to evaluate the interaction between film and culture and explore the possibilities of film as a vehicle for social activism. “The brain is more hard-wired for sociability, for engaging with others, and for empathy than we had realized,” said faculty member, Rod Kramer. “The brain developed as a visual-auditory sensory processing system, which, when you think about it, is what film does.”²⁸² The high art of the cinematic images in conjunction with dynamic sound design, the cinematic experience can fuel the power of fetish to the point of “obsessing the viewers” toward violence,

²⁸⁰ Joel Roberts, “Poll: America’s Cultural Divide,” CBS News, November 22, 2004, <http://www.cbsnews.com/news/poll-americas-cultural-divide/>.

²⁸¹ Jacob Trussell, “Instruments of Mass Persuasion: Fear and Media in Film,” Film School Rejects. August 15, 2018. <https://filmschoolrejects.com/media-in-film/>.

²⁸² Loren Gary, “Film as Social Change,” *Harvard Gazette*, April 20, 2010, <http://news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2010/04/film-as-social-change/>.

self-harm, depression, insignificance, failure, and nihilism.²⁸³ It can also motivate soul restoration, adjust political views, and confirm religious beliefs. A good cinematic story can inspire a person toward virtue and acts of selflessness toward others. Through the art of story, believable characters, and cinematography, a film has the ability to make the viewer laugh and cry all the while delivering a specific view of the world.

Cinema that promotes political and social change stimulates “accelerated crowd learning,” noted Diana Barrett, former Harvard Business School professor and founder of The Fledgling Fund, which incorporates innovative uses of media to build social activism campaigns. Cinema can be a strategic vehicle for triggering social change.²⁸⁴ History affirms the power of cinema for the use of worldview propaganda. Bill Moyers, an award-winning journalist, once interviewed “Fritz Hippler, the mastermind of most of the German propaganda films made during Adolf Hitler’s reign of terror. When asked what made propaganda so effective, Hippler didn’t hesitate. The two principals were simplicity and repetition.”²⁸⁵

John T. Cacioppo, founder of social neuroscience, and Richard E. Petty, distinguished research scientist, further substantiated this finding when they presented research verifying a repeated message is more persuasive than one that is heard only once.²⁸⁶ Psychologist Charles S. Carver and Michael F. Scheier write, “Affect can be positive, neutral or negative for any goal-

²⁸³ Marshall Soules, *Media, Persuasion and Propaganda* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015), 41.

²⁸⁴ Soules, *Media, Persuasion and Propaganda*, 41.

²⁸⁵ Sparks, *Media Effects Research*, 192.

²⁸⁶ Ibid.

directed action, depending on how well or poorly the action seems to be attaining the goal.”²⁸⁷ In other words, human achievement and human emotions are tied. Similarly, as a person watching a movie expects the protagonist to make choices that are good for the ultimate success of his or her journey, the viewer also makes corrective adjustments based on his or her personal worldview. Herein lies the rub, if the protagonist chooses to make a moral choice that is in conflict with the viewer, the viewer may lean toward the unagreeable choice based on viewer’s partnership with the protagonist. The result over time, when repeated, is a high prospect of worldview change by the viewer.²⁸⁸

More importantly, the validation of product sales due to creative and relentless advertising have secured the Madison Avenue position that anything can be sold whether the consumer “needs” it or not. A study by German neuroeconomist Professor Peter Kenning found that decision making was radically influenced toward a specific brand of product by familiarity. By studying the activity of the brain when shown a favorite brand over a non-favorite brand, “the brain showed significantly less activity in areas involved in reflective thinking.”²⁸⁹ The ultimate effect is that human beings react swiftly in their decision making to familiar product brands whether that emotion based on a strong media presence of the brand or merely personal affinity.

These findings are not examined to suggest that special revelation in cinema is in some way imparted through propaganda, brainwashing, or manipulation. The key purpose of this section is to set the foundation that cinema is not just watching a movie; it is an event that transports a person deeply into the visual story by means of empathetic partnership between hero

²⁸⁷ Charles S. Carver and Michael F. Scheier, “Action, Affect, and Two-Mode Models of Functioning,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Human Action*, ed. Ezequiel Morsella, John A. Bargh, and Peter M. Gollwitzer (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 298.

²⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 290-98.

²⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 5.

and viewer. This study is substantial to an understanding of influence on human behavioral change propagated in media. When media executives wish to promote a new or opposing ideal to the consumer audience through a theatrical medium, strong emotional connections to corresponding “agreements” embedded in the story causes less decision making. For instance, if an advertiser wanted to sway a viewer away from product A to product B, having a well-known actor in a commercial decline product A for product B has a credible and emotional impact on the viewing audience. This is fertile ground for influencing a culture away from fundamental Christian principles toward evolutionary and naturalistic dogma through the convention of cinema.

Cinema provides unique opportunities for personal contemplative moments by the moviegoer absorbed in the story by being emotionally invested with the hero’s journey. “In an increasingly visual culture, film images have become an important source of knowledge.”²⁹⁰ But, because the moviegoer cannot control the cinematic images they are often caught off guard. Cinema can create an opportunity to tell the viewer things about themselves and others. As such, movies are a significant ingredient in a person’s individual formation.”²⁹¹

One well-documented example of media influence that was purely unintended occurred when the character, The Fonz, applied for a library card in an episode of the popular sitcom *Happy Days*.²⁹² In the weeks following this episode, libraries around the country reported a 500% increase in library card applications. Apparently, children and young adolescents who admired The Fonz were motivated to copy his behavior and get a library card for themselves. There was no persuasive ploy featured in the *Happy Days* episode; the producers of the program had no idea that this scene would trigger a surge in library card applications.²⁹³

²⁹⁰ Johnston, *Reel Spirituality*, 89.

²⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 89.

²⁹² *Happy Days*, created by Gary Marshall (Henderson Productions/ABC, 1974-1984).

²⁹³ Johnston, *Reel Spirituality*, 175.

“Since media can capture most human behavior, it is theoretically possible that media can influence any given human behavior.”²⁹⁴ A good example of a unique advertising campaign and its profound impact on consumer behavior was the sales of Reese’s Pieces after being featured in the movie *E.T. The Extra-Terrestrial*.²⁹⁵ Sales of the product rose 65 percent. Similarly, when Walt Disney introduced the character of Bambi, deer hunting dropped from a \$5.7 million business to \$1 million.

Psychological behavioral processes move function and effect by considered perception; comprehension and emotion; interpretation and evaluation; and finally, to function and effect. These are the critical mental means by which cinema impacts people’s lives.²⁹⁶ These subliminal effects induced by sensory stimuli are mostly unnoticeable to the human conscious. Although there is an unawareness of the message submerged within a film’s worldview, the subliminal effects are worthy of note and should not be disregarded when engaging contemporary entertainment. It is along this line that society has become desensitized to the persuasive effects of media on human behavior.

Moral Ambiguity in Cinema

McKee asserts, “Our appetite for story is a reflection of the profound human need to grasp the patterns of living, not merely as an intellectual exercise, but within a very personal, emotional experience.”²⁹⁷ Cinema is not a disengagement of the mind or emotion no matter how much a moviegoer may say he or she only watches to be entertained. The cinema experience is a

²⁹⁴ Skip Dine Young, *Psychology at the Movies* (Sussex, UK: John Wiley & Sons, 2012), 134.

²⁹⁵ Johnston, *Reel Spirituality*, 31; *E.T. The Extra-Terrestrial*, directed by Steven Spielberg (Universal Pictures, 1982), 2 hr., 1 min. DVD.

²⁹⁶ Johnston, *Reel Spirituality*, 133.

²⁹⁷ McKee, *Story*, 12.

submission by the viewer to the imaginative transformation that transports the viewer into the personal life of the character with whom the viewer identifies. The viewer is drawn into the dramatic circumstance of the main characters whereby the viewer becomes emotionally invested in the wellbeing of the protagonist. Cinema has the ability to transport the viewer viscerally into the protagonist journey to the point of the viewer feeling empathy and anxiousness along with the protagonist's anxiety in the scene portrayed on the screen. Thus, the most prevalent methods toward story appeal are the play on the natural desires of men and women, specifically sex and violence. As noted earlier, the subliminal seduction impacts the subconscious with media messages that ultimately influence human behavior.

The film *Interstellar* is a captivating science-fiction film that serves up well-crafted moral dilemmas of self-sacrifice in survival-of-the-fittest form with plenty of heartfelt scenes of family devotion all wrapped in the evolutionary precepts that mankind has evolved and must continue to evolve in order to progress into the future.²⁹⁸ Though mankind seems to be able to destroy the earth as the result of selfishness and greed, humans continue to become extraordinary beings with supernatural capabilities and once again transcendent toward a position of the gods. It is in this representation of humanity as against all odds that the *imago Dei* shines brightly in the protagonist qualities. *Interstellar* is not a "Christian" film. It holds to the belief that the human race exists on the continuum of scientific transformation through the evolutionary process. This is evident when the character Cooper discovers a fifth dimension of the universe that gives him the ability to move through time in such a way as to save the inhabitants of earth. It is here that humanist philosophy is most revealed. Instead of suggesting the act of a transcendent God, creator of the universe, or even aliens, Cooper states, "They didn't bring us here at all. We

²⁹⁸ *Interstellar*, directed by Christopher Nolan (Paramount Pictures, 2014), 2 hr., 49 min. DVD.

brought ourselves. We did this.”

Bruce Ashford notes, “People’s hearts are shot through with sin and idolatry; they need God’s special revelation to help them recognize general revelation and interpret it correctly.”²⁹⁹ As men and women created in the image of God, human beings are not left to exist in fear but in communion with their Father, the Creator. Even in Christopher Nolan’s *Interstellar*, mankind is not left to be adrift in the cosmos. The resonates with illumination that though man believes he is completely in control of his existence, the mysteries of the galaxy itself points to the grandest artist of all. Whether intended by Nolan or not, an individual watching the film can be touched by the Holy Spirit through general revelation as the dialogue and cinematic drama presents mankind struggling with questions of purpose and characters willingly sacrificing themselves for the safety of others.

The Truman Show captures the theology of God in cinema in a uniquely entertaining way and covertly fulfills the themes of an atheistic worldview.³⁰⁰ The structure of the story provides for a powerful examination of belief in an all-loving God. It offers a premise, “God’s sovereign control of our lives leads to slavery; human autonomy leads to freedom.”³⁰¹ Thus, God is manipulative, demanding, and selfish. In an effort to evaluate the theory of premeditated ideology within the cinematic story, it is necessary to develop an awareness and respect of how the philosophy of ethics and morality infiltrate the cinematic medium. Cinema either affirms an individual’s faith or compels him or her toward rebellion against God. For many, movies confirm that God holds great power but cannot be trusted to use it in a loving manner or for their

²⁹⁹ Bruce Ashford and Chris Pappalardo, *One Nation Under God: A Christian Hope for American Politics* (Nashville, TN: B&H Academic, 2015). 19.

³⁰⁰ *The Truman Show*, directed by Peter Weir (Paramount Pictures, 1998), 1 hr., 47 min. DVD.

³⁰¹ Godawa, *Hollywood World Views*, 81.

good. “He” is only available when He feels like it but is constantly evaluating us from afar. This God seems to have an inordinate interest in getting His own way; His will must be done. In order to avoid trouble, or to get what one needs, one must work to placate such a God and find out what He wants. At the least, one must give the appearance of going along, being grateful, and not disrupting His plans. The only other alternatives, according to the film, are to similarly trick or use such an inadequate God. Or, ideally, one can maturely reject this God and bravely face uncertainty and risk with human strength alone. The god-figure, called Christof, in *The Truman Show* is powerful and does pour out his wrath onto Truman for what he believes is best for Truman. The movie reflects an inherent hatred for the idea of God. The film asserts humanity is inescapably merely subjects in the experience of life, thus humanity at best can merely rebel against God. The film expresses man’s pure rejection of God’s sovereignty.

Most films do not attempt to directly ask the question of God’s existence. Yet, the image of God exists within all cultures and their arts. “The God who allows His glory to light up His image on earth and to shine forth from that image is reflected in human beings as in a mirror. . . . The God who allows himself to be represented on earth by His image also appears in that image, and the image becomes an indirect revelation of His divine Being in earthly form.”³⁰² *The Truman Show*, regardless of the filmmaker’s intention, has left a rich and contrasting impression on audiences. The film certainly accepts that a Creator exists, and because He exists, mankind has a dilemma to contemplate. When Truman makes the decision at the end of the movie to leave the world he was born into and reject Christof, the creator of Truman’s world, Truman reflects the disenchantment of many who have turned from religion in pursuit of their own personal truth. The question is to what extent does the viewer perceive Christof as manipulator, even Lucifer in

³⁰² Moltmann, *God in Creation*, 220-221.

disguise, and Truman as base man in search for identity.

For many the film supports their view of an absent or, at best, a distant God who is uninvolved with mankind. For others the film mirrors mankind's foolish lack of awareness of God's presence in the world. The reality of God's presence in his world nearly hits Truman in the head. This reality is the metaphor for general revelation as God reveals himself. Ultimately, the viewer continues to reflect on the "otherness" of God and His relationship with mankind through the fictional portrayals in *The Truman Show*.

Summary

This chapter addressed theoretical background and literature specific to the foundation and evidence for divine transcendence of the *imago Dei* in contemporary cinema by the work of the Holy Spirit. The first section defines and examines divine revelation as the act of communication by God to humanity. Two distinctions of divine revelation, general and special, were evaluated based on theological interpretations. General revelation is that which can be known of God as revealed in nature and special revelation as the supernatural occurrence of direct communication with humankind by God through the Holy Spirit. The second section advanced the study of special revelation to the observance of revelation through phenomenal acts, including: miracles and visions. The wonder of God's special intervention in the lives of humanity can be exhibited by the occurrences of past and present manifestations of God's providence and miracles. The following section provided a literature review on the *imago Dei* in man and evidence that the *imago Dei* can be reflected in form by one person to another especially in the exaggerated performance by the cinematic protagonist. The next section served as an overview concerning the rhetoric of narrative and the influence to motivate a viewer toward or away from a particular ideal or worldview.

Augustine's confession that God commanded him to pick up Paul's book cannot be identified necessarily as revealing truth. Yet, in the commanding, content can be the proposition of revelation. Human beings desire answers to the wonder of the universe and their own inquires of self-understanding. Surely the text of Scripture provides man conviction, motivation, repentance, and revelation, and therefore, transfers knowledge from God to human beings. There is no limitation of God's sovereignty to appropriate divine communication with all humankind.

CHAPTER 3: *THE PASSION OF THE CHRIST* and *THE MISSION* SYNOPSES

Introduction

This chapter introduces a short synopsis of each of the two artifacts. As this dissertation explores the evidence and presence of God's revelation, focus will narrow on transcendence of the Holy Spirit and the presence of the *imago Dei* in the cinematic experience. Synopses are drafted for *The Passion of the Christ* and *The Mission* to serve as a general overview of the story's main characters, main storyline, and setting of each film. The synopses are not designed to necessarily entertain, but to encapsulate the basis of the stories in their metanarratives and worldviews on which to set the stage for investigation of potential encounters with Christ through these stories. The following chapter will dive deep into each story by analyzing the hero's journey and hero qualities exhibited by pursuit of mission, audience empathy, and behavior contradiction.

The purpose for choosing these particular films is twofold: their uniquely opposing purposes and their likeness in worldview positions. Though both films are categorized as dramas, their genres are quite different. *The Passion of the Christ* is what has become defined as a faith film. The narrative of this drama depicts the historic life of Jesus Christ. *The Mission*, however, is a secular film surrounding the mission of a Jesuit priest in 18th century South America. The way in which the films are similar is they both present worldviews that are spiritually based and maintain the rich message of hope and redemption through faith in Jesus Christ. *The Passion of the Christ* serves as a dramatic biography on the death of Jesus that has been described as beautiful, glorious, painful, inventive, and faithful. It is considered the most spiritually impactful

love story told in cinema history.³⁰³ The depiction of His suffering has often caused intense reactions by the public while watching the movie's graphic images of Christ's torture.³⁰⁴

The Passion of the Christ serves as the prime exemplar because it brings the viewer face to face with the realization of Christ's torment and sacrifice for all humankind. It blatantly declares that Christ is the Truth, and He is the only way to the Father. Yet, it is still wholly a love story portrayed by an actor, produced and filmed by Christians and non-Christians, written and fictionalized by a man, and released to the public for financial gain.

The Mission conveys the miracle of grace and the transforming power of the Holy Spirit over the priest who becomes compelled by fierce conviction that goes against his own personal safety. The film identifies persuasive imagery—the image of God in man and the faithfulness and self-sacrifice of the church in the midst of condemnation and torture.

The Passion of the Christ Synopsis

The story opens in the Garden of Gethsemane late at night as Jesus prays while His disciples, Peter, James, and John, sleep. His prayer releases a sound of quiet anguish, His brow sweats blood from the intensity, until He is suddenly interrupted by Satan.

Satan's countenance is disturbing as he cunningly attempts to dissuade Jesus from going through with His sacrifice. Satan tells Jesus that God is surely asking too much of Him to suffer and die for unworthy humans. A serpent emerges from Satan's robe. As Jesus hears His disciples calling, Jesus rebukes Satan and crushes the head of the snake with His heel.

³⁰³ Robert H. Woods, Jr., Michael C. Jindra, and Jason D. Barker, "The Audience Responds to 'The Passion of the Christ,'" in *Re-viewing the Passion: Mel Gibson's Film and Its Critics*, ed. S. Brent Plate (New York: Palgrave/Macmillan, 2004), 163-80.

³⁰⁴ Joshua Meyer, "'The Passion of the Christ' at 15: Untangling the Crown of Thorns of a Divisive Religious Blockbuster," *Film: Blogging the Reel World*, Feb. 25, 2019, <https://www.slashfilm.com/the-passion-of-the-christ-revisited/>.

The disciples join Jesus as Judas arrives with temple guards. Judas approaches Jesus and gives Him a kiss to signify to the guards the one who is Jesus. As the guards seize Jesus, Peter quickly draws a dagger and cuts off the ear of one of the guards. Jesus tells Peter to stop and picks up the guard's ear and heals it back in its place. The disciples flee as the guards beat and shackle Jesus and take Him away. Jesus is brought before Caiaphas, the high priest, and questioned as people gather and yell false accusations against Jesus. When Caiaphas asks Jesus if He is the Son of God. Jesus answers, "I am." Caiaphas, outraged by this blasphemy, rips his robes and condemns Jesus to death. Jesus is then slapped and beaten by the guards.

During this, Peter is confronted by a mob who recognize him as a follower of Jesus. Peter denies knowing Jesus and runs away. Meanwhile, Judas has become stricken with the guilt of betraying Jesus. He tries to return the money so that Jesus might go free, but the priests refuse his offer. Tormented by demons and overcome with guilt, he runs from the city and hangs himself.

Caiaphas brings Jesus before Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor of Judea, to be condemned to death. Pilate questions Jesus and finds no reason to convict Him to death. Also, Claudia, Pilate's wife claims to have had a bad dream the night before that she thinks is about Jesus. Pilate has Jesus transferred to the court of King Herod Antipas due to his rule over Nazareth, the place of Jesus' birth. Jesus is found not guilty and is returned to Pilate. In an attempt to free Jesus, Pilate gives the people a choice: free Jesus or the vicious criminal Barabbas. Pilate is surprised when the crowd screams "free Barabbas" and demands that Jesus be crucified. Pilate orders the guards to scourge Jesus. Satan watches with pleasure as the guards torture Jesus. The guards place a crown of thorns on His head and take the bleeding Jesus back to Pilate. However, the crowd continues to demand that Jesus be crucified. Pilate succumbs to the crowd and orders Jesus' crucifixion. As Jesus is taken away, Pilate washes his hands of the

event. Jesus is forced to carry his own heavy wooden cross to Golgotha. Along the way, a woman wipes Jesus' face with a cloth and Simon of Cyrene is forced to carry Jesus' cross. Jesus' mother, Mary Magdalene, and others witness the brutal nailing of Jesus to the cross.

The cross is raised with Jesus hanging in pain. His blood drips from His body. The two thieves hanging beside Jesus. Soldiers gamble over Jesus' robe. Caiaphas tells Jesus to come down off the cross if He is the Messiah. Suffering on the cross, Jesus asks God to forgive those that are torturing Him. He also gives grace and salvation to a criminal hanging next to Him who asks Jesus for forgiveness. The sky darkens and Jesus says, "It is finished. . . . Father into your hands. . ." A single raindrop (a tear) falls from heaven, the earth shakes, the temple is destroyed, and the Holy of Holies veil is split in two. Satan screams in agony. A Roman soldier thrusts a spear into Jesus' chest to be sure He is dead. Jesus' body is brought down from the cross as Mary, John, and Magdalene kneel around Jesus and weep. All goes black. In the final moment, Jesus steps from the grave to a beautiful sunlit day. He is whole and walks toward the light.

The Mission Synopsis

The setting is South America in the 18th century near the breathtaking Iguassu waterfalls bordering Brazil, Paraguay, and Argentina. The Colonial forces are competing for the hearts and minds of the native Indians. On the one hand, there are the imperialist plunderers, who want to establish a trade in slaves. On the other hand, there are the missionaries, who want to convert the Indians to Christ.

The Mission opens as a wounded Jesuit missionary is strapped to a wooden cross by Guaraní Indians and then shoved into the Iguazu river. The missionary, on the cross, is rocked by the rapids and finally plunges over the massive Iguazu Falls to his death.

Soon after the priest is killed, Father Gabriel, the one who assigned the martyred priest to

the ministry of the Guaraní Indians, sets out to engage the Indians. Father Gabriel climbs the treacherous wet rockface beside the falls in an attempt to find and communicate with the Guaraní. However, the Guaraní are on a mission to kill him. As he enters the jungle territory of the Guaraní, Father Gabriel hears them coming. He stops in a stream, sits on a large rock, and begins to play his oboe. The Guaraní warriors arrive ready to kill him, but the music softens their hearts, and they decide not to harm him and to take him into their tribe.

Rodrigo Mendoza, the protagonist of the film, is a mercenary and slave trader who makes his living capturing Guaraní Indians, occasionally killing those that run, and selling them to neighboring plantation owners. When Mendoza attempts to capture the Indians of the Mission, Father Gabriel faces Mendoza and claims, “We are going to make Christians out of these people.” Mendoza replies as he retreats, “If you have the time.”

Mendoza, a man of great passion and love for his brother, Felipe, becomes a man of rage when he finds his brother in bed with his fiancée, Carlotta. In the town square, Mendoza draws a dagger and stabs his brother to death in the street. Mendoza realizes the horror of his action and swiftly falls into brokenness and despair.

Father Gabriel hears of Mendoza’s plight and goes to offer him the path to redemption. Mendoza agrees to help with Father Gabriel’s mission and to serve the Guaraní people, but he demands to have a worthy penance for what he deems as an unforgiveable act.

As his penance, Mendoza is bound by rope to a large net comprised of all his armor and weapons of war. He pulls the net behind him through the jungle and up the cliffs of the Iguazu Falls. As they reach the Guaraní mission, Mendoza collapses. One of the Indians recognizes Mendoza and rushes over and places a knife at his throat, as Mendoza, completely exhausted from the climb submits to his death. However, after Father Gabriel tells the Indians of

Mendoza's repentance, the Indian withdraws the knife and uses it to cut Mendoza free of the massive weighted net and pushes it over the cliff into the river below. Mendoza wrought with emotion, cries and eventually laughs in the freedom of God's grace represented in the hearts of the Indians.

Father Gabriel's mission soon becomes self-sufficient and thrives as a place for education and growing in the faith for the Indians. Father Gabriel and his priests teach the Indian children to carve, play instruments, and sing, as well as, basic knowledge of reading, writing, and mathematics. Mendoza spends time reading the Bible, specifically, he first reads 1 Corinthians 13. Mendoza soon takes the vows of chastity, obedience, and poverty to become a Jesuit priest under the mentorship of Father Gabriel. Meanwhile, political conflicts in the area lead to Spain surrendering land to Portugal which causes the Guaraní people to fall under the slavery of the Portuguese. With this political action, Father Gabriel's mission is forced to be closed.

Knowing the demise of the Guaraní people under the new rule, Mendoza refuses to leave the mission and tells Father Gabriel that they must fight to protect the Guaraní Indians. Father Gabriel argues that God is love, and he chooses to stay, but not to fight. Mendoza forsakes his vows and prepares for war by training up the Indians to fight. As the Colonial soldiers attack the Mission, Father Gabriel, Mendoza, and the Guaraní men, women, and children march toward the troops unarmed, singing, and holding a cross. The soldiers massacre them. In the final moments of the film, a leader of the Catholic Church and a Portuguese official discuss the atrocity. The official laments, "thus is the world in which we live." To which the church official replies, "No, thus have we made the world. Thus, have I made it." Days later, a canoe full of young children return to the Mission and collect a few belongings, including a broken violin, which one of the children plays. They set off up the river in a canoe, deeper into the jungle, leaving behind the

scorched church. A final title declares that Jesuits and others continue to fight for the rights of indigenous people. The verse of John 1:5 is displayed on the screen: “The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.”

Rodrigo Mendoza is the main character who begins as a slave hunter and trader of local natives to the highest bidders. But, after he murders his brother in a rage of love and betrayal, Mendoza seeks redemption. Father Gabriel, a Jesuit missionary at a Guaraní Indian Mission, grants Mendoza an agonizing penance. Mendoza fulfills the duty and soon becomes a Jesuit priest under the leadership of Father Gabriel. The missionaries seek a society in which Christian natives will live in harmony with the Spanish and Portuguese. But the colonial governors find this vision dangerous; they would rather enslave the Indians than convert them, and they issue orders for the mission to be destroyed. Father Gabriel prepares in prayer, while Mendoza prepares for war. Both fail and the colonial forces invade and slaughter men, women, and children including Mendoza and Father Gabriel.

Summary

This chapter served as an introduction of the two artifacts on which this dissertation seeks to present evidence and the presence of God’s revelation with specific focus on transcendence of the Holy Spirit and the *imago Dei* in the cinematic experience. A synopsis was offered for each film, *The Passion of the Christ* and *The Mission*. Each synopsis provided a general overview of the story’s main characters, main storyline, and setting. The next chapter will examine each artifact by focusing on the identity of the *imago Dei* in man as expressed in the protagonist qualities and the impact of these qualities on the viewer.

CHAPTER 4: THE TRANSCENDENT NATURE OF THE *IMAGO DEI* IN CINEMA

Introduction

The rhetorical framework of the task ahead will examine the protagonist qualities revealed in each artifact: the character's willful desire, character empathy (audience empathy), and behavior contradiction (multi-dimensional and self-contradictory). The expectation is that these protagonist qualities as revealed in the hero's journey will demonstrate the expressions of the *imago Dei*, the person of Jesus Christ, and the transcendence of grace through special revelation in cinema, specifically exhibited in *The Passion of the Christ* and *The Mission*.

The specific attributes of the *imago Dei* in human beings are mirrored in each of the protagonist qualities, such as man's free will to choose, man's self-sacrifice for the sake of others, and man's moral responsibility reflected in behavior contradiction.

Cinema provides a visceral experience through which a person may be brought to moral conviction. It is in this set-apartness that cinema, mirroring human nature through character, plot, and theme, has the power to alert the moral deficiency in the soul of a person and awaken the truth of Christ. These two artifacts are examined on story structure, protagonist qualities, and the intimate relationship of the *imago Dei* as a means to demonstrate the possibility of special revelation in cinema.

The Passion of the Christ

Protagonist Qualities Revealed

The protagonist in cinema is recognized by the viewer as one who is a willful, empathetic character who often exhibits a behavior contradiction while consciously in pursuit of a specific

task or goal.³⁰⁵ It is in this willful pursuit of calling that the protagonist reflects the *imago Dei*. Human beings desire to thrive, not necessarily only in the obvious base needs, but to thrive toward a sense of peace, inner joy, and well-being.³⁰⁶ Thus, the proposition here is that the viewer in whom the *imago Dei* exists, may connect with the protagonist by actions taken and choices evident in protagonist qualities. Simply stated, the viewer may experience the story as the protagonist so deeply as to raise the viewer's heart rate and cause the viewer momentary disorientation.³⁰⁷ Anguish in the protagonist triggers produces the effects of anguish in the viewer.

Willful Character

The opening scene of *The Passion of the Christ* introduces Jesus as the protagonist in the Garden of Gethsemane praying to His Father. Jesus exhibits the willful character trait that mirror the attribute of free will appropriated by the *imago Dei* in all human beings. This connection between the protagonist's willful character who chooses to pursue the goal set before him exhibits man's created design to achieve and make right humanity's conflict and injustice. The *imago Dei* represented in the protagonist reflects the universal and personal connection with the viewer of the film.

³⁰⁵ McKee, *Story*, 136-141.

³⁰⁶ C. L. M. Keyes, "Social Well Being," *Social Psychology Quarterly* 61, no 2 (June 1998): 121-140, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2787065>.

³⁰⁷ Documentation regarding this phenomenon is noted by various psychologists and cardiologists. Dr. Regis Fernandes, a cardiologist at the Mayo Clinic in Phoenix, AZ, says that the "fight or flight" response can be activated by anxiety as the mind creates the response based on perceived danger. The brain tells the body to release adrenaline for the fight or flight response. Movies can pose a similar threat and cause a spike in a person's heart rate.; Caroline Kee, "Here's What Goes on Inside Your Body When You Watch a Scary Movie," BuzzFeed News. June 14, 2018. <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/carolinekee/horror-movies-heart-rate-body-health>; University College London. "Watching stressful movies triggers changes to your heartbeat," ScienceDaily, May 15, 2014, <http://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2014/05/140515103836.htm>.

Love and death are human elements at the forefront of *The Passion of the Christ*.³⁰⁸ The viewer is drawn into the plight of the character of Jesus who is perceived by some as criminal and others as Savior who has a dramatic goal to fulfill, not for himself, but for all humankind. His goal is to be the sacrifice for all humankind. His prayer to His Father is deeply earnest and conveys to the viewer His vulnerability as he confesses His fear of the suffering he must soon endure. This moment of deep prayer established His communication with His Father and His willful desire to serve and honor His Father. By being man and Christ, he is not forced in the choice he chooses. He freely submits to His call to action though knowing the suffering will be despicable.

When Satan enters the garden, Jesus stands with strength against him while maintaining complete submission to His Father's will. Jesus, though weary from prayer, responds to Satan with wisdom and strength which are exemplified in Jesus' willful action to crush the serpent's head. He is always wise to the schemes of Satan. Additionally, Jesus exhibits a relentless pursuit toward His mission and never loses His station or succumbs to Satan's accusations.

Likewise, the attribute of the *imago Dei* is realized through the character of Jesus when He is confronted by the guards in the garden. His willful intention to stand strong and submissive before His accusers exhibits His activation of choice, free will. Similarly, the viewer, connected to the protagonist by the *imago Dei*, witnesses a willful choice that may challenge the viewer as Jesus' action is likely contradictory to the choice of most men.

Jesus exhibits protagonist willfulness as He instructs Peter to withdraw his dagger and stand down from the fight against the guards as Jesus picks up the ear and miraculously reattaches it on the guard. Again, the willful action by the character of Jesus exhibited a willful

³⁰⁸ Vogler and Montez, *The Writer's Journey*, ix-xv.

choice which is an attribute of the *imago Dei* and submits to being shackled and beaten by the guards before He is taken away. Simultaneously, Jesus maintains His conscious desire to complete the mission His Father has planned for Him.

These acts by the protagonist provide viewers with a visceral experience that may lead them to a spiritual change in their worldview.³⁰⁹ The *imago Dei* in the viewer provides a reflection of the *imago Dei* in the protagonist, Jesus, who has the power to call down an army of angels to destroy His oppressors but chooses to vulnerably submit himself into their hands. This act by the protagonist to submit in order to fulfill His ultimate mission is evidence of man's divine gift of free will provided by the *imago Dei*.

Jesus chooses willful submission instead of defiance to the task ahead throughout the film. He advances forward resolutely, but not unconsciously, to His death. His journey links the *imago Dei* in the protagonist with the *imago Dei* in the viewer through the understanding of man's free will to make such a fateful decision. Such an act establishes a familiarity by the viewer with the protagonist as the viewer may recognize the challenge if in a similar situation. In this regard, the viewer may have fuller understanding of making such a willful choice of sacrifice for another person.

As Jesus hangs on the cross, His relentless pursuit to save all human beings is witnessed as He redeems the criminal on the cross next to Him. Jesus willfully seeks to perform the greatest expression of love possible as He gives His life so that all human beings may have life. The sacrifice by Jesus is shown through the horrific scourging scene as the soldiers rip the flesh off His body. Furthermore, the nails driven into His hands, the jolting of the cross into the ground as His body tears externally and internally, and the suffering while hanging on the cross express

³⁰⁹ Documented testimonies to actual encounters are included at the end of this section.

Jesus' willful choice to fulfill His destiny. These actions are the ultimate expression of willful characters qualities in the protagonist. As noted earlier by Detweiler, cinema has the ability to perform a religious occasion for contemplation by the viewer, maybe even a change in worldview.³¹⁰ From the beginning of the story to His ultimate death and resurrection, Jesus, as the protagonist, maintains His relentless mission to redeem all humankind though His death—His ultimate objective—reflection of the *imago Dei*.

Character Empathy

Character empathy is expressed in *The Passion of the Christ* through the *imago Dei* revealed in human nature of an individual viewer who identifies with the suffering, oppression, and sacrifice of the Jesus character as the protagonist. His suffering is the act of submission by the character of Jesus which immediately provides the viewer with an understanding of Jesus' obedience to His Father.

In the Christian tradition, Jesus is the metaphorical lamb to be slaughtered on the altar for the repentance of all human beings, which is reference to the Israelite practice of sacrificing animals to atone for sins. Thus, the character of Jesus in the film makes the choice to be the sacrifice which, as noted earlier, is an aspect of the *imago Dei* in man. The supernatural encounter between Jesus and Satan illuminates the viewer to the presence of the spiritual realm in which human beings must wrestle. The scene itself may cause fear in the viewer, but the strength of Jesus in the scene demonstrates the power of Jesus over the demonic forces in the world. It is reasonable to assert that the viewer, tapping into this aspect of the *imago Dei*, would empathize with Jesus as He stands His ground against evil. Viewer participation with the character of Jesus can be exhibited through the emotional impact of the drama unfolding before

³¹⁰ Detweiler, *Into the Dark*, 30.

them. A key within the rhetoric of storytelling is the ability of a story to grab and hold the viewer's attention. The dramatic devices exhibited by the protagonist qualities and His confrontation with Satan hook the viewers into the story causing them to anticipate a continued momentum of the story to an ultimate satisfying resolution.³¹¹

The acts of Jesus in the garden create empathy in the audience: the aggression of the guards against Him, Jesus' choice to submit to the guards, and the betrayal of Judas. Each of these acts reveal the *imago Dei* attribute of self-sacrifice in the protagonist. The narrative and the complexity of the hero's journey then invites the viewer to join not merely the story from the objective point of view but to realize the connection between the protagonist and the view by the shared *imago Dei* attributes. The viewer can relate to the drama as basic human survival instincts are expressed.

Christ's suffering ignites the viewer's cognitive and physical response to the danger even though the viewer is not in jeopardy. Yet, the protagonist maintains the choice of self-sacrifice for the sake of community, the world. Empathy for the character of Jesus is also exhibited by the universal desire for justice and mercy as representative of the *imago Dei*. In the absence of justice and mercy, as in *The Passion of the Christ*, the viewer empathizes with the injustice inflicted on the protagonist as he or she would those in his own community. The ability of the viewer to empathize with the protagonist is a reflection of the *imago Dei* in humanity.

The viewer may admire acting skills and cinematic expertise of the film, but what brings an viewer to laugh with joy or cry in pain for the protagonist is not skill, it is the courage exhibited by the protagonist by which the view connects viscerally with the protagonist through the shared qualities of the *imago Dei*.

³¹¹ Vogler and Montez, *The Writer's Journey*, 7; Blake Snyder, *Save the Cat: The Last Book on Screenwriting You'll Ever Need* (Studio City, CA: Michael Wiese Productions, 2005), 6.

The person watching the horrific torture scenes of Jesus witnesses the injustice against the protagonist which reflects evil in the world and serves in some ways to resonate with the viewers and their desire for justice to be served in society. As Paul writes, “Not only that, but we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope” (Romans 5:3-4). The *imago Dei* in human beings provides for a communion with Jesus in the radical last hours of His life. They are able to acknowledge the intense truth of His suffering and for many come to identify with the injustice against Jesus. The reflection of Jesus is made known and serves the audience’s empathy for the protagonist as the viewer is emotionally moved by the hero’s journey.

The rhetoric of the narrative storytelling noted here further shows how audience empathy is generated. Jesus’ torn flesh and blood were dramatically poured out from His body. A reviewer for the New York Press observes a statement by Russell Hittinger and Elizabeth Lev on the dramatic closeness of audience to the suffering Jesus. The body of Jesus fills the screen.

Gibson’s figures are in the style of Michelangelo, filling the screen, looming over us, threatening to enter our space. It is unnerving art. When the Roman Soldiers call out “*vertere crucem*” the audience tenses. The soldiers lift the cross, prop it on its side for an agonizing moment, and then let it fall over towards us. As it crashes to the ground, an audible gasp sounds in the theater. Gibson’s disturbing technique of filling the screen with Jesus’ body, almost allowing Him to tumble into our laps.”³¹²

Matt Seitz explains, “[Gibson] wants to produce images of pain so graphic, intense and unrelenting that they obliterate euphemisms.”³¹³

Jesus’ resurrection restores and affirms all that He set to accomplish on His journey and emboldened all those who follow Him. The final moments of the film seem as an altar call to

³¹² Russell Hittinger and Elizabeth Lev, “Gibson’s *Passion*,” *First Things*, March 2004, <https://www.firstthings.com/article/2004/03/gibsons-passion>.

³¹³ Matt Zoller Seitz, “Red-State Decide: Crucifixion as Bloodbath, Christ as Action Hero,” *New York Press*, February 26, 2004.

humanity and a decree to Christ followers to share the message of the Good News. For the unbeliever, the *imago Dei* may present a clear presentation of the gospel message to a viewer simply by revealing the viewer's spiritual depravity and his slavery by his rebellion to the cross of Christ. The betrayal to Jesus by His followers and the church similarly reflects upon the viewer's own injustice.

Behavior Contradiction

The opening scene in the Garden of Gethsemane reveals blood dripping from Jesus' brow while He agonizes in prayer. The scene exposes the depth of the protagonist character contradiction. He willfully desires to accomplish his mission, yet He expresses the anxiety of challenge and pending suffering to come. The attribute of the *imago Dei* mirrored in the protagonist quality of behavior contradiction is moral responsibility. Moral responsibility is similarly a dilemma of all human beings who find themselves asking for deliverance from an expected dreadful event or the desire to move beyond an event, that must be dealt with in order for the person to continue to thrive spiritually, physically, and/or emotionally.

The character contradiction in this scene is contingent on the viewer's understanding that Jesus has the supernatural power to destroy all those who beat Him, yet He submits to the pain. Thus, the viewers potentially wrestle with their own contradictions as they claim to be a follower of Christ but are swift to deny Him at the first moments of ridicule or persecution that might come against them when others discover their faith.

Though Jesus wrestles with His approaching destiny, His behavior poses a contradiction as He submits to the guards and stops Peter from attacking the soldiers instead of fighting and fleeing to safety. Even knowing Judas would betray Him, Jesus seemingly contradicts His own wellbeing in order to fulfill and accomplish what is the determined outcome of His purpose. This

character contradiction relates the viewer personally to the protagonist and to the viewer as well. An understanding of normative morality is reflected in both the protagonist, Jesus, and the viewer through the attributes of the *imago Dei*. Because of the *imago Dei* in all humankind, the protagonist and the viewer share a concrete link to the moral image of God.³¹⁴

The soldiers mock Jesus and place a crown of thorns upon His head. The protagonist behavior contradiction is reflected Jesus' choice to allow all suffering upon himself even knowing He is the Son of God with all power to remove himself from the scene. Yet, He remains. The *imago Dei* attribute of moral responsibility holds Him accountable to all humanity. Their eternity depends on His fulfillment to the cross and ultimately to the resurrection. This is to the same effect as the crowd continues to yell, "Crucify Him!" Pilate pleads with Jesus to speak in His defense. Jesus answers, "You have no power over me except what is given to you from above."

Pilate washes his hands and orders Jesus to be crucified. The soldiers placed the heavy cross on His shoulder. The physical burden is obvious; however, the moral fortitude to not submit to calling down a legend of angels to rescue Him is a much greater example of His commitment to the mission and to the whole of all people. These moments in the cinema have the potential to move a viewer by way of the revelation through the *imago Dei* to a recognition of the viewer's own faith in the person of Jesus Christ. This connection of the viewer to the *imago Dei* in the protagonist can lay the foundation for a potential instance of special revelation.

Another moment of behavior contradiction is seen as Jesus hugs the cross and prays to His Father. "I am your servant, Father and the son of your handmaid." From His arrival on the

³¹⁴ Josh Fountain, "Grounding Ethics in God: Why God's Nature Determines Morality," Moral Apologetics, April 15, 2015, <https://www.moralapologetics.com/wordpress/grounding-ethics-in-god-why-gods-nature-determines-morality>.

back of a donkey as the Messiah, Jesus has always caused His viewer to be fascinated by His character contradiction. Now, the cross is raised with Jesus hanging in pain. His blood drips from His body. Caiaphas calls out to Jesus to come down off the cross if He is truly the Messiah. Jesus responds by asking God to forgive those who are torturing Him. The sky darkens. Jesus says, “It is finished. . . . Father into your hands . . .” The character of Jesus Christ maintains protagonist contradictions even to the end as He addresses His oppressors. He is the Son of God who could call down an army of angels to destroy His enemies, yet He continues to allow the torture for the sake of all humankind. He willingly becomes the lamb slain for the sins of the world. He forsakes His power in order for himself to be forsaken. Finally, all the power that He subdued was fully activated and His character redeemed through His resurrection.

Similarly, the viewer of these scenes is a character on a particular spiritual journey punctuated with the awareness of a mission set apart from mere earthly performance. It is reasonable, as Ricoeur claims, the viewer shares an identity with the protagonist in the narrative story which “can be called his or her narrative identity,” the connection through the *imago Dei*.³¹⁵ As Bonhoeffer stresses, “To say that in humankind God creates God’s own image on earth means that humankind is like the Creator in that it is free. To be sure, it is free only through God’s creation, through the word of God; it is free for the worship of the Creator.”³¹⁶

The Mission

Protagonist Qualities Revealed

The protagonist qualities for Rodrigo Mendoza align on several positions of character in both action and dialogue and in relation to the *imago Dei* exemplifies human character qualities.

³¹⁵ Paul Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, 149-50.

³¹⁶ Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall*, 62-63.

Represented in the protagonist character of Mendoza are each of the protagonist qualities of willful character, character empathy, and behavior contradiction. Additionally, identified are the attributes of the *imago Dei* reflected and shared between the protagonist and the viewer. The attributes of the *imago Dei* focused here are man's free will, man's ability to sacrifice self for the sake of community, and man's moral responsibility.

Willful Character

The beginning of the film establishes Mendoza as a man who is willfully and relentlessly in pursuit of what he regards as his mission without any regard to the Indians as human beings. He finds Father Gabriel's goal to help the Indians as foolishness. Mendoza exhibits the willful character traits of a protagonist fully committed to his plan. His point of view is for personal gain, and he maintains a life empty of faith outside himself. Mendoza is set to sacrifice the lives of the Indians for the sake of financial gain. Mendoza hunts the Indians to sell them into bondage. In their first confrontation, Mendoza chases a few Indians in an attempt to capture or kill them. They run to the arms of Father Gabriel. Mendoza stops and hides behind the trees. Father Gabriel yells out to Mendoza that he plans to "make Christians out of these people." Mendoza responds, "If you have the time." Immediately, Mendoza's character is established, and the story suggests the pending conflict between Mendoza's goal to enslave the Indians and Father Gabriel's hope for the Indians' souls.

The character's objectives are articulated and the metanarrative of good versus evil in the human existence is encapsulated by their missions. Living a life in service to Jesus Christ is the willful mission of Father Gabriel and is punctuated also by his protagonist qualities. He demonstrates these character traits as he climbs the rock face to reach the Guaraní Indians only to discover they are approaching to kill him. In his wisdom, he sits on a rock, takes out his oboe and

begins to play a beautiful melody. This character action reveals a character who can remain willful to the task while being vulnerable in the process. These actions draw the viewer in to Father Gabriel from an opposite position as that of Mendoza. Yet, each character shares the reflection of the *imago Dei* and with the viewer.

Mendoza's line, "If you have the time," represents a foreshadowing for characters in the film as well as all the world. Not only does he know the political situations that will soon lead to his death and the death of the Indians, Mendoza is also not blind to his rebellion against the Church. This "knowing" serves as evidence of the *imago Dei* in his character. An example of this is found in Mendoza's conversation with Father Gabriel regarding the slaying of Felipe. Mendoza declares, "For me there is no redemption, no penance great enough." Even as Mendoza gives up and seeks either to die or be left in prison, he maintains the willful protagonist quality.

The dramatic expression of willful character quality is probably most noted as Mendoza must pull all his armor and weapons of war up the treacherous waterfall cliffs to the mission in order to receive his penance for his sins. Though Father Gabriel admits the act is not necessary for God's forgiveness, Mendoza declares he must suffer in some extreme way for the horrible things he's done. His courage draws the viewer into the plight of Mendoza's character and provides for the shared expression of man's free will through the *imago Dei* in both Mendoza and the viewer.

Mendoza collapses and shown grace by the Indians who would have killed him had they not become Christ followers through the love and teaching by Father Gabriel. God's grace is shown to Mendoza, and his life is changed. This dramatic scene of redemption may impact the viewer through the shared revelation of the *imago Dei* in the protagonist and the viewer.

The same willfulness exhibited by Mendoza to suffer for the sake of grace is shown in his

actions in the study of the Scriptures and in his ultimate battle against the adversaries who slaughter them. Mendoza's willful choice to fight alongside the Indians reflects the *imago Dei* in Mendoza and likewise provides the shared *imago Dei* connection with the viewer.

These moments in cinema have the potential to move a viewer by way of the gospel, though it is not itself the gospel. By the intimacy of the *imago Dei* in the viewer, cinema can serve as a conduit of personal revelation and recognition of the viewer's own depravity and need for a relationship with the Creator.

Character Empathy

Viewer empathy with the protagonist is experienced by the viewer's emotional involvement through identification with the protagonist's journey in the story. Thus, a responsive connection is propagated by the *imago Dei* in both the viewer and the protagonist. When Mendoza realizes the depth of his wrong choices, specifically the killing of his brother and the slave-trading of the Indians, he feels unworthy to live. Yet, as Father Gabriel calls Mendoza a coward for running from the world, Mendoza begs for penance and forgiveness.

Viewer empathy for Mendoza occurs as a result of Father Gabriel's compassion for Mendoza and also as the viewer watches Mendoza make a spiritual investment to seek God's forgiveness. Viewer empathy is stirred for Mendoza by his submission to penance. His love for his brother whom he killed in an act of anger provides a reflection of the viewer's own human nature. Any human being can certainly commit an act of violence either on themselves or on someone else when confronted with an act of betrayal by ones they love. Betrayal is possibly the most powerful of human emotions. "The subject of betrayal elicits our deepest emotions because

it touches the very core of humanness.”³¹⁷ The attribute of self-sacrifice in the *imago Dei* is exhibited by Mendoza provides viewer empathy for the protagonist.

These moments in the film provide for a cinematic reflection of human nature expressed as Mendoza wrestles for repentance and submission to God. Empathy for the characters occurs as Mendoza submits to seeing the fight through to the inevitable end. Mendoza chooses to fight to protect the very people he once tried to enslave. He is slain with the Indians and falls side-by-side to the ground, as equals, human beings, all children of God. It is reasonable to assert that audience empathy occurs through this connection between the attribute of self-sacrifice of the *imago Dei* in the Mendoza and the viewer.

Behavior Contradiction

The protagonist quality of behavior contradiction is expressed by Mendoza’s choice to stay at the mission and die with the Indians. His act is directly incongruous with human nature’s desire to live, yet Mendoza felt a moral responsibility to endure with the Indians. This is an instance of the attribute of the *imago Dei* in the protagonist and the viewer. Mendoza is a man who has chosen to turn from his past to a life of service to God and the Indians at the Mission. He teaches them how to create and build instruments to sustain life and bring joy. Yet, when the enemy is at the doorstep of the Mission, his love for the Indians causes him to resort back to his earlier nature of survival—to fight. He then teaches the Indians to build weapons of death knowing they will not survive the battle. Mendoza’s character reveals a man wrestling and contradicting his moral convictions. His love for the community of Indians, the *koinonia* of the Mission, drives him toward self-sacrifice due to his understanding of his moral responsibility.

³¹⁷ John Amodeo, *Love and Betrayal: Broken Trust in Intimate Relationships* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1994), 7.

The excerpt from the screenplay expresses the drama of Mendoza's choice.

Mendoza reveals a dramatic character arc as he transitions from slave trader and murderer to priest and martyr for a cause that is universal and a stance that is representative against all religious and political tyranny. As Mendoza struggles through his journey, the viewer vicariously lives through the character, making a divine connection spirit to spirit, *imago Dei* to *imago Dei*, which then in turn establishes a clear medium through which the Holy Spirit can and does speak to a specific viewer and specifically in a language that has no words.

The universality of the characters' actions is reflected in humanity's recognition of injustice and the flame of discontent that arises in human beings, as bearers of the *imago Dei*, when witnessing such atrocities as those in *The Mission*. The final haunting scene depicts Mendoza, Father Gabriel, and the men, women, and children being cut down by gunfire from the Portuguese slave-traders on whose land the Jesuit mission was established.

These moments in the story expose the characters' behavior contradiction. The act of sacrifice is sufficient proposition of humanity's struggle and expression of the *imago Dei* in all human beings that may empower them to submit to a calling beyond what is natural. Further validation of possible transcendence can be found in the articulation of biblical Scriptures observed in the reading of 1 Corinthians 13 by Mendoza as he submits his life to the service of God. Mendoza's conversion might be considered similar to Paul's character transformation when he encountered the risen Christ and made a radical life decision and commitment for the Kingdom of God. Paul was a man known for persecuting Christians, yet when the risen Jesus appeared to him, he fell to the ground and experienced the grace of Jesus Christ. From that day on, Paul was a follower and disciple for Jesus Christ.³¹⁸ Jesus is the *imago Dei* incarnate. He is

³¹⁸ Acts 9:3-19; 22:9.

the connection between the *imago Dei* in the viewer to the *imago Dei* in the protagonist that lays the foundation for a potential occurrence of special revelation.

Summary: *Imago Dei* in *The Passion of the Christ* and *The Mission*

The relevance of each artifact examined above is the potential for a heart change in the viewer by the shared connection of the *imago Dei* in both protagonist and viewer through the visceral experience of exhibited protagonist qualities and the redemptive work of the Holy Spirit. It is through this cinematic experience that the potential for special revelation occurs due to the *imago Dei* in the viewer connecting supernaturally with the *imago Dei* in the protagonist.

The Passion of the Christ

The salvific blood of Christ is the fulfillment of Old and New Testament Scriptures. Jesus' own perfect blood dripping from the cross in *The Passion of the Christ* displays the character's relentless willful pursuit to fulfill the mission to which He is called. He does so without expression of pity or sympathy. The viewer, however, is smitten with compassion, empathy and, for some, conviction by the acts of Jesus' suffering. An underlying purpose of the film is to thrust the suffering of Jesus Christ on a viewer in such a way that the sacrifice of Jesus would bring about a human heart change by the viewer. If the event was treated with any less reality, the gospel message would not be served to the extent of historical representation or of eternal significance.

The narrative in *The Passion of the Christ* not only reveals strictly protagonist qualities in moments of the film but also affirms critical circumstances placed on the viewers as they leave the cinema. The beginning of the film predicts that the end of evil is already confirmed and that

the story, though going visually black in the cinema, is not over.³¹⁹

This special nature of all human beings to have knowledge of God is the expression of the *imago Dei* in every person. Jesus Christ is God's self-actualization through humankind. As Barth suggests, human beings were created by God for fellowship with their Creator and with other human beings.³²⁰ Thus, Jesus is the incarnate *imago Dei*, the centrality of the Christian faith.³²¹ Man's uniqueness, apart from all other created beings, is the presence of the *imago Dei*, as indicated by man's willfulness and conscious desire and by which human beings empathize with the cinematic character.

The Passion of the Christ does not provide a casual, popcorn-eating experience. It is a gut-wrenching horror of the last hours in the life of Jesus Christ. Jim Caviezel, the actor playing the role of Jesus in *The Passion of the Christ*, shared, "This film forces you to see yourself, not the way you want to see yourself, but as God sees you. There are no passive onlookers here. I don't want people to see me. I just want them to see Jesus. And through that, conversion will happen."³²² This is the power of *The Passion*. It is a vivid, raw, cinematic presentation of the last days of Christ.

Similarly, *The Mission* is not representative of a faith-based film, but rather an historical drama based on true events. Yet, it reveals a man filled with wickedness who is still able to be

³¹⁹ "Then I saw an angel coming down from heaven, holding in his hand the key to the bottomless pit and a great chain. And, He seized the dragon, the ancient serpent, who is the devil and Satan, and bound him . . . and the devil who had deceived them was thrown into the lake of fire" (Revelation 20: 1-2, 10a).

³²⁰ Barth, *The Doctrine of Creation*, 203.

³²¹ Stanley J. Grenz, "Jesus as the Imago Dei: Image-of-God Christology and the Non-linear Linearity of Theology," *Journal of Evangelical Theological Society* 47, no. 4 (December 2004): 619; N. W. Porteous, "Image of God," *Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, vol. 2, E-J, ed. George Arthur Buttrick (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1962), 682-85; 2 Corinthians 4: 4-6; Genesis 1:26-27.

³²² Scott Ross, "Jim Caviezel Talks About Playing Christ in 'The Passion,'" *The Christian Broadcasting Network*, <https://www1.cbn.com/jim-caviezel-talks-about-playing-christ-passion>, accessed November 23, 2019.

transformed by the actions and words that bring about repentance. Examining the film from the analogical perspective, the narrative has the ability to visually expose the transcendent love of God through cinema to even their enemies.

The director of the film, Roland Joffe says, “My film is about the individuals who struggle to save other individuals against the broader interest of the Church, which is trying to defend its bureaucratic structures, in this case, the Jesuit order.”³²³ Therefore, the primary examination in this section was given to character dialogue which exists outside a “pushed” or premediated religious message.

Observing both Father Gabriel and Rodrigo Mendoza, the viewer witnesses their willful pursuit as the character’s actions draw the viewer in through the reflection of the *imago Dei* in both character and viewer. Father Gabriel submits to the call in Matthew 28 to go and make disciples. He aligns with Paul’s statement, “For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain. If I am to live in the flesh, that means fruitful labor for me” (Phil. 1:21-22a). Father Gabriel was not duped; he knew he could be killed the moment he encountered the Indians. The reasoning of Father Gabriel to risk his life by being obedient to the Great Commission reveals presence of the *imago Dei* in Father Gabriel. It is this presence that drives a person toward communion with the Creator and that which emboldens a person to sacrificially demonstrate the reflection of Christ’s willingness toward the cross.

The protagonist in each of these cinematic stories is a representation of humankind in both the plight of man’s fallen nature and his reflection of the image of God. Herbert C. Leupold, in his book *Exposition of Genesis*, offers a unique perspective of man’s elevated position among the created beings. “Yet, in this strange mixture of dignity and lowliness, the story of man’s

³²³ Judith Miller, “‘The Mission’ Carries a Message from Past to Present,” *The New York Times*, October 26, 1986, <https://www.nytimes.com/1986/10/26/movies/the-mission-carries-a-message-from-past-to-present.html>.

creation definitely indicated how high above all other types of life man stands. Man, is formed from the dust of the earth by God's personal and creative activity."³²⁴ It is in transformation that mankind may be restored and gain eternal life as does the image of God through Jesus alters the course of eternity for mankind. God, the creator of all that is not God, purposely brought forth man and woman whereby they would reflect God through conscious, intelligence, and communication with the Creator. Millard Erickson writes in his book, *Christian Theology*, "The reason for human existence lies in the intention of the Supreme Being."³²⁵

God chooses to reflect himself through the mirror of man. The condition of this glory should give man cause to evaluate the sum of his existence and find all the material and immaterial essence of himself abandoned in the image and nature of God. These particular and specific designs of mankind's condition promote the opportunity for man to grow in knowledge of God and to live a life of glorious encounters with God.

Jesus, as the *imago Dei*, restores the guard's ear and fulfills the Scripture regarding the shedding of human blood. By this act of healing, Jesus also restored Peter from the justice that could have come upon him by his actions against another man. Jesus proclaims His deity and the image of God by His words to Caiaphas.

As Jesus hangs on the cross, Caiaphas passes by and taunts Jesus about destroying the temple and raising it again in three days. Jesus looks to Caiaphas and says, "Father forgive them, for they know not what they do."³²⁶ His continued nature of others-focus and His perfect love is a rich character contradiction that produces empathy by the viewer and builds drama in the story.

³²⁴ Leupold, *Exposition of Genesis*, 1:116.

³²⁵ Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 436.

³²⁶ In the movie *The Passion of the Christ* and drawn from Scripture, Luke 23:34.

With divine authority, Jesus refutes Caiaphas, not with guilt but forgiveness. This character behavior contradiction expresses the *imago Dei* attribute of moral responsibility. The character of Jesus, though suffering extreme torture, remains focused on His goal that is beyond this world, beyond the petty words of Caiaphas. Jesus' focus is eternal.

The Passion of the Christ is a cinematic experience that brings the true Jesus Christ of Scripture to the viewer through the actor playing Jesus. The *imago Dei* in the actor and the representation of Jesus Christ in the film provide for the gospel message to transcend to the heart and soul of a person even unto salvation.

The Mission

Writer David Dark shares how *The Mission* impacted his faith and his understanding of Christianity. He watched as Father Gabriel ascended the very falls the Indians had sent the previous Jesuit priest to his death. He saw Father Gabriel extend and embody the gospel to the Guarini tribe.

I was pummeled by one scene after another of lived Christian witness. As I tried to recover myself from the devastating final scenes . . . I wanted to be a part of it. The Jesuits portrayed in the film weren't just loving enemies theoretically. There were loving enemies even as the enemies *acted* as enemies. This Christianity was revolutionary . . . It didn't *need* my affirmation (or anyone else's), but it was there (in history, in the present, in certain stories) *demanding* it and awaiting my response each day.³²⁷

Another writer confesses, "Watching *The Mission* makes me want to be a Christian. This is down to two things: the reading of I Corinthians 13 by Robert De Niro, and the character of Father Gabriel. The leader of a group of Jesuit missionaries . . . he is compassionate, intelligent, deeply religious (in the good way) and resolutely pacifistic, even to the very end."

The Mission does not merely provide entertainment or illustrate the horrific events

³²⁷ David Dark, "God With Us (and Them)," *Christianity Today: Books and Culture* 12, no. 3 (May 2006): 26. <https://www.booksandculture.com/articles/2006/mayjun/19.26.html>.

experienced by the Jesuit priests and the Indians, it provides for the opportunity of transcendence to an individual by the Holy Spirit through the *imago Dei*. Matthew Monagle concurs:

The Mission seems to speak to the power of belief in a world where ideas are forfeit; it also wants to offer the image of a benevolent missionary in a struggling world. There is hope to be found in *The Mission* – hope centered on the power of community and the role the arts can play in reaching across cultures – but given enough time, we’ll always find a way to destroy the things we think we’re helping.³²⁸

The Passion of the Christ and *The Mission* expose the heroic acts of the protagonists, yet each act is one of martyrdom toward an understanding that a greater purpose exists beyond mere reason of self-sufficiency. Each film exposes the human and spiritual forces of evil maneuvering against the work of Christ. The narratives presented here of the Jesuit priests, the Indians, and Jesus, expose the gift of God’s infinite mercy, grace, and redemption, through the reflection of the *imago Dei*, even while under the brutal oppression of their persecutors.

Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of His might. Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the schemes of the devil. For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places (Eph. 6:10-12).

There are no time or place obstacles to God’s transcendence. The revelation of Jesus came upon the character of Rodrigo Mendoza in *The Mission* when the Holy Spirit revealed the grace of Jesus to him through the *imago Dei* by the forgiveness offered him by the Guarani Indians. C. S. Lewis contends, “All ground is holy and every bush (could we but perceive it) a Burning Bush.”³²⁹ He continues by claiming the Spirit of God walks with us “incognito.”³³⁰ In God’s created world, there are no laws of nature. The *law of nature* is a man-created

³²⁸ Matthew Monagle, “The World is Thus: Faith and Politics in *The Mission*,” *Birth.Movies.Death*, January 12, 2017. <https://birthmoviesdeath.com/2017/01/12/the-world-is-thus-faith-and-politics-in-the-mission>.

³²⁹ C. S. Lewis, *Letters to Malcolm: Chiefly on Prayer* (1964; repr., New York: Mariner Books, 2002), 75.

³³⁰ *Ibid.*

nomenclature that provides for an understanding of nature that allows for a non-expression of an author and Creator of the universe.

Through the analysis of the attributes of the *imago Dei* in protagonist qualities (man's free will, man's self-sacrifice for community, and man's moral responsibility) in *The Passion of the Christ* and *The Mission*, the plausibility of special revelation occurring through cinema has been asserted. To this end, the insight of Lewis, Moltmann, Calvin, Plantinga, Swinburne, and Henry was evaluated as corroboration for the possibility that a person might come to a belief and relationship with Jesus Christ by special revelation as revealed through the *imago Dei* and the power of the Holy Spirit. Both artifacts present a Christian worldview, grounded in God's grace, and maintain rich messages of hope and redemption through Jesus Christ.

Both artifacts offer the moviegoer an existential encounter, similar to parables, that serves as a means for a person to contemplate their position in the universe and possibly gain a rational perspective of the human condition. The result of contemplation provides human beings with the opportunity to define their personal worldviews. It illustrates that a person may be spiritually transformed to the point of conversion of faith while experiencing the cinematic narrative.

The purpose and nature of Christ resides in God's relentless desire to be reconciled with His children. Mankind is powerless to reverse the impact of the fall of Adam. Thus, the sacrifice of God's only Son was the cost to redeem all humanity making the incarnation the supreme presentation and sacrifice of God love and covenant with His children. It is the greatest love story from which all human love stories emulate. The story of Jesus laying down His life for all humanity echoes through each of the artifacts in this study. All generations are witness to the divine nature of God through the *imago Dei*. It is what makes human beings significant and illuminated by the divine light as noted in Genesis 5:3. "It is the gravitas of man, what is

impressive in him, striking his senses but consisting primarily in the inner force which is native to him. This is the mysterious point of identity between man and God.”³³¹

Similar to Augustine’s relentless search to know God, human beings, whether aware or not, are committed to a reconciliation with the Creator because of the *imago Dei*.³³² As the Psalmist writes, “My soul is consumed with longing for your rules at all times” (Psalm 119:20). And, Isaiah 26:9a states, “My soul yearns for you in the night, my spirit within me earnestly seeks you.” Every moment in the life of Jesus was a selfless action for the sake of all humankind. Where man is inadequate, Jesus is in every way adequate to meet the needs of each individual. Jesus provided the intimacy for the Divine to commune with the Almighty. It was the tears of God flowing through the tears of Jesus providing purification for mankind. Where humankind thirsts for truth and hungers for safety, Jesus satisfies. “I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst” (John 6:35).

The nature of Christ is twofold. Jesus is God and Jesus is man, and Jesus did not give up His divinity to become man. “By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God” (1 John 4:2). Jesus is the only person who has a divine nature and a human nature. Scripture testifies, “But of the Son He says, ‘Your throne, O God, is forever and ever’” (Heb. 1:8) and “the only begotten God” (John 1:18).

In order for Jesus to identify with the human condition, He came as the selfless sacrificial lamb who was fully man enduring human pain. Being fully God, born of the virgin Mary and conceived by the Holy Spirit, Jesus did not inherit the sin-nature of Adam. By His divine nature,

³³¹ Gerhard Kittel, ed., *Theological Dictionary*, vol. 2, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing House, 1964), 391; Martin Buber, *Königtum Gottes* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University, 1932), 214, n. 17.

³³² John 4:13-14.

Jesus broke the chains of death. “Remaining what He was, He became what He was not.”³³³ The crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus Christ is the summation of God’s love for mankind. God’s glory is made practical through the omnipotence, omnipresence, and omniscience of the risen Christ who walked with humanity.

The humanity of Jesus is evident throughout the Scriptures and both *The Passion of the Christ* and *The Mission*. He is described as sleeping, feeling pain and sorrow, knowing fellowship, hunger, temptation, empathy, love and service toward His disciples. Scripture confirms Jesus in the position of a human, “for verily He took not on Him the nature of angels, but He took on Him the seed of Abraham (Hebrews 2:16). His strength to overcome sin was from the Father, and He broke the curse of evil.

Jesus is affirmed as the Son of God by His possession of the names specifically used by God, His attributes, and deity throughout the Bible. The nature of Jesus is revealed by His possession of the attributes of God: He is sinless, sovereign, all-knowing, all-powerful. The two natures of Jesus can be described by the term *hypostatic union*. He is both fully man and fully God; thus, Jesus is eternally united with mankind. He was from the beginning (John 1:1, 14).

Once you become aware that the main business that you are here for is to know God, most of life’s problems fall into place of their own accord. What makes life worthwhile is having a big enough objective, something which catches our imagination and lays hold of our allegiance; and this the Christian has in a way that no other person has.³³⁴

In contrast to the obvious that man can die, Jesus may only die in human nature, but not in His divine nature. Therefore, Jesus’s divine nature in union with His human nature experienced human death.³³⁵ The *imago Dei* as generally understood in Christianity is the dual

³³³ J. I. Packer, *Knowing God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 57.

³³⁴ *Ibid.*, 34.

³³⁵ Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 560.

nature of Jesus living as man on the earth and seated for eternity in Heaven. “It is Christ that makes Christianity what it is. We are saved by Christ. He is the absolute center of history, the end of the beginning and the beginning of the end.”³³⁶

Personal Testimonies to Special Revelation in Cinema

Prior to and during the release of the film *The Passion of the Christ*, many pastors and theologians, all faithful followers of Christ, adamantly rejected that the film could have any salvific effect on the viewer.³³⁷ To do so, they asserted, would be to neglect God’s warnings in both the New and Old Testaments of man-made images. They quoted verses such as: “For we walk by faith, not by sight” (2 Corinthians 5:7-8) and “How shall they hear without a preacher?” (Romans 10:14). Yet, they did not address the many visions, dreams, miracles, and phenomenal acts exhibited also throughout the Scriptures.

The ultimate result is that God is not limited yesterday, today, or tomorrow. J. L. Mackie asserts, “A miracle occurs when the world is not left to itself, when something distinct from the natural order as a whole intrudes into it.”³³⁸ God’s unlimited power establishes His ability to act without restriction. God relates to humans by miracle or any other way He chooses. Erickson upholds, God relates to humanity “not because He is compelled by some need. He has acted and continues to act out of *agapē*, unselfish love, rather than out of deed.”³³⁹ Scripture affirms God’s

³³⁶ Gustave A. Weigel, “Contemporaneous Protestantism and Paul Tillich,” *Theological Studies* 11, no. 2. (May 1, 1950): 193, <https://doi.org/10.1177%2F004056395001100201>.

³³⁷ Laurie Goodstein, “‘Passion’ Disturbs a Panel of Religious Leaders,” *The New York Times*, February 25, 2004, <https://www.nytimes.com/2004/02/25/us/passion-disturbs-a-panel-of-religious-leaders.html>; Jason Smathers, “Pictures of the Christ by J. Marcellus Kik,” *Witness Unto Me*, February 3, 2010, <http://www.witnessesuntome.com/2010/02/pictures-of-the-christ-by-j-marcellus-kik/>.

³³⁸ Mackie, *The Miracle of Theism*, 19-20.

³³⁹ Millard J. Erickson, *Introducing Christian Doctrine* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 1992), 93.

power and limitlessness. “With God all things are possible” (Matt. 19:26), “Jesus replied, “What is impossible with man is possible with God” (Luke 18:27), “I fell to the ground and heard a voice say to me, ‘Saul! Saul! Why do you persecute me?’” (Acts 22:7), “Hearing this, Jesus said to Jairus, ‘Don’t be afraid; just believe, and she will be healed’” (Luke 8:50).

The views of those who deny God’s actions through cinema or the views of those who believe miracles no longer occur presently are not the ultimate task of this study.³⁴⁰ The intent here is to show that these events, whether of providence or divine miracle, are highly probable, and the following is supporting evidence to the power of God and His transcendence through cinema.

The Passion of the Christ provides “a more visceral experience than reading the New Testament ever could render,” claims Claudia Puig of *USA Today*.³⁴¹ “It is gritty and realistic in its portrayal of what Christ suffered,” notes Brian Godawa, “I mean what He really suffered. All other Jesus movies are revisionist candy coated schmaltz compared to this one. Gibson is achieving a communication of the Gospel of redemption in a way that transcends other Jesus movies and meets the postmodern where he is at.”³⁴²

Though cinema is not the sanctuary or the priest by which one finds redemption, it is a helpful landscape on which a person may experience the expressions of communication to the truth of God and Jesus Christ. Thus, God through the Spirit may move upon anyone special

³⁴⁰ The supernatural events described by the writers of the Bible provide the landscape of understanding for investigation of miracles whether they actually occurred or not. Yet, documentation exists of witnesses who offered sound testimony. Especially observed is the assuredness of miracles by the biblical writers. The Old and New Testaments provide corroborating writers and testimonies who appear to be fully bound to the knowledge of God’s divine intervention and participation through supernatural acts among human beings.

³⁴¹ Claudia Puig, “Subtle, Haunting Moments Sustain Power of *Passion*,” *USA Today*, February 24, 2004.

³⁴² Brian Godawa, “The Passion of the Christ,” Thus Spake Godawa: God, Movies, Culture, Blah, Blah, Blah, November 4, 2003, <https://godawa.com/the-passion-of-the-christ/>.

revelation of God. Christ alone is the central source and foundation of grace through the cross and the incarnation.³⁴³ This is expressed by the transformation of many viewing *The Passion of the Christ*. Many viewers shared the same experience.

The cinema protagonist can offer the viewer an opportunity to experience a representation of the Christian faith through the redemptive acts of a Christ figure.³⁴⁴ This can be very persuasive for individuals who have been hardened toward religious dogma. Peter Malone in his book *Movie Christs and Antichrists* suggests, “In times of disillusionment ... [people] have been able to draw on the experience of Jesus as a metaphor or as a symbol of the suffering which does not turn in on itself in despair or bitterness but is offered to others for support, courage or endurance.”³⁴⁵

It was a cinematic experience like no other in both public reaction and Hollywood worldwide ticket sales. On a budget of \$30 million, financed by Mel Gibson, *The Passion of the Christ* grossed more than \$610 million.³⁴⁶ This was a movie that few wanted to get behind due to what seemed to many a bad idea. When Gibson shared his film would be about the final hours of the life of Jesus Christ, Hollywood walked away. Gibson wanted to tell Jesus’ story authentically while still taking creative liberties to tell the story in the most truthful and dramatic way.³⁴⁷ Gibson chose a perspective for the film that was clearly his own. The film is meant to be

³⁴³ Rik Van Nieuwenhove, “Late Mediaeval Atonement Theologies,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Christology*, ed. Francesca Aran Murphy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 253.

³⁴⁴ This study does not investigate the plethora of film characters that epitomize the Christ figures such as Luke Skywalker in *Star Wars*, Neo in *The Matrix*, or Captain America and Iron Man. Rather, the focus here is the subtle testimony of Christ represented in the moral characteristics of the superhero and the transcendence, or at least witness, of the Spirit in human nature exposed in the superhero.

³⁴⁵ Peter Malone, *Movie Christs and Antichrists* (New York: Crossroads, 1990), 39.

³⁴⁶ Internet Movie Database, *The Passion of the Christ* (2004), <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0335345/>.

³⁴⁷ Robert L. Webb, *Jesus and Mel Gibson’s Passion of the Christ: The Film, The Gospels and The Claims of History*, ed. Kathleen E. Corley and Robert L. Webb (New York: Continuum, 2004), 2.

“unforgetting.”

There is a classical Greek word which best defines what ‘truth’ guided my work, and that of everyone else involved in the project: *alētheia*. The film, in this sense, is not meant as a historical documentary nor does it claim to have assembled all the facts. But it does enumerate those described in Holy Scripture. It is not merely representative or merely expressive. I think of it as contemplative in the sense that one is compelled to remember (unforget) in a spiritual way which cannot be articulated, only experienced.³⁴⁸

What is highly intriguing is the film’s powerful impact on the lives of many who witnessed it. A *New York Times* reviewer writes, “When we come to realize that the violence depicted in the film is punishment Jesus endured for our sake and in our stead, then the film becomes a thing of beauty. When we do see the truth, the price Jesus paid becomes a thing of beauty that will moisten the driest eye.”³⁴⁹

A person, who claimed to be a Jew, wrote to the *New York Times* saying, “I was moved to tears and was ashamed that my own people were so harshly criticizing people with such deep faith and love. I am also proud to say that I am converting to Christianity.”³⁵⁰ Michael Hale, a pastor who saw the film explains, “I will never preach the cross again without thinking about the realistic portrayal in the Passion. I felt like I had been to Calvary when I left the showing.”³⁵¹ Empathy for Jesus by the viewer is palpable during these moments in the portrayal of Jesus last hours before His death. Jesus’ contradiction of character serves as a visceral engagement by the viewer in His suffering. Richard Alleva writes, “*The Passion* isn’t just a gruesome movie, but a

³⁴⁸ Mel Gibson, *The Passion: Photography from the Movie The Passion of the Christ*, photography by Ken Duncan and Phillippe Antonello (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 2004), Forward.

³⁴⁹ J. B. Berber, “Readers Reviews,” *The New York Times* website (March 24, 2004), quoted in Q Monica Migliorino Miller, *The Theology of The Passion of the Christ* (Staten Island, NY: Alba House, 2005), 118.

³⁵⁰ Oratorium, “Inner Peace at Last,” “Readers Reviews,” *The New York Times* (March 7, 2004), quoted in Monica Migliorino Miller, *The Theology of The Passion of the Christ* (Staten Island, NY: Alba House, 2005), 119.

³⁵¹ Michael Hale, “I’ve Been to Calvary,” *Christianity Today: Movies* (March 10, 2004), quoted in Monica Migliorino Miller, *The Theology of The Passion of the Christ* (Staten Island, NY: Alba House, 2005), 126.

ritual that exalts the blood of Jesus because the release of this blood released humanity from sin.”³⁵²

Testimonies from the around the world poured into newspaper, magazines, and churches from people who had seen the film and were dramatically changed by viewing the sufferings of Jesus. After watching a screening of *The Passion*, several criminals became tormented with guilt and confessed of crimes they had committed. After watching *The Passion*, 21-year-old Dan Leach of Rosenberg, Texas, “stood in front of his church congregation and said that he had done something wrong.” He confessed of killing his girlfriend because she was pregnant, and he did not want to be responsible for her and the baby. “According to the detectives, Leach was moved to confess to the crime after viewing the movie *The Passion of the Christ*.”³⁵³

Another confession was convicted murderer and Neo-Nazi leader Johnny Olsen of Oslo, Norway. Author Karin Bohm-Pedersen writes: “On Saturday evening [March 27, 2004] one of Norway’s most feared men, walked into the offices of the Dagbledet and confessed to two bombings. Olsen said that he had decided to confess after watching *The Passion of the Christ*.”³⁵⁴ The experience of watching the journey of Christ on screen apparently creates a visual and palpable truth of Christ’s sufferings and for many cuts to the core of the human condition. David Neff believes the film unearths men’s secrets and guilt. Neff claims the film is representative of the ultimate battle between good and evil and the masquerade Satan will

³⁵² Richard Alleva, “The Passion of the Christ,” *Commonweal*, March 12, 2004, <https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/passion-christ>.

³⁵³ Jody Eldred, *Changed Lives: Miracles of the Passion* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House Publishers, 2004), 138-45; Associated Press, “Man Confesses to Murder After Viewing ‘Passion of the Christ,’” NBC News, March 26, 2004, http://www.nbcnews.com/id/4607592/ns/us_news-crime_and_courts/t/man-confesses-murder-after-viewing-passion-christ/#.Xr7o7S3MxQI; Jamie Mock, “Killer Confesses: Teen’s Death Not Suicide,” *Houston Chronicle*, March 28, 2004, <https://www.chron.com/neighborhood/article/Killer-confesses-Teen-s-death-not-suicide-9749822.php>.

³⁵⁴ Karin Bohm-Pedersen, “Confessed After Seeing ‘Passion,’” *Aftenposten*, March 28, 2004.

perform to seduce people away from Christ.³⁵⁵

Mel Gibson stated, “My new hope is that *The Passion of the Christ* will help many more people recognize the power of His love and let Him help them to save their own lives.”³⁵⁶ It appears from the many lives that have been changed, Gibson’s desire for *The Passion* was realized through the potentially supernatural acts of revelation realizing the Scripture, “He was wounded for our transgressions; He was crushed for our iniquities, by his stripes we are healed” (Isaiah 53:5). “This movie is about understanding just what that means.”³⁵⁷

What Gibson’s film does that is unlike the majority of faith-films being produced by both Christian and secular producers is that it avoids the proselytizing of overt doctrine. Instead, it presses into visuals and actions that are consistent with the biblical narratives. As Godawa comments on *The Passion*, “it serves to contextualize the suffering, giving it meaning and purpose.”³⁵⁸ “The experience was overwhelming as many were moved to tears. And after the lights came up, moviegoers simply remained in stunned silence as the credits played . . . there was little conversation, though the sense of a collective experience was palpable. The movie . . . transfixed the gaze of the viewers,” shares Robert Johnston.³⁵⁹ Cinema is capable of presenting the gospel in a way that inspires people to contemplate their life and to believe in the truth of Jesus. Cinema as art can bring comfort to a restless mind and open souls to the knowledge of God’s existence as the Holy Spirit reveals.

Film historian, Richard Birchard shares an experience while working in a theatre where

³⁵⁵ David Neff, “The Passion of Mel Gibson,” *Christianity Today*, March 1, 2004.

³⁵⁶ Gibson, *The Passion: Photography from the Movie The Passion of the Christ*, Forward.

³⁵⁷ Ibid.

³⁵⁸ Godawa, *Hollywood World Views*, 194.

³⁵⁹ Johnston, *Reel Spirituality*, 155.

Cecil B. DeMille's *The Ten Commandments* was showing, "I couldn't help feeling that the film was a work of incredible banality—and yet I'd see looks of religious rapture on the faces of patrons leaving the screenings. These people were either crazy, or there was something to this 1956 relic that I was missing . . . since I was about twenty at the time, I was pretty certain that they were crazy."³⁶⁰ Many who had seen His miracles were afraid of the possibility that He might be the Savior. They were not ready to repent and follow a king who was weak and preaching that they should love their enemies and forsake their riches in order to further the gospel mission.

The Passion of the Christ portrayed the violence against Jesus in such a realistic way the movie was able to impress upon the viewers a depth in the character of Jesus that reached beyond the typical movie experience. It is reasonable to infer this proposition based on what has been suggested regarding the connection with the *imago Dei* in both the protagonist and viewer. Additionally, due to the true nature of the story and its historicity, many viewers also expressed a deeper empathy with the character of Jesus even if they did not believe He is who He claimed.

Billy Graham saw the need for movies that could be used as dramatic inspirational tools for compelling evangelism. In 1951, Graham formed World Wide Pictures as a division of the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association. Unique to Graham's mission was that he chose not to preach to the church, but to reach the unbeliever through movies. His claim was, "Thousands will come to see a film who would not come to hear a preacher." Over 200 films were produced by World Wide Pictures and translated in 38 languages. Most importantly, the films had great

³⁶⁰ Robert S. Birchard, *Cecil B. DeMille's Hollywood* (Lexington: The University of Kentucky Press, 2004), xiii.

spiritual impact on the public with more than 2.5 million recorded decisions for Christ.³⁶¹

Similarly, the *Jesus Film Project*, which has distributed the *Jesus* film since 1979 and has been watched worldwide in more than 1,800 languages, has recorded astounding responses. As of October 16, 2019, the film has reached nearly 150 million viewers on YouTube and sold more than 60 million films and audio recordings internationally. More than 572 million decisions for Christ have been recorded from watching the film.³⁶²

The above documented results of special revelation through cinema offer strong indication of a redemptive relationship between God and humankind facilitated by the *imago Dei*. Closing this section are the words of *New York Times* writer, Peter Steinfelds.

The movie reignites religious embers that may have cooled over the years. Critics who have recoiled at Mr. Gibson's grim vision are puzzling over the widespread positive response. They do not grasp that viewers are bringing to the film a whole store of religious beliefs and emotions, embracing and kindly as well as apocalyptic. These people are not simply going to a movie; they are going to church.³⁶³

³⁶¹ Laura Bailey, "New Library Display Casts Light on BGEA's Groundbreaking Film Ministry," *Billy Graham Evangelistic Association*, January 12, 2017, <https://billygraham.org/story/new-library-display-casts-light-on-bgeas-groundbreaking-film-ministry/>.

³⁶² Jesus Film Project. "Official Jesus Film Project Ministry Statistics – October 16, 2019," Jesus Film Project / Donor Reporting, <https://www.jesusfilm.org/about/learn-more/statistics.html>.

³⁶³ Peter Steinfelds, "Beliefs: In the End, Does 'The Passion of the Christ' Point to Christian Truths, or Obscure Them," *The New York Times*, February 28, 2004, <https://www.nytimes.com/2004/02/28/us/beliefs-end-does-passion-christ-point-christian-truths-obscurer-them.html>.

CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION

Introduction

The purview of this dissertation is the argument for the plausibility of special revelation in cinema through the transcendence of the *imago Dei* exhibited by protagonist qualities in the narrative story and the connection with the *imago Dei* in the viewer. It has been proposed that God may speak to a person through the narrative storytelling of cinema by the viewer's association with the protagonist and the reflection of the *imago Dei* in all human beings. This study examined unique protagonist character qualities that are revealed through protagonist choices in two artifacts: *The Passion of the Christ* and *The Mission*. This final chapter will seek to present a summary of what has been concluded from the study, a brief analysis of the critical arguments for special revelation in cinema, and consideration of further study on the church's engagement in cinema as an application for Christian apologetics.

Transcendence of the *imago Dei* in Cinema

This study has shown evidence for the plausibility of a personal encounter with God through the cinematic event resulting in a person's conversion of faith by the power of the Holy Spirit. And, that this special revelation is in concert with the *imago Dei* shared in both the moviegoer and the protagonist character that fulfills and ignites the conversion moment.

Examination of *The Passion of the Christ* and *The Mission* disclosed and identified in each artifact the protagonist qualities of willful character, character empathy, and behavior contradiction while observing the attributes of the *imago Dei* represented in each protagonist quality. Cinema has the ability to tell the story but can offer viewers new paradigms of seeing.

As Augustine suggests, God is closer to me than I am to myself.³⁶⁴ God's transcendence, providence, and revelation are without boundaries, beyond human preconceptions, and relentless in His pursuit of His children.

Thus, a rhetorical framework was erected to examine the personal alignment and conviction of the viewer with the dramatic challenges and moral choices made by the protagonist. The investigation of protagonist qualities in cinema as revealed through character and story expressed how each protagonist quality placed weight on the sacrifice of Jesus and the witness of the *imago Dei* for the salvation. This provided the foundation for observing the transcendence of the *imago Dei* in protagonist qualities as examined in each of the two artifacts, *The Passion of the Christ* and *The Mission*. It was shown that the illumination of the *imago Dei* could be witnessed in the character of the protagonist through action and dialogue. More specifically, the protagonist qualities of willful character, character empathy, and behavior contradiction serve as mirror images of character choices in all human beings. Attributes of the *imago Dei*, man's free will, man's self-sacrifice, and man's moral responsibility were observed in the protagonist as well as the viewer.

Godawa asserts, "It is important to understand that the effectiveness of redemption portrayed in any story is exactly equal to the accuracy of the depiction of the depravity from which we are redeemed."³⁶⁵ The idea that the cinematic experience could serve as the stage on which the Holy Spirit illuminates Christ through the narrative aligns with Scriptures. Monica Miller claims, "Truly, *The Passion* has provided the 'man on the street' with the opportunity to

³⁶⁴ Augustine. *The Confessions of Saint Augustine*, 3.6.11.

³⁶⁵ Godawa, *Hollywood World Views*, 192.

seriously ponder and talk about the meaning of the Christian faith.”³⁶⁶ The *imago Dei* is the spiritual capacity that ignites humanity through the human personality and expressions of emotion, desire, creativity, and passion. These are core expressions of the protagonist qualities found in the character of Jesus in *The Passion of the Christ* and *The Mission*.

Victor Hugo’s *Les Misérables* serves as a redemption story for the basest of human beings.³⁶⁷ The story explores vivid moments of betrayal, loss, fear, redemption, love, legalism, perseverance, grace, and faith. An example of grace is exhibited in the scene when Jean Valjean, a man twenty years imprisoned for stealing a loaf of bread, is caught by the police stealing the church’s silver and the bishop shows Valjean grace which sets him free of the police. It is through the act of the bishop that Jean Valjean’s life begins to change. The mercy shown by the bishop goes beyond that of the ordinary man, and similarly, Valjean’s life becomes a clear redemption story. The film explores man’s depravity with powerful imagery and challenges the characters and the viewers with the profound question of humanity’s existence and ultimate purpose. At the heart of the story is God’s continued desire to act under all circumstances for the encouragement and redemption of all mankind.

In the film *Tender Mercies*, directed by Bruce Beresford, starring Robert Duvall, the Christian faith is questioned and tried in the crucible of humankind’s depravity around the subtlety of life’s fractured moments.³⁶⁸ The film is about a burned-out country-western singer, Mac Sledge (Robert Duval), and widow and Christian, Rosa Lee, and her ten-year-old son, Sonny. All three characters are wrestling with the overwhelming darkness that has pierced their

³⁶⁶ Monica Migliorino Miller, *The Theology of The Passion of the Christ* (Staten Island, NY: Alba House, 2005), 143.

³⁶⁷ *Les Misérables*, directed by Bille August, (Mandalay Entertainment, Columbia Pictures, 1998), 2 hr., 39 min. DVD.

³⁶⁸ *Tender Mercies*, directed by Bruce Beresford (Universal Pictures, 1983), 1 hr., 40 min. DVD.

lives. Rosa Lee's husband was killed in Vietnam, Sonny longs and wonders about the father he never knew, while Sledge is an alcoholic trying to numb himself from the pain of his broken marriage and the daughter with whom he longs for a relationship. As Sledge falls in love with Rosa Lee, he stops drinking and begins to write songs again while working on the land of Rosa Lee's motel. Sledge soon gives his life to Jesus and gets baptized.

Tender Mercies shows a woman giving mercy and seeking guidance from God through prayer, honors the sanctity of baptism, teaches that suffering may come to those who seek after fame, exposes the repercussions of drugs and alcohol abuse, displays the tragedy of war, and shows the purpose and call of the Church toward fellowship and accountability. Interestingly, one might assume given the Christian precepts in the film *Tender Mercies* to be a faith-based film. However, it is a secular film with strong moral values and Christian themes. Yet, as this study suggests, it is the *imago Dei* who bears witness to God's desire for communion with His children.³⁶⁹ "But it is the spirit in man, the breath of the Almighty, that makes him understand" (Job 32:8). "By this we know that we abide in Him and He in us, because He has given us of His Spirit" (1 John 4:13). The human being is a work of art made by the hands of God and as the artist creates, His qualities are found in the artistic image created. That image remains as the systemic of God across all human beings.

The Fall of all humankind has tainted the *imago Dei*, but the image remains and allows for the work of the Holy Spirit to provide the transcendent knowledge of God to an individual.

The soul's essential nature . . . is to be an image of God. The fall of man was the obscuring of the divine image by a dissimilitude, an "unlikeness" superimposed upon it. But the image itself is indestructible: every man retains his "capacity for the eternal."³⁷⁰

³⁶⁹ Romans 8:16.

³⁷⁰ John Burnaby, *Amor Dei: A Study of the Religion of St. Augustine* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1960), 261.

The image of God in Jesus Christ, who was without sin, is whole and without blemish. “The God of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God” (2 Corinthians 4:4). Thus, Jesus remains the pure sacrifice before God for the sake of all humanity. As Augustine claims, “The lion from the tribe of Judah has conquered. Because in being slain He slew death.”³⁷¹

Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit, and the Father are one; thus, Jesus is the visual *imago Dei*. He is the image of God, the mercy of God, and the mirror by whom all human beings may be reconciled by faith. It is because of His relentless passion that the crucifixion echoes across the landscape of Scripture. “Father forgive them, for they know not what they do” (Luke 23:34). The Sermon on the Mount: “But I say to you: love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you” (Matt. 5:44). “They divide my garments among them, and for my clothing they cast lots” (Psalm 22:18). “Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends” (John 15:13).

The observation and study of phenomenal acts herein is primarily directed to the argument for credibility of phenomenal acts occurring in and through cinema which can provide for spiritual transformation by an individual through the anointing work of the Holy Spirit. The intention is to posit credibility of phenomenal acts exposed through cinema as comparable to miracles claimed in the Scriptures. From this observation, the work of the Spirit is no less found in these acts as it was in the transformation of water into wine by Jesus at the wedding ceremony. Each act is a celebratory experience.

This is especially true for the followers of Jesus Christ who recognize the miracle as an act of God. For the Christian, the leap of belief in miracles is not a confounding struggle against

³⁷¹ Revelation 5:5; Augustine, *Work of St. Augustin*, 330.

science or natural laws but an extraordinary source of communion with the Father. Recognizing human beings as image-bearers, their destiny is to fulfill the communion as they reflect the Creator of the universe. On all points of human existence, the intention is toward this end. Additionally, considering the acceptance of the extraordinary, many people have been so influenced by a story in cinema that they shiver from the excitement or are brought to tears by the visceral and seemingly shared experience with a character in the cinema. What is this in human beings that they can be moved so deeply by a film? Could it be the very presence of God within all humankind? If so, then the event could be considered a phenomenal act.

The story of man's journey as a hero, however, has not been one of contentment in fellowship with the Creator. Mankind desperately yearns for freedom, even at the expense of communion with God. Surely, this is why Paul chastened, "You, my brothers and sister, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the flesh; rather, serve one another humbly in love" (Galatians 5:13). Cinema has the ability to serve as a reflection of humanity's rebellion against God. The attributes of the *imago Dei* may be revealed through fictional characters in literature and cinema as they are inherently drawn from the spirit of human beings who can do no other than express their essence—which at the core is the *imago Dei*.

Additionally, focus was narrowed on the *imago Dei* as the incarnate Christ who was slain as the Lamb for all humanity. *The Passion of the Christ* and *The Mission* were observed as a means for aligning a human soul to the reality of the cross and the reason for human existence. The passion of Jesus and His willingness to suffer the sins of the world provided an exploration for the evidence and presence of God's revelation with specific focus on transcendence of the *imago Dei* in the cinematic experience. Additionally, the study analyzed the protagonist's journey and character qualities exhibited by viewer empathy and the potential work of special

revelation in each film. The purpose was to evaluate the protagonist qualities in each character through expressions of the *imago Dei* in their action and dialogue.

Finally, it has been shown herein that a person, through the viewing of a film, might have an encounter with the Holy Spirit of God, in concert with the *imago Dei* in man. The relationship between viewer and the cinematic characters become a visceral experience by which similar emotions are expressed by the viewer journeying with the characters in the story. The cinematic experience which often triggers dramatic emotions by persons watching a film are undeniable and support the reflection of the Creator who makes these feelings uniquely part of the human experience by way of the *imago Dei*.

Further Study

Cinema as Christian Apologetic

The central topic for further study is the Church's responsibility to engage the art of cinema as a personal apologetic for examining one's faith toward an individual's development in a personal relationship to Christ. Timothy Keller notes that whether intentional or subconscious, worldviews influence the narrative stories in cinema and have the potential to influence society.³⁷² The challenge is to determine the worldview that will be delivered to the world from Hollywood. "Neglecting the importance of the worldview behind a movie denies as well the influence our stories have on the human psyche, collective and individual."³⁷³ According to research published by the Social Science Quarterly, viewers who are not necessarily critical about what they see onscreen are more likely to experience a temporary political shift when

³⁷² Timothy Keller states that the gospel faith of Christians had immediate and far-reaching impact on social and economic relationships that transformed society. "Christian faith touches on and affects *all of life*." Timothy Keller, *Center Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012), 214.

³⁷³ Godawa, *Hollywood World Views*, 62.

watching Hollywood movies with an underlying political message.³⁷⁴

Gordon Lynch acknowledges the power of cinema and argues that contemporary society is ripe for applying film to Christian apologetics. The volume of media consumed by society on a daily basis provides for “a missiological response to popular culture . . . a medium for theological reflection.”³⁷⁵ Lynch suggests that cinema offers a social function with “shared beliefs and values that provide a structure for their everyday lives.” In addition, cinema, like the Bible, follow narratives that help people “to live with a sense of identity, meaning, and purpose.” Cinema provides a transcendent function that “provides a medium through which people are able to experience ‘God,’ the numinous or the transcendent.”³⁷⁶

Gareth Higgins shares in his book *How Movies Helped Save My Soul* the powerful association between man and his soul in the dark of the cinema. “Movies are for people who want to make sense of their own lives, of our place in the world, of the need for an encounter with God to heal us.”³⁷⁷ Cinema affirms or counters the moviegoer’s worldview from the perspectives provided by thematic approaches to the hero’s storyline.

Christians have an opportunity for apologetics through discussions on current themes expressed in cinema. Christopher Nolan’s film *The Dark Knight* provides an example for delving into a rich worldview debate. In regard to the character of the Joker, Nolan said, “We wanted The Joker to represent pure, unadulterated evil, in the sense that he has no logical motivation for

³⁷⁴ Todd Adkins and Jeremiah J. Castle, “Moving Pictures? Experimental Evidence of Cinematic Influence on Political Attitudes,” *Social Science Quarterly* 95, no. 5 (December 2014): 4-6. <https://doi.org/10.1111/ssqu.12070>.

³⁷⁵ Gordon Lynch, *Understanding Theology and Popular Culture* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), 21.

³⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 28.

³⁷⁷ Gareth Higgins, *How Movies Helped Save My Soul: Finding Spiritual Fingerprints in Culturally Significant Films* (Lake Mary, FL: Relevant Books, 2003), xvii, xix.

his actions. That is what we wanted to unleash on the city of Gotham. He is an absolute.”³⁷⁸ The film examines the depravity of man and the desperate means to a person might go to find redemption.

Clive Marsh writes, “The complex way in which they move us . . . compel us to make links and draw contrasts with life-experience past and present indicates that films are doing something important to their viewers.”³⁷⁹ The contrasts that once occurred in the church has now moved to the cinema. Ironically, with all the visual and sensory distractions upon today’s culture, three-quarters of all adults are looking for ways to live a more meaningful life. Forty percent of unchurched adults say they do not attend a religious organization because they find God elsewhere. The question arises: Has the church disengaged completely from the conversation of worldview in cinema?

Carl Henry presents a critical notion of the disintegration of Christian values in the contemporary culture. “The modern world of words has toppled from its divine intention. The authentically biblical four-letter words—*free, good, true, holy, love*, and others—have yielded to cheap and carnal imitations.”³⁸⁰ Henry is indisputably fervent in his concern that the Word of God has become ineffectual idioms in the mouths of vain human speech tossed about in the common market place of subjectivity. He suggests, “When truth is lost, falsehood no longer exists; everything becomes relative to its own situation.”³⁸¹ Mass media in all its variations can be valuable tools for the truth of Jesus Christ and the power of God. Mass communication should

³⁷⁸ Christopher Nolan quoted in Vasco Hexel, *Hans Zimmer and James Newton Howard’s The Dark Knight: A Film Score Guide* (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016), 26.

³⁷⁹ Clive Marsh, *Cinema and Sentiment*, 9.

³⁸⁰ Henry, *God Who Speaks and Shows*, 28.

³⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 28-29.

be employed and appreciated as an additional means for fulfilling the Great Commission.³⁸²

Whether it is pervasive on the small scale of candy wrappers or exploitative in an Imax cinematic event, Henry challenges evangelicals of the postmodern culture to engage the world in the crucible of secular media where morality and the Christian faith have become relics of the past. It is upon this battlefield that the Christian worldview in America, and possibly the world, is losing ground. It is on this front that relativism is continuing to infect society with a misconstrued view of the divine revelation of God's love and His redemption for mankind.

The church must penetrate the culture so that the Word of truth might not be obscured or subjugated by the enticement so covertly presented by Hollywood and the postmodern media philosophy of Self. "Despite occasional ethical commentary and some special coverage of religious events and moral issues, the media tend more to accommodate than to critique the theological and ethical ambiguities of our time."³⁸³ Media's only devotion is to the gratification of its viewers and to its advertisers who bankroll the whole endeavor. If a particular visual image, whether morally right in the eyes of the evangelicals, will sell more soap or more theatre tickets then it is *in*, if not, it is *out*.

Cinema provides the opportunity for a person to engage in the narrative so intently that cinema acts a religious experience—a sanctuary for the broken souls of humanity identify themselves to the hero in the story. The dark theatre, the dramatic sound and visuals, and human desire to thrive, intensifies the power of cinema to an experience that may initiate a viewer toward spiritual submission.

"We elevate rational discourse and put down dramatic theater as too emotional or

³⁸² Henry, *God Who Speaks and Shows*, 28-29.

³⁸³ *Ibid.*, 19.

entertainment-oriented, while God elevates drama as part of our *imago Dei*.³⁸⁴ God embraces story. His divine drama is played out in His Word to the human race through visual stories as His prevailing means of embodied truth. The stories told in movies and television shows can be, and often are, like sermons fulfilling a personification of God's truth. Today's culture would seem to rather receive their dutiful sermon in the visual medium as opposed to the droning of non-entertaining preachers struggling to capture a congregation who has already been captured by the latest technology.

Robert Johnston offers, "Entertainment is taking the place of religion as a cultural site where the task of meaning making is undertaken."³⁸⁵ A case study administered by Clive Marsh in regards to religion, film, and philosophy revealed the striking influence cinema has by impacting the culture and challenging the minds of moviegoers viscerally and personally on theological themes. One respondent admitted, "My emotions can be temporarily swayed, or my attention drawn to an aspect of my behavior of which I was not previously aware."³⁸⁶

Yet, if art is worship to God by the Christian artist, it should point to the glory of God and not for personal praise or served as an idolized self-expression. It is this study's particular endeavor to motivate the Christian filmmaker beyond mediocrity toward transformational expressions of God's truth in story and character. Art, in all its various formations and though created by flawed man, ultimately reflects the perfect glory of God. "To reject any of the arts in toto is to reject the *imago Dei*, the image of God in humanity."³⁸⁷

³⁸⁴ Godawa, *Hollywood World Views*, 15.

³⁸⁵ Clive Marsh, "On Dealing with What Films Actually Do to People," in *Reframing Theology and Film: New Focus for an Emerging Discipline*, ed. Robert K. Johnston (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007), 150.

³⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 147-9.

³⁸⁷ Godawa, *Hollywood World Views*, 19.

Lynch observes, “Films have an important sociological function in shaping contemporary religious beliefs and practices.”³⁸⁸ The contemporary society has become more vested in the search for a personal, meaningful, and supportive religious experience. Cinema offers a sense of projected moralistic adventure that may serve to motivate an individual further toward an autonomous and subjective religious lifestyle or, depending on the worldview presented in the film, may transport a viewer toward positive moral themes based in Judeo-Christian precepts. Everyday life is where people face the contradictions of their subjective moral choices and may realize the discordance of those choices when confronted with the visual story in which the protagonist reflects the human dilemma. Why not use this opportunity for conversation on the narrative stories of cinema for apologetics and discipleship?

³⁸⁸ Gordon Lynch, “Film and the Subjective Turn: How the Sociology of Religion Can Contribute to Theological Reading of Film” in *Reframing Theology and Film: New Focus for an Emerging Discipline*, ed. Robert K. Johnston (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007), 112.

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