

Questions to consider when watching a film

These questions are from Appendix 1 of *Focus: The Art and Soul of Cinema* (Damaris, 2007). They are intended to help you organise your thinking as you watch a film, and also serve as a summary of the book. It is a long list – and it is still far from comprehensive. Clearly it is not something which can be memorised as a whole, but I would strongly recommend memorising the ten main headings to help you structure your thinking about a film while you are watching it, or while talking to friends about it afterwards. I would also urge you to learn the five key worldview questions (questions 9 a–e below) as a framework for thinking about this vital aspect of films.

As well as helping you in your own thinking about movies, these questions also provide a useful framework for group discussions (in a CultureWatch Group,¹ for example). You can download guidelines for leading discussions from the *Focus* microsite at www.damaris.org/focus. Group discussions immediately after a film benefit significantly from ten minutes in which the members can reflect quietly on the film before sharing their thoughts with others. Extrovert members who like to do all their thinking aloud may be champing at the bit, but will still find it useful. Those who tend more towards introversion will find this space of time invaluable.

1. Initial response

- How did the film make you feel?
- What aspect of the film did you most engage with? What will you remember?
- What does it make you think about?
- Would you watch it again? Why/why not?
- How would a second viewing be different? What would you focus on?
- How would different people view this film differently (dependent on gender, age, ethnic background, worldview, etc)?

2. What is the place of this film within the culture?

- How popular is this film? How well did it do at the box office?
- How influential is it? Has it been referenced in later films, television programmes, etc.?
- What kind of buzz has it created? What media exposure has the film received? What has the critical response (reviews in newspapers, websites, etc.) been? Why?

- How are cultural references (to history, books, films, music, etc.) used?
- Is history treated fairly, or twisted to suit the film-makers' purposes?
- If the film is an adaptation of earlier material, how faithful is it to the original? What changes have been made? Why?

3. How well has the film been made?

- Is artistic and technical excellence achieved by screenplay, direction, cinematography, acting, editing, special effects, soundtrack?
- What were the particular strengths and weaknesses?

a) Who are the film-makers? (See Chapter 4)

- Who wrote the screenplay (and the original story if the film is an adaptation)?
- Who directed and produced the film?
- Do the writers and directors have a characteristic style or particular preoccupations? What does this tell you?
- What do we know about the worldviews of these people – from their other work or from interviews?

b) Acting performances

- What did you think of the casting?
- What expectations were created by the use of particular actors?
- Which performances particularly stood out?

4. What was the original context of the film? (See Chapter 3)

- When was the film made? What was the prevailing worldview?
- Does the film endorse this worldview or represent a challenge to it?

5. What is the genre? (See Chapter 6)

- Is it fantasy, biography, drama, comedy, science fiction, historical drama, horror, romance, war, western, romantic comedy, film noir, documentary, etc.?
- What are the conventions of this genre?
- How are genre conventions reinforced or subverted?

6. How is the narrative structured? (See Chapter 5)

- What is the plot – what happens (in summary)?
- When do the turning points in the narrative come? Are the major sections evenly balanced?

a) Consistency, cause and effect

- Are the events in the story presented as a chain of cause and effect or are there unmotivated coincidences?
- Does God have a role, or is there an impersonal force of fate?
- Is the invented reality consistent?
- If reality is inconsistent, is this because it is set in a dream or some other fantasy? Why? What does this communicate?
- Is time linear or nonlinear?

b) Who is the protagonist?

- Does the film feature single protagonist, dual protagonists (two sharing the same goals), parallel protagonists (two equally-balanced protagonist with opposing goals) or multiple protagonists?
- How would you describe the protagonist(s) (active or passive, character, etc.)?
- What are the protagonist(s) goals? Is there a time deadline?
- What worldview is represented by the protagonist(s)?

c) What is the force of antagonism?

- What problems are faced by the protagonist(s)?

- How do these relate to the Fall?
- Do the forces of antagonism represent a particular worldview?

d) Who are the other characters?

- How would you describe them?
- What worldview(s) do they represent?
- What do they want?
- Who is my favourite character? Why?
- Which characteristic would I want to imitate?

e) Consequences and change

- What choices do the characters make?
- What other changes take place?
- What motivate the choices and changes?
- What are the consequences?

f) How is resolution achieved?

- Is the ending closed or open?
- Has there been any external change?
- Are the problems resolved? How? If not, why not?
- What self-discovery has the protagonist made?
- How are the characters able to find the answers they need?
- Does the film ultimately affirm or undercut the worldview it initially appears to support?

7. How is meaning created? (See Chapters 4 and 5)

a) Mise en scène

- How is the film lit?
- Is colour significant? If so, how?
- Where is the camera for key shots? What angles does it shoot from?
- How were long shots, close-ups, etc. used?
- Whose point of view does the camera represent?
- How did the sets, locations and props contribute to the meaning of the film?
- How is our attention drawn to particular images?
- Are there any recurring motifs?
- Are there significant symbols and metaphors?
- How else could key shots have been filmed – why did the director do it in this way (paradigmatic meaning)?

b) Editing

- What is the editing style?
- How are non-standard edits (match cuts, dissolves, wipes, jump cuts, etc.) used?
- Are there any particularly significant edits?
- How does the editing contribute to the meaning of the film?

c) Soundtrack

- What emotional effect did the soundtrack create?
- Did any sound effects contribute to the meaning at any point?
- How did the score enhance your understanding of scenes?

d) Titles

- Was any important information given on title cards?
- How did they affect your understanding of the film?

8. What are the key themes? (See Chapter 7)

- Morality, politics, religion, sexuality, happiness, freedom, love, spirituality, identity, etc.
- How does the theme develop and become clear?
- How is the theme explored and emphasized?
- Is the theme explored in fresh ways?
- How do other films handle the theme?
- Are there any religious themes or connections? How is faith treated (if at all)?
- Are there any echoes of Christ? If so, how are they dealt with?

9. What is the worldview? (See Chapter 2)

a) What is the view of reality?

- Is the physical world all there is, or is there a spiritual dimension as well? Which is more important?
- Why is the world like it is? Where did it come from?
- What kind of God or gods are there, if any? If so, what are they like? Or is fate used as a substitute for God?

b) What is the view of humanity?

- What are the distinctive things – if any – about human beings?
- Where did we come from?
- What happens when we die?
- Is the film pessimistic or optimistic about human nature?
- Do human beings have genuine freedom, or are they entirely subject to forces beyond their control?
- Do characters show any evidence of spirituality?
- What is the point of life?
- Are some human beings more important than others?

- Is community viewed as fractured and dysfunctional or united and nurturing?
- What is the view of the family? How do families function?
- Who is the butt of any humour? Why?

c) What is the view of knowledge?

- How do characters know what is true – through experience, logic, intuition or revelation?
- What is the film's view on these different ways of knowing?
- How do the characters make decisions?
- Where does wisdom come from?
- Where does meaning come from?
- What is film's the view of truth?

d) What is the view of right and wrong?

- Is there any objective morality? Is there such a thing as good and evil?
- How do characters know right and wrong?
- Are the characters concerned primarily with the consequences of our actions, with ethical principles, or with being a good person?
- What do the characters value?
- What are the film's values – the attitudes toward truth, life, sex, family, community, etc.? Are these the same as the central characters or different? Why?
- What does goodness or beauty mean? How are they seen in the film?
- Is there any judgment on wrong-doing?

e) What is the fundamental problem confronting all human beings, and what is the solution?

- What is the basic problem which stops the characters being fulfilled? Is this seen as true for all humanity?

- What do we most need in life?
- What is the nature of evil? How can we be saved from it?

f) How well does the worldview measure up?

- What do the film-makers want me to take away from this film?
- Do the ideas *cohere*? (Do they hang together and make sense?) Which ones do and which do not?
- Do the ideas work? What happens if you push them a little further? What kinds of tensions and difficulties would you run into? Where does it all come crashing down?
- Do these ideas *correspond* with reality? Do they describe the world as it really is? Or are they a distortion, or even complete invention? Do they ignore some significant factor?

10. Truth, error and implications (see Chapters 2, 7 and 8)

- What resonates with you? Why?
- What truth or insight, error or blindness do you find in the film?
- What aspects of the film are consistent or inconsistent with the Bible?
- Is the film sensitive to the difficulties, dilemmas and tensions of life?
- What else reflects the image of God in human beings?
- How is human rebellion against God expressed?
- Is there any evidence of the longing for God (a longing for peace)?
- What substitutes for God does the film show?
- 'How might this film affect viewers as they return to their everyday activity? Will it inspire more hope and faith, or more despair? Will it encourage viewers to have courage, or will it enflame their fears? Will it inspire responsibility or recklessness?'²

Notes

¹ See www.damaris.org/culturewatchgroups for information.

² Jeffrey Overstreet, *Arts and Faith* discussion forum – artsandfaith.com/index.php?showtopic=10108.