

C.S. LEWIS, MYTH AND FILMMAKING

Timothy Nargi, Jr. on the Power of
Indirect Communication

Long before history began recording them, man has communicated through stories. Stories of wonder. Stories of courage. Stories of power. Stories of gods. In today's age, stories are released from every corner of the globe through YouTube, self-publishing sites, mobile apps, or personal blogs. The world is flooded with stories in whatever genre or format the viewer wishes to view them. And more and more of these stories have confused messages or outright deny the Christian worldview. The problem for filmmakers writing from the Christian perspective is this: how do you communicate Christian truths in an ever-increasingly post-Christian world? And why do Christian movies have little or no lasting emotional impact?

The short answer is that a film needs to employ the tool of indirect communication, specifically through myth, to slip past a culture that does not

understand or does not accept the Christian worldview. But how do we do this? We first must explore what indirect communication and myth are.

What is Indirect Communication?

Soren Kierkegaard was a Danish philosopher of the early 1800's who was critical of the state and practice of Christianity in his country. Many of Kierkegaard's writings dealt with presenting Christian truths in one of two ways, direct and indirect communication. Direct communication, as the name implies, is a straightforward presentation of information. It includes the disciplines of science, math, and history. Kierkegaard states, "direct communication presupposes that the receiver's ability to receive is undisturbed."¹ It only works if a person has an interest in the subject. It does not work for those who are antagonistic, uninterested, or even for those who have a slight interest. When these classes of people are presented with a logically solid argument that is grounded and backed by factual data, they will refuse, not only to believe in the argument, but to even engage in a conversation. Kierkegaard believed that a direct communication

¹Søren Kierkegaard, *The Point of View for My Work as an Author: A Report to History*, ed. Benjamin Nelson (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1962), 40.

approach to presenting Christian truths was not the best method to awaken his culture, so he tried a different tactic -- *indirect* communication. Kierkegaard defines indirect communication:

One can deceive a person for the truth's sake, and (to recall old Socrates) one can deceive a person into the truth. Indeed it is only by this means, i.e., by deceiving him, that it is possible to bring into the truth one who is in an illusion. Whoever rejects this opinion betrays the fact that he is not over-well versed in dialectics, and that is precisely what is especially needed when operating in this field.²

Kierkegaard believed that in order to communicate truth, specifically Christian truth, to an audience, the truth must be veiled. He felt that his culture was living an illusion of Christianity, rather than what Christianity actually was. Kierkegaard said that, "The greater number of people in Christendom who call themselves Christian only imagine themselves to be Christians."³ He thought a direct approach would not only fail to get his culture to realize they were living a falsehood, but that it would also strengthen their belief in that falsehood.

²Kierkegaard, *Point of View*, 39-40.

³ *Ibid.*, 25.

Kierkegaard used storytelling to communicate Christian truths. Thomas Oden explains that the “story format was necessary for implementing his highly explicit theory and method of indirect communication, which was essential to the purpose of his writing” because “readers often do not quite grasp what has hit them in this fantasized situation until they move more deeply into the self-examination that the parable elicits and requires.”⁴ Stories allow the audience to be drawn into an awareness of truth while, at the same time, slipping past what C.S. Lewis called “watchful dragons.”⁵

Lewis understood these “watchful dragons” of reason firsthand.⁶ He was greatly influenced by William T. Kirkpatrick, otherwise known as “The Great Knock.” Lyle Dorsett describes the influence that Kirkpatrick had on Lewis:

. . . he taught him to think critically and analytically as well as how to express himself logically and clearly . . . Kirkpatrick’s teachings left permanent

⁴ Thomas C. Oden, Introduction. In Søren Kierkegaard, *Parables of Kierkegaard* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1978), xii.

⁵ C.S. Lewis, *Of Other Worlds: Essays and Stories*. ed. Walter Hooper (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1994), 37.

⁶ Lewis did not mean the abandonment of reason, but rather “slipping past” purely didactic forms of rational argument, as didactic reasoning usually results in an immediate posture of defense from opponents.

marks on C.S. Lewis. The writer's clear language, careful thoughts, meticulous logic, and persuasive evidence reflect the old teacher's care in developing a brilliant young mind . . . Truth, as C.S. Lewis learned, is eminently worth pursuing. But the teaching he received insisted that the pathway to truth came only through reason.⁷

Lewis was steeped in reason until he read George MacDonald's *Phantastes*. In the preface to *George MacDonald*, Lewis writes, "What it actually did to me was to convert, even to baptize . . . my imagination. It did nothing to my intellect nor (at that time) to my conscience."⁸

What it did do was get Lewis to see that truth did not have to be told through reason alone⁹; it could also be told through story. It was the genesis of Lewis beginning to use indirect communication to communicate truth, though not yet Christian truths. It was also the genesis of Lewis beginning to use one form of indirect communication, myth.

⁷ Lyle Dorsett, *The Essential C. S. Lewis* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996), 5.

⁸ C.S. Lewis, *George MacDonald* (New York: HarperCollins, 2001), xxxviii.

⁹ Lewis at this stage in life is beginning to see that he could add imagination to reason in presenting truth. He would never divorce the two, but prior to reading *Phantastes* he did not see any use for imagination in argumentation.

Lewis writes, “Most myths were made in prehistoric times, and I suppose, not consciously made by individuals at all. But every now and then there occurs in the modern world a genius--a Kafka or a Novalis- who can make such a story. MacDonald is the greatest genius of this kind whom I know.”¹⁰

What is Myth?

C.S. Lewis's view of myth differs from what most today understand as the definition of myth, especially with regards to filmmaking or storytelling. Today's predominant view, popularized by Joseph Campbell and known as the *monomyth*, consists of a hero's journey. The journey has traits that are common to all myth stories and are broken down into three stages: the hero's separation, the hero's trials, and the hero's return. Some will note the comparison between the three act structure of film.¹¹ This is closely related to what Campbell calls the Cosmogonic Cycle, which consists of themes like creation, virgin birth, hero transformation, and the breaking up of the world. Campbell says that when humans create stories of

¹⁰ Lewis, *George MacDonald*, xxviii.

¹¹ Most films today contain three acts: a beginning, a middle, and an end. The genesis of understanding dramatic works in this way is commonly attributed to Aristotle in his work *Poetics*.

myth they tap into common archetypes.¹² This explains the similarities in world mythologies and religions, he says. Humans have created these myths for four functions: to have a sense of awe at the mystery of the universe, to give solutions for the origin of the world, to provide instructions to society on how to behave with ethical and moral laws, and to help teach people how to live. Thus Campbell sees Christianity as just another story sharing common themes that are contained in other stories from other religions.¹³ For him, Christ is a mythic embellishment based on an actual person of history, but the “legend” of Christ grew over time, replacing the “historical” Christ.¹⁴ He removes the historicity in myth and only sees the myth, the symbol itself, as truth. In doing so,

. . . the practical effect of Campbell’s thought is to devalue the historical reality of the Bible. At the same time, his overemphasis on the mythological underpinnings of the Biblical message

¹² Joseph Campbell & Bill Moyers, *The Power of Myth* (New York: Anchor, 1991), 60.

¹³ Kevin Kelsey, *When Myth Married Truth: The Practical Value of Tolkien and Lewis’s View of Mythology and Christianity*, Unpublished Thesis (Jackson, Mississippi: Reformed Theological Seminary, 2010), 62.

¹⁴ Joseph Campbell, *Thou Art That: Transforming Religious Metaphor* (Novato, CA: New World Library, 2001), 112.

changes the entire meaning of cardinal doctrines of Christianity. Campbell, like Bultmann, is another example of what happens when myth and truth are divorced from one another.¹⁵

Many films today are structured and written around this view of myth, the most famous being *Star Wars*. George Lucas drew heavily from Campbell when crafting his story.¹⁶

Furthermore, our culture commonly refers to something *unreal* as a myth. A myth is something made up that has no basis in history or reality. If this is what myth is, and Christianity is a myth, then there are no absolute and exclusive Christian truths to present in story, since all myths are essentially the same story anyway.

Lewis's view of myth is quite different. One late September night, Lewis had the now famous Addison's walk and talk between himself, J.R.R. Tolkien and Hugo Dyson. The three of them discussed the relationship between Christianity and myth. Lewis recounts:

¹⁵ Kelsey, *When Myth Married Truth*, 69.

¹⁶ Lucas Seastrom, "Mythic Discovery: Revisiting the Meeting between George Lucas and Joseph Campbell," *StarWars.com*, last modified October 22, 2015.
<https://www.starwars.com/news/mythic-discovery-within-the-inner-reaches-of-outer-space-joseph-campbell-meets-george-lucas-part-i>

Now what Dyson and Tolkien showed me was this: that if I met the idea of sacrifice in a Pagan story I didn't mind it at all: again, that if I met the idea of a god sacrificing himself to himself . . . I liked it very much and was mysteriously moved by it: . . . The reason was that in Pagan stories I was prepared to feel the myth as profound and suggestive of meanings beyond my grasp even tho' I could not say in cold prose 'what it meant'. Now the story of Christ is simply a true myth: a myth working on us in the same way as the others, but with this tremendous difference that it really happened.¹⁷

Lewis understood that myths were not lies but could contain truth. He also realized that Christianity was the fulfillment of all previous myths; it is a true myth, a myth that became fact. Myth gave concrete expression to a truth that was an abstract concept. Myth made truth something we could experience, and myth was truth communicated in reality. Since Christ describes Himself as the truth, and he is a real person, not simply a story, then Christ is the ultimate communication of truth, and therefore myth became fact. Lewis says:

¹⁷ Lewis, *George MacDonald*, 427.

The heart of Christianity is a myth which is also a fact. The old myth of the Dying God, without ceasing to be myth, comes down from the heaven of legend and imagination to the earth of history. It happens—at a particular date, in a particular place, followed by definable historical consequences. We pass from a Balder to an Osiris, dying nobody knows when or where to a historical Person crucified (it is all in order) under Pontius Pilate. By becoming fact it does not cease to be myth.¹⁸

This is what a myth is. It is an expression of truth that we can experience, and at one time in history, Christ came to us as the true sacrificial God whom we can experience. He fulfilled all the partial truths in pagan dying god stories because this Christ story was really true. Lewis did not see myth as a way to explain the world or a way to tell of things common to man like Campbell does. Instead, he understood that myth tells something true about God by shocking the sensations (feelings, thoughts, ideas) without the audience even knowing it. This is exactly what films can do, and, because the true myth of the Bible far exceeds ancient pagan myths, the filmmaker making films from the Christian

¹⁸ C.S. Lewis, "Myth Became Fact," *God in the Dock: Essays on Theology and Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970), 66-67.

worldview, the true worldview, has a distinct advantage to move audiences. They know the truth they present is absolutely, exclusively, and really true, since the story from the Christian perspective comes from the source of all truth.

How Did Lewis Use Myth as Indirect Communication?

In a letter to Carl F. Henry on September 28, 1955, Lewis was responding to Henry, who requested that Lewis contribute some articles to *Christianity Today*.

Dear Doctor Henry,

Thank you for your letter of Sept. 12th. I wish your project heartily well but can't write your articles. My thought and talent (such as they are) now flow in different, though I think not less Christian, channels, and I do not think I am at all likely to write more directly theological pieces. The last work of that sort which I attempted had to be abandoned. If I am now good for anything it is for catching the reader unawares - thro' fiction and symbol. I have done what I could in the way of frontal attacks, but I now feel quite sure those days are over.

With many thanks.

Yours sincerely,

C.S. Lewis.¹⁹

Note where Lewis says he will catch “the reader unawares,” won't use “frontal attacks” anymore, and will not work on “directly” theological pieces. These are all ideals straight from Kierkegaard's philosophy on indirect communication. So how does myth come into play? A few quotes from Lewis will help clarify. In the preface to *George MacDonald*, Lewis writes:

[Myth] may even be one of the greatest arts; for it produces works which give . . . as much wisdom and strength as the works of the greatest poets. . . It arouses in us sensations we have never had before . .

.²⁰

Here Lewis writes how myth shocks people awake. The truth that is communicated to them does not smash their brick wall of defense; it hops over it. Something has stirred within them, and perhaps they will begin to ask questions with an open mind.

¹⁹ C.S. Lewis, *The Collected Letters of C.S. Lewis*, Volume 3: Narnia, Cambridge, and Joy, 1950 – 1963 (New York: HarperCollins, 2007), 651.

²⁰ Lewis, *George MacDonald*, xxxii.

Lewis gives another illustration in his essay “On Three Ways of Writing for Children.” When a little boy reads of an enchanted wood, it “gives it a new dimension of depth. He does not despise real woods because he has read of enchanted woods: the reading makes all real woods a little enchanted.”²¹

The experience of myth “is as if something of great moment had been communicated to us.”²² Myth enthralls, enchants, and captures the imagination of the audience and because of this, truth can be communicated without argument. This truth resonates, they know something has happened to them, and some things may become clearer to them which never would have been achieved via a frontal assault. Thus, myth is a valuable tool in indirect communication for conveying Christian truths.

In *The Chronicles of Narnia*, the Christ figure is Aslan. Aslan had to come to Narnia to redeem it, just as Christ did. Aslan sacrificed himself for Edmund's treachery, and Aslan resurrected from the dead. Aslan is also presented as a stern but loving creature. These are all aspects of Christ. But Aslan is a lion, not

²¹ C.S. Lewis, *Of Other Worlds: Essays and Stories*. ed. Walter Hooper (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1994), 29-30.

²² C.S. Lewis, *An Experiment in Criticism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 44.

a human. He is killed on a stone table, not a cross. Lewis creates a fantastic world, something so beautiful and wonderful that readers are wrapped up in it. They read about the sacrifice and loving kindness of Aslan, and something stirs in their imaginations and in their hearts. Peter Schakel says, "When the *Chronicles* are at their best, they do not just convey Christian meanings intellectually, by 'representations', but they communicate directly to the imagination and the emotions a sizable share of the central elements of the Christian faith."²³

Narnia and Aslan are not real, but they point to the one who is real by grabbing emotions through story. Lewis communicated the overwhelming love of Christ to his readers without them explicitly realizing it. They were able to experience, through story, what that love might be like. That is the power of myth and indirect communication.

WHAT CAN FILMMAKERS LEARN?

How can Lewis's view of myth help present Christian truths in film? It must be said that the goal of films, and any tale, first and foremost must be to tell a good story. However, that definition begs the question of what is good. For the Christian, and all

²³ Mark Freshwater, *C.S. Lewis and the Truth of Myth* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1988), 99-100.

storytellers really, the story has to tell the truth of reality as revealed in the Bible. That may be depicting the horrors of evil as something not to be desired or demonstrating incomprehensible grace. Christians can do exactly what Lewis did: create great stories that showcase their worldview, without sacrificing the story. There is no reason why a Christian should not be able to achieve this. Unfortunately so many Christian directors seem to feel it is necessary to have an altar call scene or that the Bible must be quoted extensively in order for a film to be considered Christian. Those things eradicate myth. They are “frontal assaults” that touch few hearts.

Lewis presented Christian truth through story. Not sermons. Not preaching. A Christian filmmaker should present Christian truths through a good, true, and beautiful story. A film should not be a sermon, just as a sermon should not be a film. A sermon proclaims and tells forth the historical reality of the Gospel and its benefits. A Christian film should make you feel the Gospel, or some relational aspect of it, in a way that perhaps never even mentions the Gospel at all. This is where “Christian films” get it wrong. You don't have a story when you are arguing for the existence of God. You don't have a story when you preach or lecture. You don't have a

film when it tries to spell out Romans Road. Instead, you have a reason for the audience to fall asleep or change the channel. Presenting a film as a sermon does not work. In fact, it ceases to become a film. That is why “Christian” films go nowhere and are laughed at and forgotten. A film is meant to stir the emotions and chip away at a frozen heart. It is not meant to evangelize. Francis Schaeffer would call what a film is supposed to do “pre-evangelism.”²⁴ It is a method for allowing people to be more receptive to the Gospel when it is finally preached to them. Only the Holy Spirit, through the preaching of the Gospel, changes hearts. Film should awaken something true about God or the viewer, though they may not know exactly what. Thus, filmmakers can employ Lewis's views of myth, thereby using Kierkegaard's philosophy of indirect communication. They can slip past the “watchful dragons” of reason to communicate Christian truths in a post-Christian culture and awaken sensations that make people *feel* and *experience* those truths.

²⁴ Francis Schaeffer, “The God Who Is There,” in *The Complete Works of Francis Schaeffer*, Vol. 1 (Westchester, IL: Crossway Books), 155.

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