



Revelation in Movies: Theology of Film in Thailand

ABSTRACT

Society today gives importance to film as a means of cultural communication. It has become a significant contemporary language in need of understanding and explication. Movies have increasingly become part of the core curriculum of fields, such as philosophy, sociology, English, psychology and religions. No longer regarded as just simply entertainment and diversion, movies are life stories—we interpret them and they interpret us. Hence, they can change lives and communicate truth; they can reveal, redeem, and bring good news and the message of salvation to people in different contexts. This paper discusses how films in Thailand—a series of epic films and five short commercial films—have been doing this for Thailand, a country currently embroiled in political wrangling and aching to rediscover its most important societal values. It further illustrates how these films, which mirror and reflect Thai society, can also lead to an understanding of how people see and experience God, the divine, in different dimensions.



INTRODUCTION

Elia Kazan, controversial filmmaker of the fifties, sixties, and seventies had said, “Film is now the language of [hu]mankind.”¹ Film in today’s many forms—epic movies, shorts, documentaries or independent movies—broadens people’s exposure to life and provides alternate interpretations of life’s meaning and significance. Values and images are formed in response to life experience, with movies providing the data of countless new stories. In fact, as society’s major means of telling its stories, movies have become a type of bridge language that goes beyond the boundaries of its original group, community, and society.

Society today gives importance to film as a means of cultural communication. Cinema has become a significant contemporary language in need of understanding and explication. It has become more commonly used as part of the core curriculum of such disparate fields as philosophy, sociology, English, psychology and religions. Some even believe that cinema studies is positioned to become the new MBA, a means of general preparation for careers in fields as diverse as law and military.²

Movies cannot be dismissed as simply entertainment and diversion, though they are also that. Movies are life stories; we interpret them and they interpret us.³ Hence, the power and the effect of films can change lives and communicate truth; films can reveal, redeem, and bring people good news and the message of salvation in different particular contexts. Films provide us with possibilities not only to know about God but to know God. Movies have the power to transform life.⁴

This study pursues how films—a series of epic films and five short commercial ones—have been doing this for Thailand, which is currently embroiled in political wrangling and is aching to rediscover

¹Elia Kazan, *Elia Kazan: A Life* (New York: Knopf, 1988), 381.

²Elizabeth Van Ness, “New York Times: Is a Cinema Studies Degree the New M.B.A.?” <http://www.nytimes.com/2005/03/06/movies/06vann.html>.

³Robert K. Johnston, *Reel Spirituality: Theology and Film in Dialogue* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2006), Location 523 of 7581. Kindle Edition.

⁴*Ibid.*, Location 618 of 7581. Kindle Edition.

its most important societal values. The study further illustrates how the films, which mirror and reflect Thai society, can also lead to an understanding of how people see and experience God, the divine, in different dimensions.

THE CONTEXT OF THAI FILMS: THE POLITICAL CRISIS IN THAILAND

Since the “democratic revolution” in 1932 led by Westernized bureaucrats and tradition-oriented military, Thailand officially became a constitutional monarchy with a prime minister serving as the head of government. This officially ended 700 years of absolute monarchy. The conception of “democracy” in Thailand has been turbulent, with 18 *coups d'état* passing power back and forth between leaders of the military and an elite bureaucracy. The country has been governed under 18 different Constitutions, the most current being the result of a bloodless overthrow of then Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra in 2014.

From 1998 to 2014, Thailand grappled with political crisis. The People’s Democratic Reform Committee (PDRC) organized anti-government protests between November 2013 and May 2014 and overthrew Shinawatra, which eventually led to the establishment of a military junta.

A “People’s Council” was appointed to oversee the reforms of the political system. Protesters viewed Thaksin as being highly corrupt and damaging to Thailand’s democracy, although he enjoyed strong support in many areas of Thailand, particularly the poorer north, because of his social reform programs and economic policies. The Thai people soon began to be divided into various political colors, which threatened the country’s harmony and unity. Most of all, the political crisis created a sense of distrust among big and small communities in Thai society. Other issues behind the crisis include the royal succession, a rural-urban or north-south divide, social inequality, an overcentralized bureaucracy, and royal and military influence on politics. Nonetheless, the Thai people remain politically active; they value their freedom despite their tenuous democracy.

CONTEMPORARY AND POPULAR THAI FILMS

Thailand is a force that pushes forward its traditions and history in the face of a century of continuous change that threatens its sense of identity. Popular culture through the film industry gathered momentum in 1999 as local film productions multiplied—from 24 films in 1997 to 60 in 2003, establishing a new generation of directors, actors, and actresses. Among the more prominent films recently produced, which enjoyed popular viewing, are the epic film series, *The Legend of King Naresuan* as well as the five short commercial films produced by the Thai Life Insurance Company.

The Legend of King Naresuan is a six-part epic released from 2006 to 2014. It tells the story of how Naresuan rose from being the captive child of the Burmese king (who defeated his father, the King of Siam) to bring back Siam to its former glory and to let peace and harmony reign in the kingdom for many years.⁵

The Thai Life Insurance Company meanwhile produced several short film commercials/ advertisements based on the stories of ordinary Thai people. In 2006, *My Girl* was released. The film is about the crisis of a father whose school-age daughter becomes pregnant. It focuses on his journey from frustration to love and acceptance of his daughter's condition. The video was uploaded on the YouTube video-sharing site and was translated into several languages.

In 2008, the film entitled *Melody of Life* was released. It presents a woman who discovers she has terminal cancer and only has two years to live. She spends her last two years taking care of homeless children and providing a living for people. She realizes that “the real value of life is not in being rich, celebrated, or living a long time. Life is about how you value others and how others value you.”

Silence of Love came out in 2011. It is about a deaf father who shows his love for his daughter beyond words that can be spoken. The film ends with a beautiful quotation, “There might be no perfect fathers, but a father will always love perfectly.”

⁵Sirinya Pakditawan, “The Legend of King Naresuan: History & Movie.” *Sirinya's Thailand: Culture, Art, History, Tradition, and the People of Thailand*. <http://www.sirinyas-thailand.de/2015/07/24/the-legend-of-king-naresuan-history-movie/Sirinya>.

Released in 2012, *Forget Me Not* tells the story of an old couple who lived together for more than 50 years. Time never changed their love. Although Alzheimer's disease hits the wife, the husband never stopped loving and taking care of her, always serving her with a smile on his face.

On April 3, 2014, *Unsung Hero* was shown on YouTube and enjoyed over six million views. The film is about an anonymous man selflessly helping people and animals around him without expecting recognition or reward for his time and effort. Produced by Thai Life Insurance, this simple ad asks people to “believe in good” and give back to society.

Lastly, on August 5, 2014, one week before Thai Mother's Day, a film called *Street Concert* was shown on YouTube. It is about a boy who tries to play the guitar on the streets to earn funds for his mother's cancer medication.

INSIGHTS AND VALUES IN THAI FILMS

The comments and reactions from the viewers of the two genres of Thai film—the epic films about King Naresuan and the five short commercial films—can provide insights and values as expressed by Thai people as they experienced political unrest in the country. The Legend of King Naresuan I–VI series portray Thai values of unity and patriotism—a dramatic call for the whole nation while the short films of the Thai Life Insurance Company present values on the personal and family levels.

The most important Thai values are put into focus by and in these films:

1. “น้ำใจ,” “*Nahm-jai*,” which means “water that flows from the heart.” This refers to the genuine, unconditional generosity that comes straight from the heart, without any hidden agenda and expectation of anything in return.
2. “เกรงใจ,” “*Gkrehng-jai*,” which means “to be considerate” and “to be courteous.” When people have *gkrehng-jai*, they manifest considerate behavior toward persons. They resist imposing on someone by asking for a favor. They refrain

from doing something that they feel will overextend their boundary—a very important value for maintaining harmonious social relationships.

3. “ใจเย็น,” “*Jai-yen*,” which means “cool heart.” When people are *jai-yen*, it means they are patient, forgiving, accepting of the circumstances that life brings, easygoing. They can remain calm and collected even in the face of provocation or distress. In modern understanding, a person who has a cool heart is often regarded as emotionally mature.
4. The last is “น้ำหนึ่งใจเดียว,” “*Nahm-neung-jai-deaw*,” which means “one water and one heart,” “unity,” “solidarity” or “loyalty.” This refers to the Thai social value— collective and Asian in nature—of interdependence, social harmony, selflessness, obedience, conforming behavior, and pleasant relationships.
5. Thai people are heart people. In times of difficulty, using too much “head” to make peace and to reconstruct the nation to restore order may not be as effective as tapping into the heart where Thai core values of generosity, charity, patience, solidarity, desire for unity, gratitude, forgiveness and compassion may be found. These values could pave the way to national unity.

BIBLICAL THEOLOGY: GOD’S REVELATION IN THE OLD TESTAMENT AND IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

In the Scriptures, God reveals himself to humanity throughout the Old Testament and New Testament. The God of the Old Testament has made Himself known through persons, events, and nature.⁶ He is not a projection of human consciousness, God has entered actively and fully into the lives of people as a source of strength, not of weakness. God’s being is not a static substance to which action is subsequently added. Rather God’s being is known in His creative action and defined by communion in love. God has committed Himself in complete

⁶Brian S. Rosner, T. Desmond Alexander, Graeme Goldsworthy, and D. A. Carson, *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 89.

freedom to Israel and God's motivation is love (Deut 7:7-8). God remained free, sovereign and holy while taking upon himself the sin and sufferings of the world. God has willed salvation for His people. He continues to exercise his absolute power to fulfill it. God's presence is unfailing in spite of human weaknesses. God is God and not human (Hos 11:9), yet he has become 'God with us' (Isa 8:10).⁷

The story of Israel has become the story of humanity. Yahweh, the God of Israel, has become the God of all nations. If the Jews today can say, "With mighty hand, God brought us out of Egypt," so can the Christians who believe in God through Jesus Christ and his redemptive ministry in history.⁸

In the New Testament, writes Dwyer, God doesn't simply impart new information about the past, rather, he offers people radical and different ways of understanding human beings, by decoding meanings of words like "success" and "failure," "life" and "death."⁹

According to Carson, Jesus brought no new concept of God as people understand the Old Testament, but he affirmably shows in action the full extent of God's redemptive will for the world, which was present from the beginning. The New Testament presents the experience of [Jesus] Christ as the unique manifestation of God.

People name Jesus according to their experience of him: some are delighted in him; some are challenged by him; some feel threatened by him. Throughout the Gospel's narratives, people's response to Jesus has been determined by what they experienced. They decided on a name to give him. In the same way, his name was determined by the way people responded to him as well.¹⁰

One of the interesting marks of Jesus' ministry is how He has taught through storytelling. Jesus communicates His Truth through short narrative fiction in the form of parables. He invites his listeners to use their imagination and follow him into the world of realization. He hopes that his listeners will see things differently and get some

⁷Ibid., 358.

⁸Joseph Jensen, *God's Word to Israel* (Wilmington: Michael Glazier, 1983), 5.

⁹John C. Dwyer, *The Word was Made Flesh: An Introduction to the Theology of the New Testament* (Kansas City, MO: Sheed and Ward, 1989), 3-4.

¹⁰Denis McBride, *Jesus and the Gospels* (London: Redemptorist Publications, 2002).

inspiration, so that, when they leave the world of parable for the world of their experience, they will return with ‘new insight.’ This is the power of the parables, challenging the listeners to become better Christians for others.¹¹

DIALOGUE BETWEEN THE FILMS AND THE OLD AND NEW TESTAMENT

Johnston explains that the discussion between theology and movies can take many forms: It can note the explicit theological themes of given films or dialogues with the theme embedded both in movies and the Bible. It can bring film and biblical (or theological) text into conversation, or it can compare and contrast the Christ of the Gospels, with the metaphorical use of a Christ-figure to advance the meaning of a given movie. A few movies are even explicit depictions of the Jesus story, inviting correlation and critique. But whatever the shape is, the common denominator in such approach is the attempt to bring film and theology into a two-way conversation, letting both sides be equal partners in the dialogue.¹²

The film *The Legend of King Naresuan I-IV* communicates common understanding, patriotism, coexistence and peace to Thai people at a time of great difficulty in the country. The movie tells of the leader of the Thai people who introduced freedom, sovereignty, and unity to Ayutthaya Kingdom (Siam) from Burma. It may be compared to the story of God’s mighty deeds for Israelites and His relationship with them in the Old Testament. This is the God who got involved in the (human) history of salvation. Although there were no references to the power of a supreme God or to the supernatural, the deeds and actions of King Naresuan led the Thai people to an experience of divine grace.

Reverend Herbert Jump, a Congregationalist minister, has referred to movies as “modern-day parables.” He believes that the parables of Jesus share certain similarities with contemporary movies.

¹¹Ibid, 112.

¹²Johnston, *Reel Spirituality*, Location 1260 of 7581. Kindle Edition.

These dramatic stories are rooted in everyday experience and serve as effective means of communication with his audiences. The parable of the Good Samaritan, in particular, seems paradigmatic: the story is taken from contemporary experience rather than from the Scripture of Jesus's day. Its depiction of a violent robbery was exciting; and its realism allowed us to see and judge for ourselves the morals of the characters involved.¹³

The five short advertisement films of Thai Life Insurance could be compared to the parables of Jesus in present Thai society. They present stories of ordinary people who acted from their hearts—in the same way Jesus' parables spoke directly to the heart of the listeners to express basic truths. Both the short films and the parables of Jesus were told at a time of great trial—the films during a Thai crisis and Jesus' parables at a time when there was great confusion and misinterpretation of the Scriptures.

Christianity is, at its core, not an abstract philosophy, but a story; not pure factual reportage, but a recounting of one life in order that other lives might be transformed. Christian theology is rooted in the testimony of what has been both seen and lived—what is both real in its own right and redemptive in those who experience the story and respond to it. When preachers testify to the death and resurrection of Jesus and its efficacy for Christians, they are speaking of both past event and present reality. Stories provide this bridge.¹⁴

In this period of postmodern technology, films tell the stories. As with these Thai films, even without mention of God, Christ, angels, saints or Christians, the truth and meaning of life bridges Thai and other cultures with basic Christian teachings and aspirations.

Values and insights, such as unity, love, compassion, mercy, generosity, happiness, goodness, and forgiveness, are universal. People in the past, from ancient times to the present, have searched for these values over and over again. Ancient Israel, the priests and elders told

¹³Herbert Jump, *The Religious Possibilities of the Motion Picture* (New Britain, Conn.: South Congregational Church Private Distribution, 1911), reprinted in *The Silents of God: Selected Issues and Documents in Silent American Film and Religion, 1908–1925*, by Terry Lindvall (Lanham, Md.: Scarecrow, 2001), 55–56.

¹⁴Johnston, *Reel Spirituality*, Location 2102 of 7581. Kindle Edition.

and recorded these truths in the “Sacred Scriptures” or what is now known as the Bible. Two thousand years ago, Jesus proclaimed these truths to his disciples, and people came to know these as the “Good News” or “Gospels.” Even in Thai society, especially at this time of strife and internal conflict in the country, these truths are sought and proclaimed in the epic and short commercial films presented in this paper, as well as in many others produced in the last decade.

THE THEOLOGY OF THAI FILMS: WHEN GOD IS REVEALED IN THAI HUMAN EXPERIENCE

In his book, *God in Popular Culture*, Andrew Greeley introduces the idea that “God’s self-disclosure happens through objects, events, and people.”¹⁵ As such, he also believes that a movie is “a medium that represents the relationship of God and humans.” Moviemakers might not intend to have the products of their efforts called “a celebration of grace,” but that is what Christians recognize it to be. Greeley goes further by pointing out that the filmmakers scan, at times, disclose God’s presence “even more sharply and decisively” than God has chosen to do through creation itself.

Johnston supports this idea and explains further in his reflection that God lives, and it is in the particular concrete experiences of life, including those in movies, that a sense of the divine is being conveyed. These experiences, though partial, invite our theological reflection.

He explains that a movie extends its effects to people differently. It is not only that movies have something to do with the varied background and life experiences of the audience; it has to do with the mystery of God’s presence.

Johnston notes that “the presence of God in the life of people . . . through their hopes, their fears, their love and their aspirations, which is primarily what movies can capture and create.”¹⁶ People can relate to find their lives in the films. Films are narratives of life. In a way, films

¹⁵Greeley, *God in Popular Culture*, 17.

¹⁶Johnston, *Reel Spirituality*, Location 2679 of 7581. Kindle Edition.

could serve as a way of proclaiming the good news in people's lives. They offer a venue where people experience redemption from sorrows, healing from wounds, and learning from mistakes. From films, people imbibe wisdom that is essential to living life well. Thus, one can say that films are indeed narratives that bring out messages of salvation—salvation that God offers to His people constantly.

CONCLUSION: THE GOOD NEWS IN HUMAN STORIES

In their particularity, movies have the capacity to portray life's universal or absolute truths, which are also present in many religious beliefs, cultures, and ways of life. Rooted in the content of the stories, these universal truths or common values are a natural point of connection between theology and film. These values, insights, and truths do not need to be intentionally Christian or be significant for Christians wanting to make theological connections. Johnston believes that they need only to be rooted authentically in life itself.

The Thai films studied—*The Legend of King Naresuan* and six short commercial films (*My Girl*, *Melody of Life*, *Silence of Love*, *Forget Me Not*, *Unsung Hero*, and *Street Concert*)—are stories of people's experiences presented as screenplays. Written and captured on film, they are also works of Thai history portraying, at one end, the grand and heroic legacy of its people and, on the other, everyday life and ordinary struggles. Within these stories are good news, which people can learn from and relate to in their contemporary lives. Their viewing experience is also an experience of redemption and salvation. Thus, without necessarily being Christian believers, Thai filmmakers have used the essence of the Good News as a root metaphor for reality and society.¹⁷

¹⁷R. Johnston, *Reel Spirituality*, Location 3197 of 7581 Kindle Edition.

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