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Negotiating the meaning of film for intercultural pastoral work: *Tsotsi* and the cry for humanity ²

ABSTRACT

Acknowledging the fact that stories play a very important role in Africa, it is a given that, with the emphasis on the narrative accent, the medium of film is regarded as an important expression of meaning giving. The award winning movie “Tsotsi”, by the director Gavin Wood and based on the novel with the same title by Athol Fugard, portrays contemporary South Africa revealing heartbreaking realities of poverty, HIV and/or AIDS and crime. In exploring the fact that films from other countries could be considered as prime vehicles for cultural and religious exploration, not only in content and form, but also in audience reception, the proposed ABDCE-research paradigm for intercultural pastoral work is followed. Accordingly to this paradigm, and concurrent to the narratives portrayed in film, the movements of Action, Background, Development, Climax and Ending could constitute a narrative research paradigm and epistemology. In following this methodology the focus in the paper will be on exploring and describing the background that informed the development of the movie “Tsotsi” within the South African context. In the practice of the development of a form of practical wisdom which values the stories of people and communities, it is described how the pastoral paradigm portrayed by film could assist people to give meaning to their humanity.

1. INTRODUCTION

Acknowledging the fact that “... in Africa we do things together through stories ...” (Manaka 2001:5), it was a given that, with the emphasis on the meaning of narrative accent that has grown throughout the world, the medium of film as “... fictional narrative ...” (Lynch 2007:122) was the natural choice in exploring some insights from Africa concerning humanity and identity.

Louw (2008:399) is correct in stating that film has developed into an important technological and visual expression by which to give meaning. Acknowledging this fact, the relevance of theology is demonstrated as “...showing such interest in culture, media and film...(and)... On this basis, it is legitimate to conclude that as a form of practical theology, ‘theology through film’ simply illustrates in a contemporary way how theological reflection happens most naturally” (Marsh 2007:168-169).

In film, as one of “... culture’s major storytelling and myth-producing medium[s]” (Johnston 2007:16), important paradigmatic developments are portrayed. Cilliers (2007:10), in conjunction

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with the French philosopher Debray, described the progression of the paradigms through which culture has been communicated throughout history by referred to them as eras or spheres of communication, namely the logo-sphere (oral tradition), grapho-sphere (printed media), and the video-sphere (transmission of images via electronic means).

Acknowledging the narrative connection between novel and film Monaco (1981:27) confirms that "The narrative potential of film is so marked that it has developed its strongest bond with the novel ...". In agreeing with Ortiz (2007:85) that films from other countries could be considered not only in content and form but also in audience reception as prime vehicles for cultural and religious exploration, the proposed ABDCE-research paradigm (Müller 2001:64-70; Müller, Van Deventer & Human 2001:80), as a possible exponent of narrative research, is used in negotiating the meaning of film for intercultural pastoral work in Africa, as particularly portrayed in the movie "Tsotsi". Accordingly to this paradigm, and concurrent to the narratives portrayed in film, movements of Action, Background, Development, Climax, and Ending could constitute a narrative research paradigm and epistemology. In departing on this endeavour of exploring the possible meaning of film for intercultural work within an African context the words of Louw (2004:35) is remembered: "...that for a theologia Africana and a pastoral paradigm, God images should make God present to the context of Africa within an understanding of African spirituality."

2. ACTION

On 28 December 1895, the audiovisual culture was born when 35 people witnessed the first movie being shown in Paris, France (Van der Merwe 2002:154). The meaning of this groundbreaking and historical event is described as follow by Mitchell and Plate (2007:1):

The setting for cinema's creation myth is Paris's Grand Cafe in December, 1895. An expectant audience had gathered to see the Lumière brothers' new invention, the cinematography, the latest in a string of visual technologies that emerged through the nineteenth century: from the camera lucida to the stereoscope, from the daguerreotype to photographic film. Each of these inventions offered fascinating possibilities for seeing the world in new ways.

This historical event escalated when, in 1979, George Atkinson opened the first movie rental store, making the ongoing viewing and reviewing of movies a possibility (Johnston 2007:15). With the help of technological and marketing advances this medium has grown remarkably and every human has become a viewer (Doubell 2008:140). Being a viewer and seeing the world in new ways implies that the viewer must experience some sort of change or action that is altering the existing picture.

"Action!" usually indicates the movement when the recording cameras start rolling on the movie-set. To our mind, a good empirical scrutiny of people and the action in which they are involved portray an honest and serious effort to describe the 'now' of the action (Müller, Van Deventer & Human 2001:80). We would propose that important links exist between the cinematic phenomenon and developments within the pastoral care field, especially understanding that, in film, we are "... moving beyond a 'literary paradigm'" (Johnston 2007:19).

During the twentieth century, pastoral care indicated specific evolutionary developments. Moving from a kerygmatic, therapeutic phase to a new, hermeneutic phase, since the seventies, with the emphasis on a rich description entertaining various perspectives with the emphasis on "... plausible forms of interdisciplinary dialogue" (Demasure & Müller 2006:418), space is found to facilitate the discussion between film and pastoral care. Moving towards an understanding

of intercultural pastoral care as a process of social-constructionism in which it is all about the interaction with people and their actions, film hermeneutically mediates our interaction with the action so that we can become part of the action (Müller, Van Deventer & Human 2001:80). Therefore, one can rightfully assume that “[t]he theology that emerges from this kind of engagement is not so much a theology of answers as a theology of engagement” (Taylor 2007:67). From this perspective, one can become part of a theology of engagement and the opening up of new horizons of understanding “...about the engagement of the church with the existential realities of life” (Louw 2009:126).

As part of the Action-movement, the film “Tsotsi” could be an example of the embodiment of the described theology of engagement. The movie “Tsotsi”, which received the Academy Award for Best Foreign Language Film in 2006 (Wikipedia 2008: electronic source), portrayed a possible Africa accent in the development of a theology of engagement focusing on contextual themes like HIV and/or AIDS, poverty and crime. The movie is based on the novel with the same title by Athol Fugard (1980) and portrays six days in the violent life of a young Johannesburg gang leader. Originally the novel portrayed a brutal tale set in Sophiatown, a black township in Johannesburg, that was razed in the 1950’s to make way for the homes of whites. Gavin Wood, the director of the film, used the novel in portraying a contemporary South Africa, revealing an even more powerful and political portrait of the heartbreaking and painful realities of poverty and the scourge of HIV and/or AIDS, which eventually results in brutal crime.

3. BACKGROUND

The word “Background” could be understood against the metaphor of a movie-set décor. The action, previously described, is played out against this background, which is alive with associations and connotations of the past and therefore often means revisiting these previous situations (Müller, Van Deventer & Human 2001:83). The Background to the South African movie “Tsotsi” could evoke associations associated with the legacy of apartheid, the growing pains of a teenager South-African democratic disposition, as well as the recent xenophobic attacks reported in the world media. More specifically, the following notes on “Tsotsi”’s background:

Changes in the social and demographic characteristics of South Africa, which occur through urbanisation and migrant labour, led to the disintegration of the family support network (Decker & Winkle 1996:2) and to many young people roaming the streets and being vulnerable to criminal activities (Glaser 2000:22). The character’s name, “Tsotsi”, like many young people, who were orphaned by HIV and/or AIDS and who have been abandoned by their families because of poverty, has a deeper meaning (Fugard 1980:19). The name “Tsotsi” literally means “thug” or “gangster” in the street language of the South African townships and ghettos. The term represents a potent reality that was at the core of the soul of apartheid. It referred to a style of narrow-bottomed trousers that became popular among the urban African youth in the early 1940’s (Glaser 2000:50) and is derived from the Sesotho “ho tsotsa” meaning “to sharpen”, which refers to the shape of the trouser (Glaser 2000:50). Initially used to refer to the trousers worn by young men in townships as a symbol of urban sophistication, the term “Tsotsi” later became used to refer to a specific sub-cultural style amongst the youth and gradually widened to incorporate urban juvenile delinquents (Glaser 2000:20).

Taking the images portrayed seriously, it could be agreed with Ortiz (2007:85) that, due to the fact that cinema has become a universal mode of entertainment, the film has become a lens for viewers through which they can glimpse different ways of living and religious values, yet recognize a common humanity. Schneiders (2005:26) refer to this ‘common humanity’ as “...the recognition that spirituality is an anthropological constant, a constitutive dimension of

the humanum". In agreement with Louw (2008:398) that spirituality is embedded within many written and visual texts (also in the film "Tsotsi") in secular society, one could wonder what this might mean in terms of our ability to change the stories we tell about ourselves, others, and the Other (Ortiz 2007:85).

When it is portrayed in the film how "Tsotsi" carjacked a woman, his past creeps into the present and the viewer is invited to retrieve or visit the past. Understanding the given that every room of our lives is about memory (Müller, Van Deventer & Human 2001:83), the story portrayed in the film invites people to re-visit their rooms and places of the past, helping them to place their actions against their background, against where they come from. The fact is acknowledged that human beings survive through their memories, which are wrapped in stories, and that the healing often comes from these narratives (Botman & Peterson 1996:161). Narratives of memory, in which real events are recalled, stand to guarantee an occasion for some serious moments of reflection (Nuttall & Coetzee 1999:20) and mark a movement from repression to expression. Although visiting the past might be painful, not doing so, would be to trivialize and ignore human identity and human dignity (Botman & Peterson 1996:160).

5. DEVELOPMENT

Embedded within the metaphor of film is the "Development" of "... the drama, the actions, the tensions..." (Lamot 1995:62). In the development of the formation of pastoral theory, different paradigmatic movements can be identified (Müller 1996:7-17; Louw 2005:7-9; Ganzevoort & Visser 2007:95-99). Firstly, there is a movement from a one-sided preaching model to a participatory pastorate in which the pastor is instrumental in the guiding of people to the discovery of God's involvement in their lives. The fact that the context is being taken into account and that there is a shift away from the one-sided professional approach to the mutual caring of believers are represented in this. There is another movement from a therapeutic to a hermeneutic orientated pastorate with emphasis on and acknowledging "... the endeavour to read, understand and interpret texts within contexts. Hermeneutics underlined anew the importance of our human quest for meaning... (and) the importance of compassion: the dimension of pathos in theology" (Louw 2003:54).

Taking into consideration that it is not only about storytelling, but also about story development, we are constantly looking and waiting for new, better stories to develop (Müller, Van Deventer & Human 2001:92). It is during this time of looking and awaiting that the person watching the movie is editing the visuals on screen with the images from her of his own experience leading to the construction of an own film (Ganzevoort 2006:125). This alone has some powerful implications to be negotiated within a pastoral therapeutic process especially acknowledging and understanding that "Film has always been an important medium for the exploration of religious themes and images..." (Hoover 2006:50).

Acknowledging the fact that "...film may be the most powerful form of artistic expression used in contemporary culture" (Flesher & Torry 2007:1), the pastoral therapeutic process is facilitated in film with amongst other the use of music, which brings so-called codes to the audience watching. With emotional codes, the audience are told how the characters are feeling or how they must feel; with the dramatic codes, the music usually support and strengthen the narrative effect; with cultural codes, music is being used to tell us where we are (Taylor 2007: 65-66).

Although it may be true that living in an image-driven world, implies that films from Hollywood or Bollywood continue to bombard screens and shelves (Mitchell & Plate 2007:79); it is also worthwhile and important for the intercultural context of this research and especially watching

a foreign film from Africa; with the ability to open the world to audiences; to take note of the function of subtitles which

“... allow us to hear other people’s voice intact and give us a full access to their subjectivity. Subtitles acknowledge that our language... is only one of many languages in the world” (Ortiz 2007:75).

The contours of the dynamics of this phase of Development are amongst other being illustrated and voiced by the gang-subculture depicted in the movie “Tsotsi”. According to Jonker (2004:20), each person not only has, but also lives a biography, reflexively organized in terms of flows of social and psychological information about possible ways of life. A gang, as also depicted in the movie by the relationship between “Tsotsi” and his friends, is born out of the spontaneous effort of individuals to create a society for themselves, where none adequate to their needs exist (Decker & Winkle 1996:5). As soon as the dominant discourse is sufficiently convincing to be shared by many, it has a normative impact on the personal identity of individuals that belong to the same dialogical community. The way the young people in a gang understand their lives is influenced by the broader story of the gang culture (Morgan 2000:9). In the film “Tsotsi” it is illustrated how close-minded people like gang members who initially believe that change is impossible is move by other to recognise their own and others humanity. The film reflect the reality of the challenges that many young people face in society; that after the advent of the new socio-economic dispensation, they still find themselves in a state of absolute poverty. At the same time, it portrays that the road to redemption is paved with potholes.

6. CLIMAX

With “Climax”, the summit of a process is envisaged where “...everything comes together in the climax, after which things are different for the main characters, different in some real way” (Lamot 1995:62). In formulating a theory of introduction for the meaning of film for intercultural pastoral care, it is taken for granted that pastoral care presupposes the human being and that insights from theological, philosophical, and human sciences’ anthropological views determine not only the pastoral encounter, but also the therapeutic outcome (Lester 1995:4; Louw 1999:17; Ganzevoort & Visser 2007:37). Using the above as possible coordinates for mapping the meaning of film for intercultural pastoral care, discovering the possible meaning for humanity and identity, one discovers with Johnston (2007:16) that:

“... movies function as a primary source of power and meaning for people throughout the world. Along with the church, the synagogue, the mosque, and the temple, they often provide people stories through which they can understand their lives ... But people within the church and outside it also recognize that movies providing primary stories around which we shape our lives ... Presenting aspects of their daily lives both intimate and profound (real and imagined), movies exercise our moral and religious imagination.”

“Tsotsi” is challenging this moral and religious imagination in portraying the relationship of the young mother with “Tsotsi” and caring for her own child as well as for the stolen baby. The young mother’s encounters with “Tsotsi” eventually compelled him to confront his own violent nature leading to his decision to return the baby. In this act the movie portrays that reconciliation is a worthier goal than notoriety. Reconciliation is therefore associated with liberating the human being from the conflicting political and social forces that determine his/her life (Vorster 1986:1). Telling these stories allows access to the major events within the human live(s) as was among other illustrated by the Truth and Reconciliation Process in South Africa providing alternative

stories and new avenues for healing (Botman & Peterson 1996:156).

7. ENDING

The “Ending” of the film “Tsotsi” portrays sadness, resignation as well as glimpses of hope. After returning the child back to his rightful parents, “Tsotsi” is held at gun point by the police arresting him. In putting his hands up in obedience of the police officer’s command, and by that portrayed a Christ-like figure in a dramatic twilight zone, the traumatic story comes to an end and leading to the start of a new unscreened story in the imagination of the audience.

In portraying this overlapping longitudes and latitudes of the possible meaning of film for intercultural pastoral work, the expectation is to develop from these perspectives a form of practical wisdom, which values the stories of people and communities. It is therefore agreed with Müller, Van Deventer and Human (2001:76-96) that “...[i]nstead of working with hypotheses of what should be, we would rather like to firstly understand the habitus, which refers to a kind of practical knowledge within which human social action... constructs culture...” It is then, within the video-sphere, that we are especially looking for the hand of God as shown on the public podium of culture (Ganzevoort 2006:123). Discovering this Presence, one might come to understand that “[t]he hope offered by popular films differs from that of Christianity, but it is a hope nonetheless, and its religious character should be recognized” (Lyden 2007:217).

6. CONCLUSION

“‘Tsotsi’ is a story of poverty, hopelessness, and struggle transformed into faith and a profound moral re-awakening leading to a better future – ‘Tsotsi’ is another appropriate representation of the Age of Hope” (President Thabo Mbeki, President of South Africa. News24.com 2006:electronic source).

This statement by the previous President of South Africa about the movie “Tsotsi” reflects the reality about South Africa as a country that is undergoing a radical transformation since the apartheid era. Although, unfortunately, there are still many challenges to overcome like poverty (Schwabe 2004:1) and the treat of HIV and/or AIDS (Dorrington et al 2006: i), there is also an optimistic search for a new identity and for finding meaning amidst a diverse array of people.

In recognizing this fact and agreeing with Marsh (2007:169) that Practical Theology describes a process using all available resources like the products of culture present to people, on the issues and questions in life, perspectives for the intertwining relationship between film and theology (Mitchell & Plate 2007:2) was portrayed in this article. In exploring some of the recent important pastoral paradigmatic developments, as amongst other portrayed within the movie “Tsotsi”, it was indicated by using a narrative methodology, how film could possible assist people giving meaning to their humanity.

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KEY WORDS

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TREFWOORDE

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