

Storytellers and their Religious Beliefs: Facts or Fiction?

By Brence Platner

Abstract: Stories are how we communicate with each other, and are a big part of the entertainment world today. Religious texts such as The Bible contain stories that have shaped entire civilizations and deeply impacted the minds of billions of humans. Directors and authors take inspiration from their own life experiences when writing their stories. And naturally, storytellers with strong religious beliefs will either intentionally or unintentionally allow those beliefs to affect the content of the stories they create. The purpose of this study is to analyze to what extent the religious beliefs of a storyteller affect the stories they tell, as well as audience perceptions of those stories. This analysis will be conducted through direct analysis of stories and their creators' religious beliefs, travelling to film festivals (both religious and nonreligious in nature), and interviewing creators and audience members at those festivals. The product will be a paper that compiles my findings, as well as a compilation and analysis of the interviews I conduct.

Introduction

Stories have held a major significance in our society for as long as humans have been able to speak. They are how we convey ideas to others, remember our past, and consider our futures. In the modern world, we are exposed to several stories on a daily basis. From a young age, we read books and watch movies whose stories shape our perceptions about the world. But what about the people that create the stories we see today? Directors and authors take inspiration from their own life experiences when writing their stories. Religious texts such as The Bible and Quran contain stories that have shaped entire civilizations and deeply impacted the minds of billions of humans. Many of their fundamental themes take form in modern films and novels. Clinical Psychologist Jordan Peterson remarks that “the idea of virtuous self-sacrifice is deeply embedded in Western Culture, insofar as the West has been influenced by Christianity” (Peterson 59). Renowned author J.K. Rowling revealed that her bestselling *Harry Potter* book series was inspired by her Christian upbringing (Christian Today). Humans process and convey information through stories, and those stories are told by other humans (that, in turn, were previously influenced by stories). As a filmmaker myself, and as someone fascinated with the prevalence of religion in our modern society, I’m eager to look further into religion’s role in stories. What is the relationship between a storyteller’s religious beliefs and the stories they tell? What is the effect those stories have on their audience. Are audiences aware of the religious themes implemented in the stories they consume?

Background + Related Works and Motivation

As mentioned in the introduction, telling stories is how we communicate ideas, and how we impact those around us. The stories people are told impact the way they think and the decisions they make. In the case of storytellers such as authors and directors, the stories that have impacted them also have an influence on their work. I've watched and/or read Mel Gibson's *Passion of the Christ*, J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* book series (specifically *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*, the conclusion to the series), Matt Reeves' *War for the Planet of the Apes*, and Guillermo del Toro's *Pan's Labyrinth*. Two of the listed stories come from Christian storytellers, while the other two come from atheist storytellers. In each case, the religious beliefs of the storyteller deeply influence the creation of their stories.

Mel Gibson's *Passion of the Christ*, an intensely religious film, had great success amongst both religious and nonreligious audiences, but also spurred controversy due to the graphic nature of some of its scenes (Neff, David). It tells the story of Jesus Christ in the last twelve hours before he was nailed to the cross. Gibson has a reputation as a Catholic, and in several interviews mentions that his background heavily influenced his works, especially *Passion of the Christ*.

J. K. Rowling, as mentioned earlier, wrote her *Harry Potter* book series with a Christian influence, and even intentionally hid that the series' Christian influence from the public until the final book was published (Christian Today). Harry Potter is the ultimate Christ figure, sacrificing himself for the sake of his friends and family around him. Had J.K. Rowling not had her early Christian influence in life, she likely would not have created the series that has become embedded in the fabric of our culture.

Guillermo del Toro has no qualms discussing his experiences with religion, and claims to be between an atheist and agnostic. In his film *Pan's Labyrinth*, a young girl explores a fantasy world of trolls, massive frogs, and fairies while World War II rages on in the world around her. The film expertly contrasts the mystical aspects of spirituality with the harsh realities of human conflict. Del Toro explains in interviews that though he detests Christianity and other religions, he feels it's a part of the human experience to find meaning and engage in the mystical (Rose, Charlie).

In *War for the Planet of the Apes*, Matt Reeves, an atheist, implements a stark religious contrast between the apes and the humans. The leader of the apes, Caesar, helps his fellow apes escape slavery and leads them to freedom. The Colonel, the main antagonist, goes so far as to say the conflict is a "holy war," and the film makes a point of including religious imagery such as crosses and crucifixes. While Caesar and his apes metaphorically represent the Old Testament, the Colonel and his forces represent the New Testament (Reeves, Matt). Given that Caesar and his apes succeed, further analysis can be given to Reeves' intentions in alluding to the Old and New Testaments in relation to Caesar's victory.

These four case studies show that whether a storyteller has strong religious belief or nonreligious belief, it affects their filmmaking. They provide the stimulus for further analysis into the topic of my research question: To what extent do a storyteller's religious beliefs affect the content of the stories that they tell, as well as audience perceptions of and reactions to those stories?

Methods

I plan to compare the works of Atheists with those of Christians (and I'll take note of different branches of Christianity in the case that they become relevant). As can be seen in the above works, storytellers intentionally implement religious themes and ideas into their works due to their background life experiences with religion. In order to effectively gauge how the religious beliefs of a storyteller affect their audiences, I need to view and read several films and stories through an analytical lens. Those films and stories will be linked to specific storytellers with publicly known religious beliefs. While the works mentioned earlier will form the foundation of my research, I plan to investigate other more recent films as well, attending both a religious film festival (The International Christian Film Festival in Orlando, FL) and a regular film festival (Florida Film Festival).

As far as the analysis itself goes, I'd like to specifically focus on the thematic elements of the stories. Among the key themes in Christianity, sacrifice, love, and creation (of the world and humanity) will be at the forefront of my research. Though God does not exist for Atheists, the previously mentioned themes still appear in films made by adamantly atheist directors. As a result, My analysis will also investigate the motivation and intention Atheist storytellers have when putting these themes in their films.

The Film festival explorations will serve two purposes. At every film festival I've attended, I have been able to connect with the creators of films after they premiere. I'll be able to watch several films that have intentionally religious themes and then immediately interact with the directors, gaining an insight into their specific thought processes. I'll also be able to interview audience members after the premieres of both the religious and nonreligious films, gauging how much the religious aspects of the films influenced them.

Expected Results

By producing a paper that reports the results of my research, I hope to spark further discussion about the significance of religion in film. As a filmmaker finding my way through the world of religion, I feel my research will also aid me in making future films that resonate deeply with people due to their truth. In the paper itself, I will make an informed conclusion about how much a storytellers' religious beliefs affect their stories. I also plan to include a discussion about how audiences perceive those stories, and whether or not they recognized religious themes (when they were intentionally included as such).

In addition to a paper, I will provide statistical results and analysis of my interactions with filmmakers and audience members at the two film festivals. These statistics will help further the conclusion I come to in my paper.

Conclusion

Overall, I hope to call attention to the importance stories have in the lives of creators as well as consumers. Through an analysis of written and filmed stories and audience reactions to them, I hope to effectively identify the relationship between a storyteller's religious backgrounds and their stories, as well as audience perceptions of religious themes in film.

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October 2021

Budget

Festivals , Lodging, and Transport

Florida Film Festival Pass (Entry to all screenings and press screenings): **\$575**

Lodging – Sheraton Orlando Hotel North, 9 days 8 nights - **\$2,234**

International Christian Film Festival, “Ultimate Movie Ticket” (Entry to all screenings): **\$50**

Lodging – Wyndham Orlando Resort International Drive, 4 days 3 nights: **\$375**

Transportation: Car, estimated 200 miles of driving, 25 miles per gallon, \$3.10 per gallon of gas
= **\$24.80**

Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows, by J.K. Rowling (Paperback) - **\$9.99**

War for the Planet of the Apes, Directed by Mat Reeves (Amazon Prime Video) - **\$14.99**

Passion of the Christ, Directed by Mel Gibson (Amazon Prime Video) – **Free**

Pan’s Labyrinth, Directed by Guillermo del Toro (Amazon Prime Video) - **\$13.99**

Working Time

Hourly Pay Rate – LMU pays undergraduate student researchers \$15/hour – I have 95 hours of
work planned - **\$1,425**

Emergency/Extra funding for unexpected work (Up to 10 hrs extra): **\$150**

Total Cost: \$4,873.77

Timeline

I plan to spend the entirety of time spent on this project in Florida, as I live there. Therefore lodging is not a cost for a majority of my research

Week 1 – Intentional Exploration and Analysis

Read *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows* - 11 hours

Watch *War for the Planet of the Apes* – 2 Hours, 20 minutes

Watch *Passion of the Christ* – 2 hours, 7 minutes

Watch *Pan's Labyrinth* - 1 Hour, 50 minutes

Initial Analysis and film write-ups, and extra article and document research – 8 hrs

Week 2 – Refinement and preparation

Further analysis, editing, and structuring of initial impressions – 10 hrs

Prepare Interview Questions

Travel to Central Florida for Film festivals

Attend the first few days of Florida Film Festival (April 8-9, 2022), Conduct Interviews

Week 3 – In the field

Attend Florida Film Festival (April 10-17, 2022), Conduct Interviews

Week 4 – Analysis and Reflection

Compile, analyze, and process the interviews and information gathered from the Florida Film Festival – Estimated 25 hours

Weeks 5 and 6 – Gap Weeks

Because the film festivals are about a month apart, I will have extra time in between them where I can reflect on my research, but that time will not be part of my structured and allocated time for this project.

Week 7 – In the Field again

Attend International Christian Film Festival (Estimated May 4-7, 2022), conduct interviews

Compile interviews and elaborate on results in research paper – 20 hours

Week 8 – Reflection and Research Finalization

Finalize and submit research – 15 hours