

Liberty University English Department

# **How the Power of Film Inspires Christianity**

A Thesis Submitted to

Dr. Durrell Nelson

In Partial Fulfillment of the Degree of

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By

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Liberty University English Department

Thesis Approval Sheet

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### Dedication

This thesis and its artifact, *Ruthie's Game*, the screenplay about a family dealing with the supernatural world of Christianity, is dedicated to my family, friends, and the audience waiting for the show to begin.

### Acknowledgements

I am beyond grateful for life experiences that inspired me to begin my college education again in midlife and to complete with my master's degree at sixty. Each path opened doors with life lessons and people as guides. Above all, my faith has provided strength when completing seemed distant. It is with a whole heart, great health, and preparedness that I begin this next adventure.

### Abstract

*Ruthie's Game* is a screenplay designed to repeat supernatural episodic events, which, according to research, may act as foundations for faith systems because watching films is a prayerful act, and the more it is repeated the longer the brain stores the memory. The thesis explores how Christian messages are received through film with a brief on the science behind the brain's activities and how it reflexes film's episodic events for later use. Testimonies, interviews, and personal comments show an audience seeking secular films with intellectual storyline and with no preaching to the choir. *Ruthie's Game* shares Christian messages in an entertaining storyline with surprising supernatural events. Realistic characters face relatable family drama, and each overcomes personal obstacles.

### Artist's Statement

This thesis is a conceptualization of how Christian messages in film are referenced by audiences. Physical transcendence is a preposterous story. A man was killed and three days later, rose from the dead, said he went to Hell and Heaven, and was the son of God, and interacted with others on Earth and because of his resurrection, anyone who believes in Him will have life after death. Spiritual transcendence is a challenging concept. Convincing nonbelievers is plausible, though, and the power of film is one way to begin the believer's journey. When a non-believer views a supernatural phenomenon in film, brain maps form and scientific studies reveal episodic events in socioemotional films are later used in real life. Films include movies and television productions. Testimonies indicate the same experience. Because science and people both show the power of film may build faith journeys, film may be the best way to inspire belief in the supernatural world of Christianity.

### Scientific Argument

One argument covers how audience members' individual historical reference as an environmental factor to openness affects the belief of phenomena. The argument includes the science behind referentiality in cinematic discourse as it relates to episodic memory and how people form concepts. "Rapid Memory Reactivation at Movie Event Boundaries Promotes Episodic Encoding," by Marta Silva et al, in *The Journal of Neuroscience: The Official Journal of the Society for Neuroscience*, suggests socioemotional movies that create episodic events are stored in memory and may be referenced in the long term for real life (pars. 39-42). "Memory for specific episodic events are the building blocks of our autobiographical memory" (Silva par. 2). Therefore, a relatable film is paramount in forming memory because, as Silva indicates, episodic memory is in the autobiographical section of memory. Which is interesting, because during play



times with youngsters, ages from six to twelve, when engaged with the story game, each youngster applies their own personal aspect to the story game, claiming it as their own. It may also be said what is experienced during screen viewing is a future message, a connection to be harvested when needed, and the need for reaching people about the Bible's messages with screen productions has never been more crucial.

### **Decline of American Christians**

Christianity is not as popular as it was a few years ago. Reading is not as popular either, but screen productions are growing in popularity. A December 2022 Gallup poll shows Americans are reading less than any prior surveyed year since 1990 (Jones par. 1). A Pew Research Poll shows 73% of Americans watch TV or movies daily (par. 1). The World Christian Database reads that in 2020, 74.16% of Americans were Christian. This is troubling, because in Dec. 2021, a Gallup article by Jeffrey M. Jones writes in 1950, 90% of Americans were Christian. That is a significant drop. According to Jones, in 2021, only 69% of Americans are Christian, which leaves 31% as lost. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, on May 16, 2022, there are 332,680,114 American citizens. That 31% of lost souls translates to 103,130,835 American citizens who need Christ. This data reveals there are fewer opportunities for people to be influenced by Christian theology.

### **Research, The Vision of the Screenplay, and Literary Context**

The research covers early and recent screen productions, books by scholars on the film industry and by theologians, articles, statements by industry professionals, interviews, and testimonies.

The vision of this paper includes arguing the need for more secular films with Christian messages. The ultimate vision is for *Ruthie's Game*, the companion screenplay for this thesis to be produced to grow God's love by planting messages for real life.

*Ruthie's Game* is written for production with a combination of real-life performance and animation with superheroes. Because people need to be reached from where they are coming from, such as from their love of drama, family adventure, horror, animation, and romance, and every conceivable genre, the world of screen productions is a buffet of platforms for sharing Christian messages. But psychology shows some mediums are better than others. Furthermore, the conclusion of this research suggests supernatural transcendence messages are more widely received in films rather than Hollywood productions. Which makes *Ruthie's Game* an ideal candidate for an Indie, Independent, or Christian film producer.

The literary context of films will be discussed as they relate to the thesis and will be threaded throughout the paper, with a concentration on the screenplay, *Ruthie's Game*. It is family drama with a touch of horror and demonstrates how phenomenology in cinematic discourse is referenced differently depending on individual historical references.

In the screenplay, Grandma Ruthie must save her grandkids from a story game threatening their lives after a goofy angel brings their toys to life. Protagonist, Sammy, is autistic and Grandma Ruthie has watched over him and taught him and his brothers the power of prayer. Her daughter, Suzie, is the antagonist, and was raised Christian, but has lost her faith after her husband's recent sudden death and is facing financial woes. Suzie is angry her mother has not shared proceeds from the sale from the family beach-front property and grows angrier when Ruthie plans to leave her 2k acre farm to the state of Florida as a wilderness preserve. Suzie forces her mother into a nursing home. Without Grandma, Sammy gets lost—literally, but his

childlike faith and determination to find proof of the supernatural world for his mother to believe grows stronger as he overcomes each obstacle.

Harry the angel is Ruthie's (deceased) grandfather, and visits in the nursing home on the first day of Ruthie's arrival. His timing is remarkable. Ruthie had a mini stroke en route to the nursing home, and another when unpacking her suitcase. He grants a wish in exchange to live on the farm while he is "AWOL." The wish is for Suzie and her grandchildren to know God is real. The wish gets tangled with the children's story game and the toys enlarge and threaten their lives. Harry tries to help, but when Harry helps, expect chaos. The kids must go to Grandma Ruthie to end the game before it is too late. Brick Johnstone, a professor of health psychology at the University of Missouri, shares in his blog, *NeuroSpirit*, that transcendence is experienced when people escape "the self," such as when reading a book or watching a movie (par 12). This research suggests the relaxed brain enjoying escapism allows for transcendence pathways to form. A wide path is needed to believe the most preposterous story ever told, the story of Jesus' transcendence as real, and that His gift is the supernatural world. Of course, this secular film does not go into detail on transcendence. The storyline shows the transcendence when Ruthie dies and Suzie's faith changes and, in the end, when Suzie sees Harry as the angel and her entire demeanor glows, like the landscape, and Ruthie's gift, which is not revealed in this thesis.

The story depicts people at their worst, needing God, and filled with intransigence, refusing to believe until miracles are seen. But before they believe, they endure trials—while battling hungry dinosaurs, a giant mouse, chomping hair claws, alligators, a mad mermaid, and an army of baby dolls. The miracle of the toys coming to life serves to entertain and show the power of prayer as worked in the story game, while demonstrating that evil is also thriving. All while little Sammy uses the power of prayer and thrives.

When Harry grants the wish, and Ruthie assists, their prayer is unknowingly intercepted, and this is not blatantly shown or discussed in the screenplay. It is subtle and suggestive of dark forces. During the wish-granting prayer, the lights in Ruthie's room flicker and dim. When Suzie's anger is mentioned, a lightbulb pops. It forms an arrow, which is a satanic symbol, and it points toward Ruthie. This shows the referentiality in content-dependent actions as character's wishes.

In one scene, Harry is aggravated and voices his dislike and wishes for alligators, and the outcome is deadly. The dinosaurs, the miracle toys, fight the living alligators, and some alligators do not survive. Suzie voices her dislike for her mother's preference to saving the land for alligators and other wildlife. Shortly after, a herd of Chilesaurus dinosaurs peck the back of an alligator until they rip off the scutes to dine on its flesh.

The significance of the dinosaurs being destructive is that they were the plastic toys brought to life by the human's story game, while the alligators were formed by God's intended design. This parallel comparison may be a reflective concept referenced after viewing the movie by an audience akin to the idea of divine creation and problems with human intervention.

These dangerous and dark dinosaur scenes show that when people are in the throes of running for their lives or evading danger like Harry, up in the sky, they may become so overpowered with their fear that they forget to pray. They rely on self-dedication instead of God, much like Franklin, the saucy middle child in *Ruthie's Game*. But as the storyline shows, the wish-granting prayer system of the story game Harry accidentally empowered is the same system that may be used to change a dangerous dinosaur back into lifeless plastic. Thank goodness, Sammy has Ruthie's gift that helps him remember to pray. But does he truly need a tangible

object with his brave childlike faith? The storyline reveals the answer in the end when Sammy shares the gift.

### **The Phenomenological Research**

The philosophical perspective of prayer is part of the background of this thesis. For believers of a higher power, prayer is the act of solemn expression to God. Consider the solemnness in most screen productions' audience attitudes, believers and not, when they are "into" a film. The attitude of solemnness, being sincere and honest, is seen when an audience does not answer the phone when watching a screen production. It is seen when the audience later tells people about the screen production with thoughtfulness. Prayer is also seen in the act of acting upon what is reaped from the solemnness. People must reflect to pray. Think before speaking. Watch before learning.

Entertaining screen productions are an art where people experience something with a solemn attitude and are not watching screen productions to learn something, but to have an experience or escape. In *Ruthie's Game*, the children are playing the story game taught by their grandmother. The story game is played by a person starting opening lines such as, "Once upon a time I went to the grocery store for chicken and the chickens in the refrigerated bins jumped up and ran me out into the parking lot. There were thirty-two drumsticks and hundreds of wings flapping all over the car until I reached the exit off Highway 1. I passed the speed limit at ninety and when I got home, only one drumstick was left. It was hanging off the bumper, and I didn't know what I was going to feed my kids that night. But that drumstick grew and grew and grew until..." That speaker points at the next player to speak his spin on the story, and it continues growing until the one who started the story game says it is finished. The story game brings out inner concepts as players lose inhibitions, pretending to be superheroes fighting outlandish

make-believe dangers. The story game signifies praying and in *Ruthie's Game*, when characters grow in strength from playing the story game, it is like their prayers are answered. This philosophical perspective of engagement with the art of film and learners is examined by Alexis Gibbs:

The whole notion of possibility lies not so much in establishing once and for all what a thing is, but how we might encounter any one thing in different ways under different circumstances. Accepting the possibilities contained within our encounters with phenomena requires the development of a particular sensibility, by which we come to appreciate different pictures of things, rather than striving for the complete picture. My own sense is that the development of such a sensibility is often better in the arts than it is within scholarship (whether in philosophy, education, or film) because they permit us to rethink the world through what Robert Sinnerbrink calls “aesthetic disclosure”, making them “forms of thinking that use different means than philosophy in order to think, create, and communicate experience.” The arts can show us the pictures to which we have become attached, without trying to force upon us a different picture (of what something is) altogether (9-10).

When the screen productions' audience experiences phenomena with inspiring messages, the likelihood of the audience rethinking, even analyzing what has been witnessed, increases. This is because art opens the mind to new ideas. How many readers have taken a reluctant teen to church to teach them how to live in God's world? Was it like baptizing a possum? Screen productions may result in less aggravation and scratches. The act of watching screen productions is similar to praying because the audience is relaxed as it absorbs information, which is later

synthesized, consciously or not, and may be later referenced during Christian theological opportunities, such as decision making.

The above philosophical perspective will be further explored with a second book by Matthew A. Rundio and Alison G. Wong, who wrote *Writing and Praying Collects as an Intervention in Narrative Therapy*. They suggest stories have long been a part of how people make sense of the world, that prayer is a type of story, and suggest writing is a form of prayer, and that how Christians pray is the foundation of their belief systems (1-5). A third book, *Movies as Prayers*, by Josh Larsen was written for nonbelievers and elucidates several popular secular films' Christian messages.

## **Marketing Research**

When writing for the screen, marketing must be a focus as a reminder to write with intent. Know the audience. Know the market. Writing for the 21<sup>st</sup> century is a complex task when the target audience is the lost. Consider the 103,130,835 American citizens who need Christ. There are only a handful of secular movies with pronounced Christian messages, and there is no genre for secular movies with Christian messages. However, there is an easily identifiable market for faith-based films—Christians.

The latest feature faith-based film by the Kendrick Brothers is *Overcomer*. It is marketed on the Christian platform. Paul Bond interviewed Alex Kendrick after the success of his Christian movie, *War Room*, and Kendrick said,

People act like preaching to the choir is a bad thing, but we would say the choir needs it.

There are two kinds of Christian films: the kind that introduces people to faith and the kind that helps people who are already in a family of faith to grow, and that's probably more of who we are" (Bond par. 6).

According to the Kendrick Brothers' webpage, Alex Kendrick and his brothers Steven Kendrick, Shannon, have produced six faith-based feature films, including *Flywheel*, *Facing the Giants*, *Fireproof*, *Courageous*, *War Room*, and *Overcomer*. The brothers formed their own production company and are ministers at Sherwood Baptist Church.

While the Kendrick brothers are preaching to the choir, there is a swath of lost souls needing Christ. The Religious Education Association published a phenomenological study in 2021, on how secular, Generation Z, college students experience Christian rhetoric, which shows Christian rhetorical practices “lack intellectual vulnerability, empathetic imagination, and a willingness to engage in steeped embodied discourse (Sierra, par. 1). College students without faith are particular in how they engage with faith messages. In that phenomenological study by Lauren K. Sierra, titled, “Secular Students’ Perceptions of Christian Rhetoric: What College Students do and do Not Want from Conversations with Christians,” participants share what they do and do not want, including the rhetoric in film:

In addition, another participant suggested Christianity was emotionally logical, but intellectually illogical: It makes sense, I guess, from an emotional standpoint, not from any logical standpoint. Because it’s like, we all want someone to talk to ... We all want someone to just take care of us ... we all want the happy ending. That’s why there’s always happy endings in movies, TV shows, games, everything. The happy ending is the end goal. And if you believe that there’s no happy ending, that’s scary. That’s intimidating. That scares the life out of people (pars 32-33).

The phenomenological study suggests there may be room for more Christian messages in secular films that Generation Z will consider as intellectually logical. Consider the movie *Snow White* when she prays over her new dwarf friends. That was not an illogical act—to consider the



wellbeing of others in a meditative manner. Consider the movie *Star Wars*. Luke Skywalker had Obi-Wan as a mentor, and they overcame evil forces. These secular movies had pleasant endings and Christian messages. Consider the college student's perspective that she does not want to be intimidated. It may be said that secular films are ideal for relaying messages without intimidation and audiences are ripe for harvesting.

### **The Significance**

It is simple. *Ruthie's Game* takes an American family on a developing supernatural tour of what life is like with and without faith. When the characters play the story game, which represents prayer, their problems shrink, like the life-sized Saltasaurus dinosaur tramping through the suburbs threatening to eat tender, young Sammy; like the Mad Mermaid coveting Bella's beauty; like Thomas' faith in science blocking his faith to call on God for healing from his knock knees; like the throttling Harley-Davidson Motorcycle encouraging Franklin to ride on the edge of the law; like Harry's fondness of earthly pleasures over heavenly duties; like Suzie's anger over losing the only man she's ever loved and how her mother keeps talking about God and won't shut up about Him and he's the one who took her husband; like Ruthie's last wish for her loved ones to know the supernatural world is real and they live in it every day. The supernatural struggles identify characters' weaknesses and strengths, and with a wide range of issues, there's a flaw or a feather for everyone in the audience to claim as their kindred.

When people identify with a character on screen in a relatable transitional phase, it opens doors for theological development. A second reason the power of film helps reach people regarding the supernatural world of Christianity is because the audience is in a receptive mood, open to entertaining a new idea. Film viewers escape reality to try on a different reality. Clive Marsh in "Theology and the Practice of Meaning-Making," suggests another reason is because

the audience is paying attention, practicing meaning-making (Marsh 68-70). The power of film may be the best way to help people consider the supernatural world of Christianity as real.

### The Critical Essay

The purpose of this thesis' screenplay, *Ruthie's Game*, is to invite audience referentiality to the supernatural world of Christianity. With a Christmas setting, the immediate inference to holiness is clear. But the setting quickly turns diabolical. The antagonist, Suzie, is bent on destroying the Christmas spirit where the family resides in Florida, and it is hot as Hades. It seems impossible to find anything holy once the antagonist drives away dear Grandma Ruthie, who watches over Sammy, the protagonist. This represents how modern culture challenges the true meaning of Christmas and Christianity.

Family is the target audience for *Ruthie's Game*, a family drama with a touch of horror. There is more opportunity for youth to share the message throughout a lifetime, multiplying efforts to fulfill the Great Commission. Research suggests a story with emotionally triggering events based on realistic characters that, when locked in memory, may be consciously or subconsciously called upon later is a practical start. Noel Brown, who wrote *Contemporary Hollywood Animation: Style, Storytelling, Culture and Ideology Since the 1990s*, shares that most children's horror films are circular journey narrative structure where the child leaves home, and enters a utopian world, faces challenges, and returns renewed (149). Which is the structure for *Ruthie's Game*. Brown suggests this fantastical theme is therapeutic in relieving real-world anxieties and the film's images may later be the object of daydreams, which leads them to choose better directions in life (149). Creating these memorable events means bringing powerful tools. To bring attention to the *supernatural* world of Christianity, animation and fantasy seems

like the perfect special sauce to sandwich the concept of Jesus Christ's transcendence into a believable concept.

### **Supernatural Transcendence**

It may be assumed that when a viewer is intent on finding a redemptive or transcendent theme, it is more likely to be found. In critical studies analysis, the culture of the viewer is considered as inherit to the referentiality. Therefore, it may be said that if a person has a clue about a Christian message in a secular film, it may be seen. What is more exciting is that experts agree that a film's power to transcend from the screen into a belief without a previous clue is also likely. Sigmund Freud, the 19<sup>th</sup>-century founder of psychoanalysis who researched the unconscious ideas and desires relationship to free association, like in dreams and fantasies, authored many articles, of which one was "Uncanny." Freud writes:

But the story-teller has a peculiarly directive power over us; by means of the moods he can put us into, he is able to guide the current of our emotions, to dam it up in one direction and make it flow in another, and he often obtains a great variety of effects from the same material. All this is nothing new...(228).

*Ruthie's Game* contains some horror, without human gore, and follows a realistic storyline with family drama. Within the first three minutes, a ballerina ghost suggests supernatural transcendence, and this theme is repeated with Harry, the goofy angel, and is exponentially defined as the ballerina ghost continually changes shapes and as Harry struggles to maintain his supernatural abilities. By pronouncing the supernatural transcendence theme, the audiences' likelihood of forming brain maps for later use increases. This will be discussed in the science section.

In *Ruthie's Game*, Grandma Ruthie has been living with her daughter, Suzie, and three grandsons and helps care for them and, occasionally, her son's daughter too. Suzie is angry at the world and her mother is the handiest scapegoat and represents Suzie's real angst. She is angry at God because her husband died, and since Ruthie tells the boys Christian stories, her mother represents her true source of anger. When Ruthie sells a piece of property and Suzie does not receive any proceeds, she is vengeful and forces Ruthie into a nursing home. But Suzie's plan to banish Ruthie and everything she represents does not go her way, despite her evil wishes.

With Grandma out of the babysitting pool, everything that could go wrong does. A magical story game brings inanimate objects to life, but the magical part of the game was a fluke from oddball timing, powerful prayer, and a goofy angel's intervention. Or was it? Could it be that even the bad things that happen in life are purposeful accidents or something in that realm? This serendipitous philosophy is reviewed by William Desmond, who wrote *The Theatre of the 'Metaxu': Staging the Between*. His article suggests time or being on Earth, which Harry the AWOL angel in *Ruthie's Game* represents, is a learning ground, a giant classroom where self-dedication is a fraction of being and God's companioning power is the master as humans are "being" between birth and death—and afterwards (Desmond 121-124). The companioning power, according to Desmond, has a history in theater (121). It may be said that convincing youngsters they are not alone in the world, but have an invisible ghost attached to them, as the young autistic Sammy in *Ruthie's Game*, and the ghost is a supernatural being called God, is somewhat of a Christian horror project.

There is psychological evidence suggesting people need to rely less on self-dedication and to welcome experiences with transcendence to be open to spiritual transcendence. Brick Johnstone, a professor of health psychology at the University of Missouri, shares in his blog,

NeuroSpirit, “The less individuals focus on the self, the more capable they are of focusing on things beyond the self (which is the basic definition of transcendence)” (par 10). When audiences are focused on films with realistic story and images, there is less opportunity to escape the self because they see “the self” on the screen. However, this psychological research suggests when audiences are focused on film with high escapism, such as animation with supernatural powers, the more likely the brain is forming transcendence pathways.

As shared in the introduction, attracting the 21<sup>st</sup>-century young adult requires special sauce. Gen Z has specific issues on how Christians communicate. In the study by Lauren K. Sierra, “Secular Students’ Perceptions of Christian Rhetoric: What College Students do and do Not Want from Conversations with Christians,” Gen Z wants logic, entertainment, not to be scared into being saved, and wants a happy ending.

Gen Z is not the only group with a special order.

Revealing comments were made following a 2016 article on Movieguide by Ben Kayser, “Please Stop Attacking Christian Movies for the Wrong Reasons,” about dislike for Christian films because of their overt messages, lack of entertainment value and poor quality. There were fourteen comments praising Christian films, two indifferent replies to comments, and fifteen comments bashing Christian films. Janie Smith comments that there need to be more movies on everyday issues for the non-Christians rather than movies for the Christians.

Tony Penny comments he does not enjoy Christian movies as art any more than McDonald’s as fine cuisine; “It satisfies a need, but can never be mistaken for something of high quality.” Penny adds he supports Christian movies even when “it means sitting through something as absolutely awful as the film *Persecuted*.”

Ellery Aguayo comments at length:

Be it comedy or drama, most 'Christian' art does not seem to display a deft understanding of the human condition. The worldview is colored in immature absolutes (sinners do bad things, Christians do good things). Even the on-screen conversions seem to magically take a 'bad sinner' and turn him into a 'do good Christian' - as if all his struggles and issues just melt away. Where is the do-good sinner? The nice guy sinner? The one trying to do what's right? The one who doesn't hate his Christian friends but actually comes to their aid in times of need? And where is the Christian struggling with sin and doubt? The one trying to do right but keeps getting it wrong? The one who keeps being selfish, arrogant, and downright uncaring? Where is the Christian addict struggling to stay clean? I want to see that guy. I want to see the broken Christian. The one who is not the hero, but rather points us to the real Hero. It seems many Christian movies make the same mistake as Christian churches in thinking the Gospel is about the Christian and what he does rather than the Christ and what he did. In other words, what's coming across is anything but Christ's sacrificial love for ungodly sinners. It's as if you - the atheist sinner - is unloved and unworthy UNTIL you 'get saved'. The message that God loved us WHILE we were yet ungodly sinners gets lost. We need better anthropology. We need to see the real human condition. We don't need to see a motion picture version of a clean and spotless Thomas Kincade painting. We need truth. We need to see our undeservedness. We need to see and understand God brings beauty from our ashes - our clunky righteousness and mistakes - and most of all that Christ came to save sinners, which WE - as Christians - are foremost (Aguayo, "Stop Attacking Christian Movies").

Audiences want relatable entertainment with story showing the message, not a speech. Jesus was in the streets, walking God's talk, not inside a ticketed hall yelling at believers.

It seems the struggle to form positive worldviews relies on visuals. Michael Foust is a journalist and film critic. For over 20 years, Baptist Press, Christianity Today, The Christian Post, the Leaf-Chronicle, the Toronto Star, and the Knoxville News-Sentinel have published his articles. Foust shares:

My interest in movies is based largely on my interest in the ideological battle of worldviews. Every film presents a worldview -- sometimes biblical, sometimes anti-biblical -- and it is the job of the reviewer/moviegoer to find it. Most movies, including R-rated ones, have strong biblical themes, even if the writer or director was not a Christian. I indeed have found it beneficial to discuss movies with individuals who are not in the church. It can be a valuable inroad to talk about more significant issues -- grace, truth and Christ's redemption, among them.

Long ago, our society was a "book culture." Back then, people read as a hobby, and they developed their worldviews based on what they consumed. Today, though, books have been replaced by screens. People of all ages are developing their beliefs based on nothing more than a movie or a television series. It's tragic, yes, but it's one reason Christians must not abandon this sphere of influence (Foust, Personal interview).

To support referentiality in film viewing, audiences need to see themselves in the story to connect and remember messages. Think struggling single parent, nerd, clown, bully, drug addict, mourner, the lonely, the thief, the prisoner, the runaway, and the bitter. There are hundreds of thousands of circumstances, behaviors, sins, and attitudes to explore in story. However, Christian films do not often include characters with deep flaws or controversial battles because they make audiences uncomfortable. Which is not realistic, and some may say it is not Christian to pretend God is not covetous of all people.

The need for realism in Christian films has been heard by Angel Studios. They created reasonable emotions and behaviors in Jesus Christ, his followers, and nemeses in *The Chosen*. As of May 31, 2022, there have been 94.80 million views (Angel Studios). This low-budget film series has fine qualities and is entertaining and evoking. Angel Studios offers a free Christian film series and does not require an email address. It is not a nonprofit or a church and asks that people simply pay it forward if they want to support the continued production of these types of films. There are plans to make seven series of *The Chosen*. As of May 31, 2021, the last episode ends with the Sermon on the Mount. It will possibly be years before audiences have an opportunity to experience *The Chosen's* realistic application of the transcendence. Which, as mentioned in the introduction, is the most preposterous story ever told.

### **The Relatability-Real Life-Magic Sandwich**

The barrier between realism and fantasy is presenting a relatable story to popular culture. Dr. Tracey Mollet is a lecturer in media and communications at the University of Leeds where she lives in Huddersfield, England. Mollet's 2020 study on *Disney, A Cultural History of the Disney Fairy Tale: Once upon an American Dream*, indicates the magic factory, Disney, has passed through the barrier. Mollet shares, "With the shift of the productions to the live action medium, the significance of marrying the idealism of the fairy tale with the perceived nightmare of everyday life has seemingly become even more important" (172). Mollet is in tune with the commenters from the 2016 bashing of Christian films. People want a relatability-real life-magic sandwich, which is a new term derived from this research.

Disney combines real life action with realism and animation, such as in *Jumanji*, in the storyline to present its magic. The realism is carried in the topics of bullying, broken homes, broken dreams by corporate bullies, broken hearts, and broken everything in the mansion, and



finally redemption. This realism sandwiches the animated and unrealistic content into a believable conception, creating pathways in the brain to accept complicated and magical ideas as possible. But Disney does not have a monopoly on the magic. In an interview with long-time film critic, Michael Foust, he shares, “Year after year, Marvel movies leap to the top of the box office, partially because of their entertainment value but also because of our attraction to supernatural beings who can defeat evil. Desires for such entertainment are grounded in our desire for a Savior.” It seems the idea of a supernatural hero is popular.

In *Ruthie’s Game*, using real life actors in combination with animation increases the believability because the storyline is widely relatable to popular culture. No family is perfect. No one escapes grief and although people work through grief in the same steps, some regress, and some jump around. In *Ruthie’s Game*, Suzie is grieving for her deceased husband and is angry at God and the world. Because Suzie sees her mother as weak, she attacks her as a grieving scapegoat. Sammy wants his mother to believe in the supernatural world and when Ruthie gives him a special gift, hides it from her because he believes she will confiscate the gift. Therefore, the relatability overrides the audience’s decision to apply logic when Suzie sees her home destroyed and she automatically accuses her mother of performing a movie trick. Which is Suzie’s guilt blinding her to the message that her home without her mother, without the one who brought Scripture, love, and understanding into her and her children’s lives, is a home on a broken foundation. Mollet suggests the relatability-real life-magic sandwich suspends belief, so the audience is not searching for logic, but is lost in the magic spell (173). Suzie is seen as a frantic woman on a journey to ensure her mother does not return to influence her or her children’s lives. Suzie is hurting, and she wants others to hurt. Meanwhile, her children have stepped into adult roles, in a game of survival of the fittest when their toys come to life.

The realism in *Ruthie's Game* is the journey through family drama in a world where evil exists. Mollet writes,

As changes in gender roles, civil rights and family life have transformed the essence of the American Dream, the Disney fairy tale has also changed. Fairy tales are primarily about the journey of the protagonist, rather than their arrival at the happily ever after. Similarly, the American Dream is more about the journey of the American people in arriving at their utopia: a journey which is located in its mythic past, once upon a time (173-174).

The journey in fairy tales to reach utopia always has a danger element. In *Ruthie's Game*, the blatant danger seems to be the life-sized toys that threaten the children, and eventually everyone else, while the storyline unveils a deeper threat. Sammy keeps his faith a secret from his mother, until the end, when he lets it shine. That is the utopia in *Ruthie's Game*.

That utopia came with a high price. Ruthie had two strokes by the time the children's game has come to life and Ruthie's daughter has had nothing but ill wishes for her mother. Suzie's scorn works like an evil prayer, hurting her mother. Suzie's scorn is seen parallel with her mother's strokes. Suzie does not appear to own a Christian heart. Ruthie knows this and that is why she made this ridiculous and powerful prayer deal with Harry—to help her daughter believe again in God's lasting love. Because Suzie has lost the love of her life through a tragic vehicular accident, she has lost faith and is so terribly bitter she is at risk of damaging her life and everyone around her.

Meanwhile, Harry, the goofy angel, is not as helpful as an angel should be. His humanness gets in the way. He wants a nap. He wants to pick flowers and slack off on the farm. He enjoys watching dinosaurs and alligators fight. He enjoys life on Earth. This may be the

audience's most relatable part of the journey to utopia. Life on Earth is good, fun. There's so much to enjoy, even with the evil element. Who wants to bother with thinking about life after life on Earth? Not Harry! He is AWOL from Heaven and on a mission to help Ruthie. He made a deal to help her and watch over the children and in return he gets to stay at the farm. But when Ruthie's bones start aching, she calls him, and it is perfect timing. Harry had been watching the dinosaurs and alligators fight. So, when Ruthie sees a young Saltasaurus dinosaur outside her window and yells to him on the phone, "Go check on my grandkids, right now! The game. The game is alive!"

It is not surprising when Harry replies, "What makes you think that?"

Trills, stomps, and thuds blast over the phone.

"That! Get on it or the deal's off!" Ruthie yells.

Harry had been doing everything except babysitting, and he desperately wants a nap. He didn't exactly lie, but he forgot to mention the truth. These behaviors are relatable and bring light to how serious it can be when people shrug responsibilities and are not completely honest.

Another revelation from this screenplay's scene is that Ruthie is not the meek old lady she seemed to be when she was in the van with Suzie earlier in the day. Which shows Ruthie may have been oppressed by Suzie's aggressiveness, but now that her grandchildren are in danger, she is emblazoned to help. This scene carries the cycle of revelation, redemption, and change. Ruthie is now fearless. She redeems her meekness with empowerment as she demands that Harry help, or the deal is off. Later, Grandma Ruthie will extricate a Saltasaurus dinosaur from the nursing home. That is the power of the believing in the supernatural world. Anything is possible.

*Jumanji*, the 1995 fantasy adventure film, involves game playing and animation combined with real life. It also carries a cycle of revelation, redemption, and the opportunity for change with each roll of the dice. The player learns what evil is lurking, and the player redeems fear with courage, finally overcoming to change into a more responsible person. The heavy topics in this film suggest Disney had a message to share.

Because *Jumanji* includes the topic of corporate capitalism, and even though the owner of the corporation rebukes his wealth to search for his son, a worldly view of how Americans treat workers is portrayed. In fact, Disney movies show America as the land of the free, for a few select individuals, and begrudgingly as a capitalist nation in a negative light. In *Discussing Disney*, edited by Amy M. Davis, the Disney family is noted as socialist and Christian family with strong ties to Marxism (43-45). Tracey L. Mollet writes a sharp study on Disney, with a disdain for capitalism and individualism:

...there is a clear correlation between the promise of the Dream and the fairy tale narratives offered by Hollywood, and more specifically, by the Walt Disney Company. He contends that “we use fairy tales as markers to determine where we are in our journey” as they become a “broad arena for presenting our wishes and desires”, thus reinforcing the “consumerist tendencies” of the general population. Indeed, the company repeatedly deploys the rhetoric of the fairy tale, invoking its promise of happiness, success and magic in order to sell its films, merchandise and package holidays. Disney thus reinforces the status quo in its own interest, ensuring that people continue to ‘buy in’ to the fairy tale promise of the American Dream (5).

Consumerism is a necessity for trading goods. Consumerism of buying ideals from media is not a necessity, but a way of conditioning culture to believe something, usually which leads to the

advertiser's benefit. Story on the screen does seem to make a way into the philosophical retrospect of one's accomplishments. The American Dream has not changed. It is common knowledge that Americans want a person to love, a home, and career. Those three things fluctuate in importance and definition with individuals. Mollet's choice to use the term fairy tale instead of story shows a sarcastic resentment against the American Dream.

Mollet's summation about the American corporate giant seems correct. Disney's wise marketing strategy to use magic story to measure audience's desires does sell dreams. However, Mollet's conclusion offers a commercialized worldview when she suggests America is the fairy tale in Disney narratives (174).

The hard-driven narrative in *Ruthie's Game* suggests the *supernatural world* is the fairy tale, and with the storyline on individual characters overcoming hurdles mostly by their own wits and prayer, in the form of the story game, individualism is highlighted. Noel Brown, who wrote *Contemporary Hollywood Animation: Style, Storytelling, Culture and Ideology Since the 1990s*, writes:

Hollywood animation is a democratic art that represents one of the purest distillations of US society as it imagines itself, how it wishes it were, and (occasionally) what it fears it may be: a nation that is highly individualistic, but pre-eminently concerned with upholding family and kinship structures (183).

Manifesting an idea is a step toward making dreams come true. It may be said that helping audiences relate to the supernatural world as the fairy tale helps them see themselves in utopia, which is a fine place to be. Not that America is not fine. But Christians do not make a plan to live forever in America. They make a plan to live forever in Heaven. Hence, *Ruthie's Game* is a secular film that progresses Christian thought into the storyline cycle of revelation, redemption,

and opportunity for change in the biggest outfit ever imagined—Heaven. However, *Ruthie's Game* is prime for transitioning into a Christian film market. The Christian film market is rich with hungry audiences. Film critic, Foust, shares:

Alex and Stephen Kendrick (*Overcomer*, *War Room*) have been open about their desire to make movies for the church. Their target audience is Christians -- primarily because they want to see believers transformed into servants for the Kingdom. *Courageous* encouraged Christian men to become better fathers. *War Room* urged believers to become prayer warriors. *Overcomer* encouraged individuals to find their identity in Christ -- and not in their hobbies or jobs.

On the flip side, Jon and Andy Erwin (*I Can Only Imagine*, *American Underdog*) are filmmakers who, indeed, want to make movies for both audiences -- and they've had mainstream success. *I Can Only Imagine* remains the top-grossing film in the history of Roadside Attractions, the mainstream studio that also released Oscar-winner *Manchester By the Sea*. Thus, a faith-based film has grossed far more money (\$83 million to \$47 million) than a movie that won mainstream awards. Of course, many of those \$83 million dollars came from Christians -- but many also did not (Foust, Personal interview).

The revelations in *Ruthie's Game* develops with each child overcoming weaknesses and using strengths to survive. For Suzie, the revelation is when her mother becomes the nursing home hero and shortly afterward, her nonaggressive autistic son, Sammy, becomes an aggressive hero in the dining hall, helping to save others from an alligator. By witnessing these magical transformations, Suzie becomes more open to healing. She is one of those people who has to see to believe. Suzie's redemption is the most significant because she has been the prodigal daughter.

Redemption in films is a powerful tool. As previously introduced, Josh Larsen is the author of *Movies Are Prayers: How Films Voice Our Deepest Longings*. Larsen discusses how characters sometimes have slowly evolving epiphanies. “I think of these as sunrise scenes, beautifully rendered fleeting moments in which a new way of living dawns on the screen” (Larsen 176). He writes that “these interior discoveries are freely, mysteriously given—gifts of grace—rather than rewards the characters have earned” (176). Larsen compares this to the same way redemption works for the audience, using the words precious, enlightened, and bewildered to describe his summation, “I suppose it’s a powerful thing to witness the receiving of grace” (176). In *Ruthie’s Game*, Thomas, the left-brained science nerd, finally receives grace near the end. Thomas had not stopped trying to find solutions, like a scientist, for saving his brother from the hungry dinosaur, and had not thought about playing the story game to render his physical limitation. His knock knees are healed after Harry prays for him and the audience is expected to sit up a bit taller and yell with Harry, when he yells, “Run, boy! Run like you’ve always dreamed about running. Go see your Ruthie as fast as you can!” Ruthie’s time on Earth is short, and Harry knows the children need to witness her prayer to end the story game nightmare. This will ultimately show the supernatural world of Christianity in a redeeming light as characters realize the power of Ruthie’s testimonies through the years to them and that God is as real as Harry the angel is goofy—and is their great, great grandfather!

In the end, Suzie sees Harry up in a tree, the same way the children have seen him since his introduction, as real. Her entire demeanor changes and love spreads across the yard like the angels have doused dew in a kind of baptism. But it is Christmas in Florida, and it sprinkles rain every few hours, so there’s the realism in that, which makes for another “sandwich scene.”

**Share the Philosophy. Share the Sandwiches.**

Inside most humans is a bouquet of philosophical buds waiting to open, and film often brings the inspirational sunlight for these blossoming moments. Alexis Gibbs wrote *Seeing Education on Film: A Conceptual Aesthetics*, and supports cinematic realism, which means showing story instead of telling (58). *Ruthie's Game* shows the children as angry when their grandmother is taken away. Their anger is expressed in an ordinary fashion for American boys, which is relatable. What is not ordinary is how the boys must survive life without their grandmother, and that is not literally explained, but is portrayed with cinematic realism as they are challenged by their toys-come-to-life for survival. This artistic rendering of their fight for survival without Grandma Ruthie, who represents Christianity, allows the audience to sum its own philosophical view.

To form this same message into a documentary or informational film on biblical lessons would ignore and degrade the audience's intelligence and desire for entertainment. Gibbs shares, "Stripping cinema of its cinematicity in order to educate suggests that education must not have an aesthetic dimension to it, that ambiguity and the potential for aspects are undesirable elements in teaching" (69). Christianity is not a fun-sucker, so showing philosophical-provoking stories should be an acceptable way to grow the Great Commission. However, some may argue storylines with sublime moral messages are brainwashing.

Intentionally suggesting good people do specific things is not the American way. But how are people going to learn about Christianity if they do not go to church? As shared in the introduction, a Pew Research Poll shows 73% of Americans watch TV or movies daily (par. 1). This reveals there is plenty of opportunity to reach popular culture.

The entire film industry may want to serve relatability-real life-magic sandwiches to offer more conversation opportunities. Family film genres offer discussion platforms to explore



meaningful interpretations. *Ruthie's Game* offers discussions on how to help others. When Suzie is upset about her sons chasing after the van when she is forcing their beloved Grandma Ruthie into a nursing home, several options may be presented. Suzie yells at her sons to get back on the lawn and she leaves. Adults watching this film with children may ask the children, "What do you think about her driving away like that with the kids so upset?" What could she have done differently?" "Do you think Suzie was teaching her kids that once people are old, they are too much trouble and are better off out of sight?" "What do you think Grandma Ruthie was feeling?" Noel Brown shares, "...family films perform social functions. Besides their obvious textual modes of appeal—e.g., escapism, sensory stimulation, emotional uplift—they also fulfill a ritual imperative: bringing families (in their multiple configurations) together and engendering kinship through a shared viewing experience" (43). Conversing about films is a way to introduce controversial subjects without pointing fingers at relatives or neighbors. It demonstrates that it is okay to disagree and introduces rhetoric in a complex popular culture. When families converse about problems, they learn how to deal with them and how to help others. Laughing at characters offers joy in learning people are going to make mistakes and it is okay.

*Ruthie's Game* is also uplifting and humorous. The middle boy, Franklin, is mischievous and daring. He finds a plastic Halloween pumpkin and uses it as a helmet for his Harley-Davidson motorcycle driving. He wears a red cape that tumbled from the closet when his mother hurriedly left. Franklin sees himself as a hero and calls himself the Red Raptor. This relatable storyline sets up the scene for when the police discover the youngster, 7, driving on the road. Franklin's confidence is upheld, but he is skeptical when Harry the angel appears on his bike. Franklin tells him, "You're one of Sammy's toys. Probably something Ruthie got him. Mom doesn't buy us dolls." Franklin has just experienced his toys coming to life, his home being

demolished, a toy Harley-Davidson motorcycle miraculously and suddenly becoming a life-sized functional replica, and his youngest brother, Sammy, 5, is running from a hungry dinosaur. Still, Franklin is rationalizing the idea of this man who appears out of nowhere while the motorcycle is in motion. This is adult behavior in a child, driving a toy motorcycle that instantly transformed into a real motorcycle, with an angel passenger. This is a scene with a relatable-real life-magic sandwich, and *Ruthie's Game* serves platter after platter of these scrumptious scenes.

### **Deviled Eggs Highlight God's Word**

There are three notable features explored in this section.

First, consider how Biblical messages in film may be interpreted. The 2002 *Spider-Man 1* is the story of Peter Parker, the nerdy science student bitten by a spider who learns he has spider-like abilities and uses them to fight devil-eyed villains like the Green Goblin. His eyes hint at flames behind his eerie, translucent yellow eyes, big as eggs, with orange irises. This devilish visual symbolizes the Devil with his lust for power and control. While Spider-Man seeks to protect everyone from the Green Goblin, but he is preoccupied with his nearly lifelong love for the lovely Mary-Jane Watson, the girl next door.

Reviewer Niall Richardson's article, "The Gospel According to Spider-Man," carries a sarcastic tone about sinful desires of human flesh. Richardson writes, "Spider-Man's desire to protect the innocent does not stem from an innate Superman goodness but from his need to atone for the shame of his masculine desires" (700). Lust, and every innate desire in human DNA is designed for a Godly purpose. The Bible reads in Genesis 1:27 that humans were made into God's likeness. Sexual lust is a God-given drive to create more humans. Soulful lust is a drive to be closer to God. Shame has nothing to do with saving Mary-Jane. Peter cares for her. He's known her since they were in elementary school and calls her MJ. At age six, he asked his

grandmother if the girl was an angel. At the science museum, Peter takes photos of MJ. He does not act like a lustful person. He acts like a boy who wants a girl to be mutually interested in him. But he is shy, so he takes photos, the next best thing.

The thing is, Peter is bitten by the poisonous spider as he is photographing MJ. This may symbolize God's will to give Peter the power to be a man of God. The escaped spider descends from a gossamer thread to prick Peter, and he is delirious in his bedroom that evening. Which may symbolize how the *power* of God's love changes people.

Richardson describes the photo-taking at the museum as predatory and describes Peter as a "Norman Bates-style latch," (697). When in fact, Peter asks permission from MJ. Ascribing guilt and shame to Spider-Man 1 may symbolize repressed shame and guilt as the viewer relates to the phenomenon. This is because individuals have different brain maps, depending on their personal experiences, allowing different interpretations.

The true source of Peter/Spider-Man's shame is not revealed in Richardson's review. But Richardson does perceive the symbolism of the young man's new body and new responsibilities in a logical manner. Richardson uses masculine Christianity to describe Spider-Man's new muscles, "Muscular Christianity dictated that the built, muscled body was not to be enjoyed for its own beauty. Instead, it was emphatic of "moral devotion, hard work and spiritual transcendence of the uncontrolled and unrestrained physical body" (701). Peter/Spider-Man submits to the moral devotion, like a muscular Christian, as he submits to his true shame. His shame is that he did not stop the thief who stole the sack of cash from the fight manager who had promised Peter three-thousand dollars, but only gave him one hundred after winning the fight early. That thief killed Peter's uncle, and when he realized this, the shame of human vindictiveness took control. While it may be interpreted that Spider-Man lost all control when he

chose to seek out the thief for vengeance, it may also be interpreted that he instantaneously learned how to use his “gifts” to protect others. Spider-Man rushed up tall buildings and quickly harnessed the power of throwing webs and lunging. It was clear that Spider-Man was using self-control when he had the opportunity to kill the thief with his own hands and did not. This shows spiritual transcendence of the uncontrolled physical body, like a muscular Christian.

In *Ruthie’s Game*, each of the children become muscular Christians.

Secondly, consider how evil makes goodness shine. Richardson continues his sarcasm describing Spider-Man’s choice to save MJ or a train full of children in the Green Goblin’s threatening grasp, by suggesting Mary-Jane symbolizes sinful human desires and saving the children symbolizes saving the greater good of Christianity. The Green Goblin revels in his wickedness as he declares it a “sadistic choice,” (“Spider-Man” 1:41:48) and says, “We are who we choose to be” (“Spider-Man” 1:41:14). This exemplifies God’s gift of free will. And what Richardson fails to include in his review is that the Green Goblin offered a devilish partnership and Spider-Man declined. In Green Goblin’s attempt to force Spider-Man’s partnership, he reveals that as the villain’s nemesis, whomever he loves will forever be in jeopardy. This plays on the biblical messages in Ephesians 6:11-16, which instructs on wearing the full armor of God against the evil one, and in Matthew 4:1-11, when the devil tried to make a deal with Jesus, and he sent the devil away.

When the devilish Green Goblin is tempting Spider-Man to save MJ or the children the villain brings attention to God’s Word. The darkness does that. The darkness drives people to look for light. In Roman’s 8:8, “Those who are in the realm of the flesh cannot please God” (NIV). Spider-Man succeeds in saving both MJ and the children and he learns the theme is indeed true.

The theme is reinforced with the statement, “With great power comes great responsibility,” (“Spider-Man” 35:45). This is a widely relatable theme. In family life, members are frequently tasked with caring for others. In corporate life, people are tasked with managing businesses and finances. In the educational field, people must be responsible for classrooms and buildings filled with youngsters. For people living on the streets, anyone tasked with watching over another’s tent and belongings is holding someone’s entire world in their hands. Therefore, it may be said that reducing a movie’s theme from a blatant biblical message, such as a verbal quote, into a widely relatable message may reach a wider audience to help fulfill the Great Commission. Because God is in control and whether a person is a believer or not, everyone is used to fulfill his plans. The inspirational superhero phenom is empowering for audiences because it may trigger episodic memories when people failed to offer help or could not help or could not help enough.

Richardson gets it right when he shares, “It is not Spider-Man’s physical body that saves the day...but his moral need to protect the innocent. Like Christ himself, Spider-Man finally renounces the physical world and all of its pleasures” (701). The final climax brings MJ into Peter’s arms as she confesses her love and he must man-up to rebuke his physical love, to offer her only friendship because the devilish Green Goblin has shown him that as long as he fights evil, his loved ones will be endangered. He learned with great power comes great responsibility.

For a Christian, *Spider-Man 1* may show this theme as with God’s power, comes the responsibility to fulfill the Great Commission.

In *Ruthie’s Game*, there are several Christian messages. A family drama and or Christian horror theme is how evil thoughts are evil prayers and they turn into actions, like when Suzie forced her mother into a nursing home, and her mother had two strokes, one after the other.

Lastly, Christian messages may be interpreted differently by individuals because they have background variances. Richardson's interpretation reveals a lack of understanding how the story shows the awkward and weak Peter wanting to attract the attention of his beloved MJ, which includes the desire to protect, and that his "wish" was granted. What young man would not be able to identify with that storyline? Or what man, period? Wanting to protect others is not a sin of the flesh. It is a shameless and honorable quality.

At the end of *Ruthie's Game*, young autistic Sammy overcomes his speech shyness to help his brother Franklin play the story game and stop an alligator from harming residents in the nursing home. The man was not Franklin's favorite person, and the situation was perilous because Franklin could have played the story game to satisfy his personal vendetta. Evil was present and did not win, which makes a nice lunch.

### **The Science of the Sandwich**

The science of how humans react to films requires at least a basic understanding of memory. Rita Carter is a medical journalist who has a panel of professional advisors and wrote *The Human Brain Book*. Carter writes sensory organs ride brain maps to the amygdala, "a tiny nugget of tissue that punches well above its weight" and the hippocampus retrieves memory, and the prefrontal cortex makes moral judgement (7). The brain is a complex organ that sends messages throughout the body. Carter writes, "so what we see when we look at an object is shaped by expectation as well as by the effect of light hitting the retina." Thusly, the term preconceived idea has a scientific foundation.

Preconceived ideas are the baggage from memories. But that can be a good thing. Memories are used on a daily basis to complete simple tasks and to make decisions. When

viewing film, memories bring baggage into the episodic events on the screen and vice versa.

Carter writes,

Only experiences giving rise to unusually prolonged and/or intense neural activity become encoded as memories. It takes up to two years to consolidate the changes that create a long-term memory, but once encoded, that memory may remain available for life. Long-term memories include events from a person's life (episodic memories) and impersonal facts (semantic memories). Together, these are termed "declarative memories," since they can be recalled consciously ("declared"). Procedural (body) memories and implicit (unconscious) memories may also be stored long-term (158).

Films are usually two hours or less, so shooting for intensity is the goal in helping the audience retain messages. To make the memory personable, the film must be relatable. To create films that trigger physical responses for the purpose of making procedural (body) memories, the audience must connect so deeply with a character they feel what the character feels. Another suggestion is to use animation for humor, for exaggeration, for wildly outrageous ideas, like dinosaurs brought to life from plastic replicas, and the transcendence of souls, because unexpected events trigger physical reactions.

The more a person concentrates, or rather, pays attention to a subject, the more neurons fire, making the connection stronger to form memory. The longer a character is in danger, the longer the audience will be motivated to empathize and concentrate. In *Ruthie's Game*, children are (intentionally) endangered until the climatic ending to keep the audience's attention for the message that even the hardest hearts can change. Emotions work like concrete to hold memories and the amygdala keeps the emotions alive by "replaying it in a loop," which begins the encoding of a memory (Carter 158). And the more sensory factors—sights, sounds, touch, and

smell, that are experienced, the stronger the memory. Sensory messages are sent to the hippocampus and parts of the sensational memory from episodic memories, those from personal events and witnessing personal events, such as viewing a film, “may later be forgotten, leaving only a residue of the factual knowledge” (158). For example, a memory about Spider-Man 1 may be reduced to a fact of what he looked like when he first learned to throw his silk from his wrist or when he saved MJ as she fell from the building. Carter explains, “When it is recalled, it triggers a ghost of a visual image, encoded in the sight area of the brain” (158).

To keep a message alive, a striking experience must occur. Supernatural events, animation, and dangerous elements produce striking cinematic experiences that form lifelong memories. Carter shares the short-term memory is sent to the hippocampus for processing when, and only when, the short-term memory is striking, because the memory must “break out” from short-term memory to travel to the hippocampus (159). Neurons fire and fuse the striking memory into long-term memory, forming pathways for later use. The adage is true that if you don’t use it, you lose it. Carter writes, “It takes up to two years for a memory to become firmly consolidated in the brain” (159). The brain works during sleep, repeating the memory message from the hippocampus to the cortex. The exciting part of this is the state-dependent memory equation.

Sensory memory, for example, is when a person was frightened during an episodic event. When the person smells, sees, touches, something relatable, like a film with the same scenario; a beady-eyed man with a beard, or gnarled hands, reaches for a youngster’s arm, the brain spits out the sensory that was felt during the original episodic event. Carter shares, “Even if the sensations they trigger are not identical to the original ones, they are likely to be similar enough to jog memories of the same period” (160). *Ruthie’s Game* is a family film in the Christian horror genre



and to attract a wide audience includes topics of single-parent families, geriatric care, childcare, family drama, surviving attacks by large predators, environmental awareness, nerdiness, autism, the police, criminal behavior, and angels. There is a wide array of possible triggers for a wide audience because audience referentiality is an individual experience.

### **Research Methodology and Testimonies on Film Impact**

Testimonies and interviews conducted for this thesis were based on a 2012 research project conducted in Latin America. The research was gathered from within a cinematic club, but the research for this thesis was pooled from the general public. Rev. Dr. Jonathan Brant, an active researcher at Oxford University's Theology Department and director of the Oxford Character Project, writes in Chapter 5, "Contextualizing the Research," of *Paul Tillich and the Possibility of Revelation through Film*:

However, of those who declared that they had no religious commitments, 66 per cent reported a spiritual dimension or awareness of a presence or a power and 32 per cent reported both. Clearly, there is a correlation between stated religious belief and affirmative answers to these questions, but it is not as emphatic as might have been expected. Perhaps this also reflects the unique religious situation in Uruguay, where a search for transcendence is increasingly divorced from traditional religious institutions and commitments (23).

As America's church attendance has declined, and mega churches have grown, dedication to the supernatural transcendence is lessened as the commercialism of faith has grown. This similarity of searching for transcendence was highly considered when drafting the question for this thesis, which was, "Were you inspired to believe in the supernatural world of Christianity after watching a movie, film, or TV show?"

Another consideration was using surveys with interviews. In Chapter 4, “Researching Filmgoers’ Experiences,” Brant writes in question surveys in a random qualitative sampling followed by interviews were conducted following the Combined University Research Ethics Committee Guidelines (33).

It is important to note that alternative Disney and Hollywood films, such as Indie films, independent Christian and secular films, and low budget films are prime candidates for stories with messages on the supernatural world of Christianity. In Chapter 5, “Contextualizing the Research,” Brant discusses the research results, stating respondents showed less attraction for Hollywood films, which they categorized as predictable and without spirit. They preferred Cinemateca, the Latin American equivalent of a film. Brant shares:

Overall, 56 per cent of respondents stated that their experience included an ‘intellectual’ component; 96 per cent an ‘emotional’ component; 50 per cent an ‘aesthetic’ component; and 48 per cent a ‘spiritual’ component. As noted above, 34 per cent declared that their experience was a mixture of all four of these, and 70 per cent that it was a mixture of at least three elements (17).

It seems people desire a connection utilizing at least one of these components. Which indicates the best message delivery in film is blend of dialogue and action to replicate what works in real life. People want to see others walking the talk.

For this thesis, a radio advertisement and social media provided a random sampling of public discourse. A radio advertisement for testimonies was scripted, sent for approval to Calvary Chapel of the Sandhills’ broadcasting manager, Samantha Powell, and recorded, the same day with the aid of an aspiring actor, Windell Jones, who did the voiceover for three different men. The ad aired five times in a 24-hour period on The Shield 100.7 FM. The audio

was recorded and shared on the blog, StephsScribble dot blogspot dot com, and shared on social media and with friends. A meager response was met and only a handful of testimonies passed vetting. Vetting included interviews and or witnesses.

Eric Anderson sent testimony and provided an interview. He earned his bachelors in Christian Ministries and Biblical Studies and is taking courses toward his license for the Wesleyan Church. Anderson says he began Nerd Chapel because the Wesleyan Church requires experience to work in the church. His website, <http://nerdchapel.com> shares it began with:

“...a blogspot page and a YouTube channel in 2013 to bridge the gap between the Christian community and the Nerd community. As both a Christian and a nerd, he wants to provide a safe place for fans who are unsure about religion to explore and ask questions but also for those who are already following Jesus to enjoy both aspects of their lives at once. Hobbies such as cosplay, science fiction, fantasy, tabletop gaming, anime and other nerdy interests are great connection points. Cosplay and Gaming build community through common interests while the stories found in these combined hobbies include great illustrations for biblical truth.

Ministering to those who are unsure about faith shows Eric Anderson is walking in faith. This increases the value of his testimony. In the interview with Michael Foust, the film critic, he shares, “I am a big proponent of using films about the supernatural to open the door in discussing larger, more significant themes found in Scripture.” Anderson is on to this idea and uses the supernatural in films and games to address biblical themes in books. Anderson contributed as an author to several books, including 42: Discovering Faith Through Fandom, The New 42: God Terraforms All Things, and The Fantastic 42: A Fellowship Facing Doom with Hope. These

books share Anderson's personal referentiality in cinematic discourse as he applies theological hermeneutics. Eric emailed his testimony on May 20, 2022:

My parents introduced me to Christ at an early age and I've always followed him but for years he has been speaking to me through science fiction, fantasy, etc. as I compared the movies and fiction with scripture. One night I went to see *The Amazing Spiderman 2*. Close to the end of the movie Spiderman has been missing for a while and the city is worried while crooks start taking advantage of his absence. When Rhino starts pulverizing the police with brutal force, a young boy runs out with a spiderman mask, trying to be his hero. Then Spiderman swoops in, takes the boy to his mom, and joins the fight. I cried as i watched this. The Holy Spirit spoke to me in this moment: Whenever you step out in Jesus' name, I will be with you. He reassured me that any time we step out in obedience to him that He will be with us.

I am a writer and have written blog posts and books that use not just movies but other fiction to point people back to scripture and ultimately Jesus. [www.nerdchapel.com](http://www.nerdchapel.com).  
Eric Anderson. Nerd Chapel.

Anderson shares an intellectual, emotional, and spiritual testimony, as do the following testimonies. These three elements compose a common mindset for a prayerful state of mind, which is found in film viewing. The nine types of prayer referenced by Josh Larsen, who wrote, *Movies Are Prayers: How Films Voice Our Deepest Longings*, includes obedience. During the Skype interview, Eric Anderson held up his copy of the book. "Movies are modern day parables. They're how we relate to others. It's where people are getting their stories these days," Eric Anderson said (10:09). With a street-smart philosophy of reaching people by sharing his own stories, Anderson's phenomenological conceptualizations are inspirational. Some may find it odd

that nerds would not be offended at attending a function titled Nerd Chapel. But some may find it odd that theatre has roots in divinity and may be seen as a long-abused art. How long?

The first adage that may come to mind is, “All the world’s a stage,” from William Shakespeare’s speech in *As You Like It*—long before Disney. And from a Christian worldview, that world is God’s. As shared in the beginning, William Desmond, a well-known philosopher, wrote *The Theatre of the ‘Metaxu’: Staging the Between*. He digs into the state of being and how humans are in a state of transcendence to God between birth and death, and suggests theatre allows a recess during the “human being” state to phenomenologically react to scenes. In this reaction, he says we are not alone and refers to God’s will, or fate, or Providence, or something like it as companioning power (121-124).

Chris Prentice shares his testimony:

The character Theoden in the *Lord of the Rings* (*The Two Towers* and *Return of the King*) has inspired me in my Christian faith. Theoden was the king of the Rohan, and as He aged, he fell under the influence of Saruman the White and his chief adviser, Grima (Wormtongue), who worked for Saruman. He was old and withered and had lost his mental and physical facilities. He was a shell of himself, and his enemies were encroaching on His land and threatening to enslave his people.

At this point, Gandalf appears before him to ask for his help. When Theoden refused, he proceeded to free him from Saurman’s influence, restoring him in body and mind. He defeated Saurman’s forces at Helm’s Deep and played a pivotal role in freeing Gondor in the “Return of the King.” He was called Theoden the Restored, and his later deeds exceeded what he had done as a youth. That has been my experience as a Christian. I went thru a difficult period that left me broken, but Christ is the restored who restores us to what we were meant to be.

Prentice's brokenness was both physical and mental, which suggests why this type of secular film was relatable. Within Larsen's nine types of prayer, this testimony shows a "connection between reconciliation and resurrection. Reconciliation is a deeply Christian idea because it is only made possible through the death and resurrection of Jesus," (102).

In a personal interview, William Rossberg shares his testimony:

I am 65 years old, and while I grew up a Roman Catholic, I first made a commitment to follow Jesus on a Young Life weekend, March 21, 1975. There would be too many movies/TV shows to list that strongly influenced my life in Jesus and my understanding of myself, my walk, and the Way I've found myself on. Off the top of my head, the first one that leaps to mind is the *Indiana Jones/ Raiders of the Lost Ark* trilogy. The scene at the end of *The Last Crusade* where Indy has to pass 3 obstacles to get the cup of Christ so he can save his Father's life had a huge impact on me, especially the 3rd challenge.

This testimony is about journey. Larsen shares that Rushmore with the gregarious teen at his beloved high school with "many, many, many school clubs to which Max belongs," (169) is symbolic of the "gifts of learning, exploring, and cultivating, all good things that were given to us in Eden," (169).

In a personal interview, Stephanie Schaible, a conservative Christian raising a family, shares her testimony:

I had no idea that when I first saw *The Lion, The Witch, and The Wardrobe* and *The Hobbit* cartoon movies, which were shown to me in grade school, that they were about Jesus until I knew that they were about Jesus. I was drawn to those stories as a child in a mysterious way that I didn't quite understand even though the One that they were about was concealed from me at that time, and because of God's mysteries, I can't simply parse

a lyrical phrase out of the song “I Can Only Imagine” for you because the song and the movie are only 2 specific things of many things that God used to draw me to Him and that He continues to use to draw me to Him. All of the lyrics from that song combined with what was awakened in me (faith) at that specific time in my life helped me to hear Christ calling me to Him, and it continues to contribute to my transformation in Christ to this day.

Another testimony on secular film was submitted by Dalton Ira, 22, a recent University of Wilmington, North Carolina graduate with a bachelor’s degree in film studies. Ira shares:

While I was brought up in a Christian church, I was very distant from my religion up until the point I started becoming a *Star Wars* fan, which would have been some point during middle school. I would watch the films on repeat during any free time I had, and I gradually became extremely attached to the storyline. I’m not sure I can pinpoint any exact reasoning, but my relationship with Christ also strengthened shortly after this period in my life. I had already been exposed to the stories in the Bible, but they all felt like a distant fiction until I dove deeper into *Star Wars*. Becoming a *Star Wars* fan allowed me to see the stories presented to me in the Bible as valuable lessons to be taught, rather than a simple story.

I would say I’m currently a Christian, but I do not have kids at the moment. I do plan on having kids in the future, and I would plan on showing *Star Wars*, *Harry Potter*, *Lord of the Rings*, etc., to my children once they come about. The Christian messages in films like these are crucial to their understanding, at least from my point of view, so it feels necessary to pass these lessons on to my children when the time comes.

These testimonies reflect a meditative and contemplative type of prayer. Which, according to Larsen, is naturally occurring because “we were created with the urge to contemplate, to shut out the realities of the moment-as pressing as they may feel-and attend to something larger,” (134-135). As youngsters watching film, the meaning-making seems to form deep pathways in the brain for later use. This idea is strengthened by Matthew A. Rundio and Alison G. Wong, who wrote “Writing and Praying Collects as an Intervention in Narrative Therapy, ” and share, “...prayer “is the act of dying to all that we consider to be our own and of being born to a new existence which is not of this world,” (3). Considering this, abandoning self to the world of film may be viewed as an act of prayer, which is akin to the story game in *Ruthie’s Game*.

God formed people as creative beings and from creating movies and TV shows, to viewing and relating to them, it is part of life on Earth to fulfill the Great Commission. Desmond writes, “The metaxu is the between space of the human and divine” (122), which is that unavoidable human trip between life on Earth and Heaven. It seems no theatrical production is not part of the metaxu, because people are in a relaxed, nearly meditative state as an audience member. Desmond explains, “Exposure to the horror of the monstrous draws us into the space of the sacred. Even an art which seems more to desecrate than to consecrate is in that space, even if there is at work a secret hatred of everything sacred” (123). Just as Eric Anderson was drawn to his belief in God’s strength when we obey Him in the darkest of times, in his testimony on *The Amazing Spiderman 2*, in *Ruthie’s Game*, the youngsters rely on the story game during dark times.

The story game is a play on words as much as it is a play on prayer. The story game lends itself to the same principles as metaxu. When the story game is played and the people make their wishes and needs known, it is a type of prayer. And film is a type of prayer. The characters are in



a limbo-state, some on the verge of being eaten by dinosaurs, arrested, or body parts snatched off by covetous dolls. These dark, episodic events invite phenomenological conceptualizations. These profound moments when people are relying on prayer, are repeatedly practiced in *Ruthie's Game's* storyline to form brain maps for later reference and use. This assessment elucidates Desmond's idea that deviled eggs highlight God's Word, leaving the idea that Pollyanna Christian films are lacking in ability to deeply inspire a belief of transcendence.

To form brain maps that leap from realism to magic, film needs to include a pattern of magic succeeding. For example, when a person has never witnessed a miracle, it is hard to believe. In Mark 9:14-29, a father brings his son to Jesus for healing from convulsions, and Jesus tells him that anything is possible for believers. Jesus casts out the illness/demon and when the disciples asked why they had been unable, Jesus tells them it takes prayer. Recall how the preconceived idea is formed by the brain as discussed under the heading, "The Science of the Sandwich." Rita Carter shares, "Even if the sensations they trigger are not identical to the original ones, they are likely to be similar enough to jog memories of the same period" (160). Repetition of similar episodic events, with transcendent moments during critical periods, are likely to create usable brain maps for later use. In *Ruthie's Game*, a ballerina angel, Ghost, watches over Sammy, the youngest boy who has autism. This angel is seen only by Sammy until the end. This angel is capable of transforming into other forms, and changes into a storm cloud, chasing predators from the boy when he is hiding in a hollowed tree trunk. This angel transcends into the sky following the transcendence of Harry, the fallen angel, when in the end, he is called to leave Earth. Harry repeatedly flies and sometimes has trouble getting off the ground because "his heart isn't always in it one hundred percent." This demonstrates that a believer needs to be one hundred percent a believer, and have the faith of a child, to expect miracles. In the end, Suzie

sees Ghost with her mother's eyes, and Sammy shares Ruthie's gift with another family. The message is clear: God is there during episodic events, forming meaning-making triggers to open hearts for His supernatural world.

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People with faith had a faith-related reference to the film viewed.

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Freud, Sigmund. *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*. Edited by James Strachey. Stanford University Press, 1997, [archive.org/details/writingsonartlit00freu/page/228/mode/2up?q=supernatural](https://archive.org/details/writingsonartlit00freu/page/228/mode/2up?q=supernatural). Freud examines the idea of reality, the supernatural, and film as tools for making sense of the world. Freud is a familiar name with a history as a founder of new ideas.

Gibbs, Alexis. *Seeing Education on Film: A Conceptual Aesthetics*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2019. Liberty University Library E-book, link-springer-com.ezproxy.liberty.edu/content/pdf/10.1007/978-3-030-33632-5.pdf. The text is heavy with pedagogy terms and explains how films may be useful and better learning appliances with the entertainment element than without. This source shows that secular films are better learning tools for sharing faith messages than Christian films.

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Johnstone, Brick. "Spiritual Transcendence: A Human or Divine Experience?" *Psychology Today*. 21 May 2022, [www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/neurospirit/201205/spiritual-transcendence](https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/neurospirit/201205/spiritual-transcendence). Dr. Johnstone shares a blog about how the brain reacts to messages on spiritual transcendence. This source shares a psychologist's professional opinion about the influence of films and the importance of relatability and escapism.

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Larsen, Josh. *Movies Are Prayers: How Films Voice Our Deepest Longings*. InterVarsity Press, 2017. *ProQuest Ebook Central*, [ebookcentral-proquest-com.ezproxy.liberty.edu/lib/liberty/detail.action?docID=5389319](http://ebookcentral-proquest-com.ezproxy.liberty.edu/lib/liberty/detail.action?docID=5389319). Larsen shows the versatility of movie themes present opportunities to share our deepest expressions with God. This book shares the nine types of prayers seen in storyline and genres.

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Penny, Tony. Comment on "Please Stop Attacking Christian Movies for the Wrong Reasons."

*Movieguide*, 7 April 2016, [www.movieguide.org/news-articles/please-stop-attacking-christian-movies-wrong-reasons.html](http://www.movieguide.org/news-articles/please-stop-attacking-christian-movies-wrong-reasons.html). Penny shares that Christian films are lacking in

quality and entertainment value. His raw statement shows that he firmly believes

Christian films are not worthy, and this means it would be difficult to get his attendance later without keen marketing strategy and an intellectual and intriguing faith film.

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2%3Faccountid%3D12085. This article explores themes of dark spirits against

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[video%2C101&ref=nb\\_sb\\_noss\\_1](http://www.amazon.com/s?k=spiderman+1&i=instant-video&crd=32JUIZW9GQJ5C&srefix=spiderman+1%2Cinstant-video%2C101&ref=nb_sb_noss_1). This superhero movie is a reference to how an

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