Cinematic Leaps of Faith: Making Meaning Together of Diverse Experiences Through Film Conversation

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The Australian film director, George Miller, once said:

> I believe Cinema is now the most powerful secular religion, and people gather in cinemas to experience things collectively, as they once did in Church. Cinema storytellers have become the new priests… I don't think we fully understand yet the need of people to gather together to listen to a story, and the power of that act.[1]

I believe he is partially right. There is great value in gathering to experience things collectively. However, I don't believe we should passively listen and accept only one particular interpretation of a story, any more than people once accepted, without question, the Church or the priest as the sole arbiter of the Truth or spiritual experience. I have overseen a Project, funded by the General Synod of the Anglican Church in Australia, which has led to a new approach to cinematic engagement and interpretation. It is known as *CineDialogue*.[2] It's both a vision and a practical program that offers a challenge to the predominant mode of passively listening and watching a story together. Instead, the process of *CineDialogue* invites cinematic 'leaps of faith' through interpretive responses to cinematic experience. Furthermore, the development of this Project has provoked challenges to the religious institution, which funded the research, as well as its stakeholders. This Project thus invites a cinematic 'leap of faith' in those stakeholders who thought that the Project was going to be a new tool for what might be termed 'covert evangelism'.

Cinema-going has become a point of connection and shared experience between people as they identify with or reject the world that is shown to them on the screen. Yet, at the same time, many people feel ill-equipped to express their engagement with cinema at more than a superficial level. There is a sense of insecurity and/or uncertainty in 'reading' a film correctly. This means that the impact of one of the most powerful and pervasive mediums for disseminating cultural meaning is unremarked upon and unexamined by those on whom it has the most influence. A cinema may be considered a "proximity" space. These are places that bring people into close proximity with each other. In proximity spaces, people with varying beliefs and values, can interact meaningfully with each other without feeling they are trapped in either's particular home territory. The space they occupy is a common social space.[3] The cinematic experience provides such a space.

CineDialogue was funded by the General Synod of the Anglican Church and is innovative in the desire to identify what are potential connections for the sharing of meaning between people through a commonly shared cultural experience. The agenda, behind the *Engaging Australia* fund of the General Synod, was that through such cultural contexts, members of the Christian faith could engage in society in a more authentic way. This would be done through initiating and participating in genuine dialogue on questions of values and beliefs arising out of the cultural discourses of society. *CineDialogue* is a practical programme that equips people with skills and resources in dialogue around film viewing.

This programme does not presuppose or require theoretical knowledge about filmmaking or so-called film literacy. Neither does it depend on access to filmmakers' or reviewers' jargon or wide exposure to films. What *CineDialogue* does require from its participants, and seeks to develop in them, is a non-judgemental openness to other peoples' and one's own responses to the experience of viewing a film. This is derived from a phenomenological recognition that,
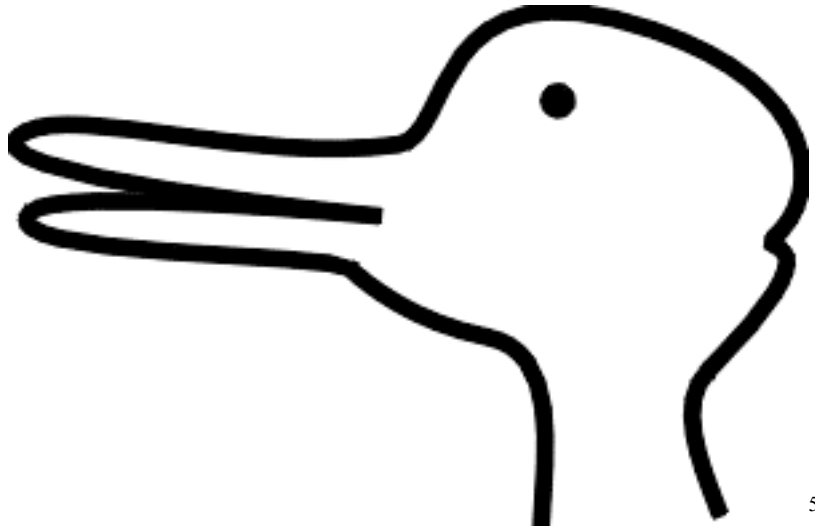
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[1] George Miller in Mark Seton (ed.): *CineDialogue Handbook 2003: Engaging Australians – Conversations About Movies*, Sydney, ScreenVision, 2003, 2.
[2] *Ibid.*, 3.
[3] Michael Frost: "Michael Frost reports on sabbatical" in *Locus: Introducing the Centre for Evangelism and Global Mission and its Programs* No. 8, Winter 2001, 2.

as embodied beings, all human beings experience and make meaning of the world in unique ways. They all recognize certain aspects of the world and misrecognise other aspects on a daily basis.

This factor of simultaneous recognition and misrecognition can be illustrated using a simple drawing – Jastrow's "duck-rabbit" – referred to in Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations.*[4]

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How one 'makes meaning of' or 'recognises' this image, in its totality, is dependent on how a person recognises particular aspects or features. If persons recognises the two protruding objects as ears, their interpretation and perception of the totality will be reinforced towards seeing the total object as a 'rabbit', but if they interpret the protruding objects as a beak, then they will be inclined to regard the totality as a kind of bird or duck. Furthermore, it is not possible to 'recognise' both total objects – the 'duck' or the 'rabbit' – in the same moment, because to recognise one requires that they misrecognise the other at the same time. One way by which people come to appreciate the range of recognitions and misrecognitions is through encouraging conversation or dialogue.

CineDialogue groups offer unique contexts where people, who enjoy and value cinematic experiences, can encounter, through dialogue, a diversity of interpretations and experiences of cinema - in an open, supportive and respectful environment. The word 'dialogue' is used to refer to the journey towards fuller meaning-making in life. It is an exploration of meaning that helps participants recognise and honour diversity among human beings. Dialogue is conversation rather than discussion. It is about creating emergent meanings, rather than locating and fixing past meanings. It is also about seeing possible connections and conflictual distinctions, at the same moment. It is encourages inquiry into assumptions rather than justifying or defending assumptions. And, It is about learning and creating a shared generation of meaning-making among many possibilities, rather than gaining agreement on one meaning.[6]

An important feature of *CineDialogue*, as a practice, is that it empowers people to make their own thoughtful, authentic responses to this powerful and pervasive medium purportedly within what we call culture. As George Herbert Mead suggests, all human participants, in an embodied way, participate in the formation and re-formation of cultural activities – in this instance, film viewing.[7] So it becomes useful to interrogate different beliefs and expectations

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[4] Ludwig Wittgenstein: *Philosophical Investigations*, G.E.M. Anscombe (trans.), Oxford, Prentice Hall, 1958, 194.

[5] http://philosophy.wisc.edu/forster/images/DuckRabbit.tif, no longer accessible. First noted in J. Jastrow: 'The Mind's Eye,' *Popular Science Monthly* 54, 1899, 299-312.

[6] Seton, *op. cit*., 4.

[7] Ralph Stacey and Douglas Griffin: 'Introduction' in *Complexity and the Experience of Leading Organizations,* Douglas Griffin and Ralph Stacey (eds.), London and New York, Routledge, 2005, 5-6.

about culture in order to encourage new, revised bodily perceptions of what may ore may not be taking place during cultural activities such as film viewing.

Historically, the very notion of culture, as an entity, has only emerged over the last two centuries. Culture is most commonly regarded as something people have as an object. It is an object that one can distance one's self from. Culture can be objectified, i.e. it can be turned into an 'object' for study. But this also implies that cultural behaviours can also be controlled. So, is culture 'out there' for humans to shape and alter and study and observe? Or, alternatively, are human beings 'in' culture – is culture some sort of container humans can choose to move in and out of? This perspective also implies a degree of objectification by which people might identify and generalise others by the culture they are in. Or, as Mead asks, is culture both 'in' human beings and produced 'between' them? In this perspective, each unique body shapes or forms experience even as it is formed by experience.

Edward Casey suggests that nature and culture meet in the lived body. He gives the example of skilled actions such as swimming. In swimming, both the natural and cultural are always already conjoined. Nothing is entirely natural or entirely cultural in that one swims with a biological body but as taught by others. When a person learns how to swim, he or she learns from his or her own unique body. But they also learn through the direction and guidance of other bodies. Casey notes that this is more than imitation. Over time, everything human beings learn they make such experiences their own. They embody it in the cells and membranes of their bodies, and in the very breath they inhale and exhale. Any learnt form is consequently brought back out, physically and publicly, through the per-forming of it. [8]

A bodily habit can only be formed through bodily practice. The actions of the body are constantly engaged in the world. So, mysteriously and paradoxically, the actions of our bodies form an experience of the world - at the same time – that our bodies are formed by an experience of the world. So how might we understand culture as being in and between us rather than an object or a container? Anthropologist Michael Agar supports the notion that culture is not an object people have or possess. Culture is rather a produced experience of difference between people. Any time human beings find themselves making mistakes in communicating and interacting in a relationship a cultural experience is produced. Agar proposes that culture is something that is constantly constructed by people to negotiate their experiences of similarities and differences in social behaviour and expectation.[9] Consequently, since language is a primary tool for negotiation between people, Agar applies the term "languaculture" as a reminder that language and culture are co-dependent social practices. The 'langua' in languaculture refers to discourses and conversations rather than just words or sentences. The 'culture' element of languaculture is a reminder of the meanings that include, but go well beyond dictionary and grammatical conventions. This means that cultural interaction is not a simple case of translation – replacing apparent like words and ideas. [10]

In recent times the concept of culture has been evoked to explain and understand differences yet presuming some normative human common denominator. The assumption is made that we are all human - so that commonality lies beneath the surface of cultural difference. However, Agar notes that not all differences are necessarily cultural. People, even within the same languaculture, often do things differently because of other motivations (eg, the desire for power or control) rather than social conventions. [11] So, Agar argues that culture isn't something a group of people 'have'. This is a misrecognition. Rather, culture is a tool to handle the experiences of difference that are encountered. It is an attempt to use apparent similarities to organise other differences into meaningful patterns. [12] A cultural norm of Australia is that its people are easy-going – a "she'll be right, mate" attitude. This seems to many Australian as a stereotype, especially as may be many fellow Australians who are not

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[8] Edward S. Casey: 'The Ghost of Embodiment: On Bodily Habitudes and Schemata' in D. Welton (ed.), *Body and Flesh: A Philosophical Reader*, Malden and Oxford, Blackwell, 1998, 212.
[9] Michael Agar: *Language Shock: Understanding the Culture of Conversation,* New York, William Morrow and Company, 1994, 138, 139.
[10] *Ibid.*, 96.
[11] *Ibid.*, 125.
[12] *Ibid.*, 128.

easy-going. So culture may be "a coherent connection of differences" but it is also constantly subject to revision by those who experience such interactions as differences. [13] Whenever a person encounters difference in relation to others this becomes a potential cultural encounter.

Furthermore, the experience of cultural encounter functions across communities as extensions of individuals. For example, any local community becomes the cultural norm and source of identity for its member-participants. A new member has to discover, through both covert and overt signals, who may speak and when, what may be said and what should remain unspoken, what is desirable and undesirable, and, what is natural/normal and unnatural/abnormal experience and behaviour. But languaculture does not remain fixed through linguistic and social convention. It is a dynamic and negotiable practice. Agar writes: "Your complexity makes you different, but your humanity offers you the chance to understand others, even to become different from what you were when you first tried to understand". [14] In this way, the experience of culture is an awareness that reveals both habitual, personal assumptions of what is 'natural' or 'right' but also opens up other possibilities for meaning making. This is what is actively taught and encouraged through various tsgae of the *CineDialogue* programme.

Agar concludes that if the dynamic of languaculture is experienced with such openness there is inevitable change. This is because, as Agar puts it, "the old 'self', the one in your heart and mind and soul, mutates as it comes into relationships with others. The self stretches to comprehend them all. A life of Being turns into a life of Becoming."[15] This is similar to the dynamic of mutual vulnerability that was mentioned earlier. And this is the challenge and opportunity of engagement with others through our shared experiences of popular culture. Thus, cultural experience is something humans habitually carry in their bodies that form their experiences, at the same time that they form each other's experiences through their mutual engagement with each other in the world.

Agar notes that the experience of culture begins, firstly, with the awareness of differences that do not make sense. When people see a film or watch a television programme with each other and something confuses or disturbs some individuals, this reveals the experience of difference. But once people begin to willingly learn new ways of seeing a film through other peoples' experience i.e. a new languaculture, they embark on the road to communicative competence with each other. As they struggle to make sense, in the company of other participants, they can gain greater clarity of both their own and other perspectives. The languaculture changes between them. In the context of *CineDialogue*, it's not just something new that they use to communicate with each other but it also becomes a part of who all the participants are becoming as they share in the film conversation experience. [16]

In fact, Agar proposes that any languaculture that emerges in this process is actually generated as a new discourse or conversation. [17] If we actually engage with others and treat popular culture as a tool rather than as an idol, then we are offering both ourselves and others liberation from an important but subtle deception, namely, the deception or misrecognition that popular culture has a 'life' of its own. It does not. Popular culture is what people make it to be. It is what they produce together either willingly or wilfully.

I and many ethically concerned cultural commentators are at work to empower people to start listening and responding, rather than just passively soaking it all in. Such conscious interaction actually changes the world and those who participate in the conversation by changing what it is that can be thought, said, and done. The experience of cultural difference potentially moves a person in new directions that alter his or her sense of identity, both in the old community and in the new encounter of an 'other' community. I have found this to be the case as I have participated in dialogues with those in the performing arts. I have had to be open to transformation of old and possibly misguided values, but my colleagues have also been provoked by my confusion and questioning. Together, we have changed each other and

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[13] *Ibid.*
[14] *Ibid.*, 77.
[15] *Ibid.*, 28.
[16] *Ibid.*, 206.
[17] *Ibid.*, 209.

been changed by each other through our mutual respect and interest in the well-being of each other.

Agar offers a three-step process on the way into this awareness of languaculture production; Step one is a mistake that is encountered when a social situation isn't working the way it's supposed to. It's not a mistake of failing to have the correct word but rather a failure to fit in naturally with the setting in spite of speaking apparently the same language. The second step is the awareness of this mismatch of expectations. There is also the openness to look for other frames of meaning that may be operating. The third step is the repair made by playing with the old operating frames that are now made transparent. It involves a kind of improvising like that of a jazz musician – who has a sense of the bigger picture even if they don't know where this particular tune may be going. And then repair involves negotiating new frames in order to function meaningfully in the new languaculture. [18] Agar has aligned the initial letters of these three steps, MAR, with the Spanish word for ocean. The experience of cultural difference puts one 'out to sea'. We might consider this in the context of a sailor who is at home at sea even though they will have had a homeland as their first social identity. [19] These three steps are crucial to the willingness to engage in genuine dialogue around the experience of film viewing.

In developing *CineDialogue* from a phenomenological premise, I have proposed that filmmakers work with our habits of perception, interpretation and experience in order to make us more comfortable and secure or less uncomfortable and secure in our film experiences. As George Ellis observes, there are four ways in which filmmakers affect people through the craft and context of cinema. Firstly, methods of film production are hidden. Secondly, in film, the boundary between the theatrical and the real is blurred. Thirdly, Ellis argues that film is both public entertainment and a subjective, dreamlike experience. Finally, through the viewing a film, participants experience spontaneous, un-interpreted reality alongside symbolic force and significance.[20] These ways confirm or cause film-goers to question their habits and cultural assumptions. Therefore, in addition to developing dialogue skills, the *CineDialgoue* programme actively encourages the practicing of two phenomenological or embodied strategies to attune participants to their embodied experiences and habitual interpretations. These take into account the sensory and the cultural through two considerations: an awareness of experience and an attitude of reflection.

Firstly, the phenomenological intention of 'bracketing' is to come freshly to one's senses and sensual experiences, without preconceptions of what one is supposed to experience in a certain context. The idea is to bracket or put on hold the usual assumptions people make about their perceptions. The experience can be as simple as closing one's eyes in order to be more aware of all the possible sounds that are circulating. Or alternatively, it might be blocking one's ears so that one is more conscious of what is available through vision. In film viewing this bracketing can't be done in such a physical way. However, this can be done in a home context, by turning down the sound and just watching the images, or by covering the screen and just listening. More usually people can learn to just draw their attention to different perceptions by withholding judgement on what they expect will happen. They may also recall things that surprised them and dwell with more attention on them as a valid part of their whole, embodied experiences. All that human beings reflect on as their 'gut' experiences can include this experiential analysis.

The second phenomenological strategy actually functions in the opposite direction to 'bracketing' experience. Since so much of cultural behaviour is taken for granted as habitual it tends to be ignored as significant. Such habits can be interrogated by attention to actively describe rather than interpret what was seen, heard or sensed in any other way. This descriptive process should be as exhaustive as possible without censoring because an expectation isn't met in terms of anticipated genre conventions. Inclusive acknowledgement of all that is experienced should be honoured in this public way. This second strategy will allow

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[18] *Ibid.*, 242, 243.
[19] *Ibid.*, 244.
[20] George Lellis: 'Perception in the Cinema: A Fourfold Confusion' in *Inter/Media: Interpersonal Communication in a Media World*, Gary Gumpert and Robert Cathcart (eds.), New York and Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1979, 388-399.

people to identify their own assumptions about how they expect a film should present its maker's story and how a film might convey its maker's values.[21]

In actuality, any open-ended, conversational dialogue is a habit that needs to be learnt and practiced. Therefore, the project of *CineDialogue* was, initially, to create a training program for group facilitators. These facilitators would learn how to encourage participants to accommodate diversity, to demonstrate mutual care and respect for each other, and to manage times of difference, discomfort and silence. It is these social skills that would provide the structure for any significant formation of relationships that support any sharing of beliefs, values or faith. The following is an outline of how a *CineDialogue* event would function. Two facilitators and a small group attend public screenings of commonly agreed current release films. Around a meal or supper they have a dialogue about the film using *Dialogue Starters*, which I will explain shortly. These Starters would be used in two ways. Firstly, in pairs, participants practise habits of dialogue in order to create a safe environment where they feel free to express their own beliefs and opinions without censure or judgement of others, and subsequently, in the group, participants come to an awareness that there can be many possible 'readings' or experiential interpretations of a film.

In *CineDialogue* groups, the sharing of diverse meanings, where everyone's experience is honoured and valued, creates a conducive space for participants. They can begin to share their experiences and understandings of other values, beliefs, and faith commitments. All this is done in the context of ongoing, deepening interpersonal relationships.[22] The Dialogue Starters are not designed to unearth what the film is 'really about'. By contrast, film criticism or film discussion groups often examine a film through the 'lense' of either genre or type of movie (drama, comedy, action, etc.), filmmakers (directors, writers, etc.) or the social context of the movie. Any or all of these lenses are used to 'prove' a particular and often exclusive interpretation. This kind of group dynamic, however, can exclude those who are less 'literate' in watching movies. It can also tend to reinforce bias and preconceptions about what movies ought to do to people. What each person brings of their own values and experiences is just as significant, even if they know little about the background to the movie. Dialogue starters are intended to facilitate an ongoing dialogue between those who share in the cinematic experience.

These dialogue skills, like any new habit, feel very self-conscious and awkward at first. They may seem 'false', but participants are encouraged to persevere in the discipline of listening and being attentive to each other, without judgement as they practise using these dialogue starters. It actually becomes easier and more 'natural' with practice over time. In pairs, participants talk, in turn, about their responses to each of three questions. Once each has shared about the first, move on to the second question, and then on to the third question. The questions begin with a "Gut" response that enquires about how watching the film affected each person's body, feelings and thoughts. The second question invites a "Storyline" response in which participants comment on how they made sense of and/or experienced the way the story was told through film through its use of characters, images, sounds, music, and son on. The third question invites a deeper "Values" response in which participants share how each made sense of and/or experienced the values, and the important or significant ideas that appear to be portrayed through the film.

Having shared in pairs, all the pairs are invited to join the larger group. A group facilitator ensures everyone is heard. Each then shares responses as the group attends to each question in turn. As each person shares, others must wait until each has fully talked about all they wish to. This then ensures that others can then express any difference of opinion they have about how they experienced and interpreted the film differently.[23]

The fact that there are no right or wrong answers is constantly emphasised with the observation that differences of opinion reveal just diverse responses and insights. Yet, it was around this area of encouraging dialogue that I began to find myself at odds with workshop

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[21] Seton, *op. cit.*, 29-31.
[22] *Ibid.*, 4.
[23] *Ibid.*, 5.

participants in the funded phase of the Project. It became apparent that the participants, the Workshop attracted, had been significantly shaped by a particularly dominant 'cultural practice' of the Anglican Diocese of Sydney. The participants did not feel comfortable, initially, with the concept and practice of dialogue – they were far more at home with apologetics i.e. defending one's faith. Alternatively, they were more comfortable with discussion groups, in which they could gradually persuade everyone to the 'correct' answers. Several of the participants expected this Project to prepare them to use film as an evangelistic tool, rather than as a medium for authentic relational encounter, without any hidden agendas. It has proved a challenge to Christians to explore new ways to genuinely engage and connect with people by initiating non–conditional supportive social networks.

There also appeared to be a fear of becoming 'contaminated' by prolonged exposure, through conversation, to other ways of experiencing and making meaning of the world. I found that there was an unfamiliarity and hesitancy to place one's self in vulnerability and openness to others. Some comments from participants gave the impression that it was unusual to share deeply and supportively in the lives of others in a church community. Some of the Workshop participants noted that sharing in Bible study/home groups remains at a surface level. It would seem that the only vulnerability that many Christians may be able to deal with is when they are in a powerful and stable position and the other is in the vulnerable position at times of crisis such as illness, death, or a relationship breakdown.

In addition, I found there was often an anxiety when I asked people of particular faiths to consider the possibility of dialogue rather than debate or discussion. If truth is regarded as a definitive 'object' to be protected and preserved by human agents then anything that questions such an understanding of truth was held at arms length. There have been various beliefs about truth: those who advocate an 'objective' or 'absolute' truth, those who advocate a 'subjective' or 'relative' truth, and, those who advocate a 'relational' or 'contingent' truth. *CineDialogue* functions from the premise of this third notion of 'relational' truth.[24] Those who understand truth, as 'relational', believe that all beliefs and phenomena that are true have both objective and subjective qualities. The practice of dialogue can open up other qualities of truth that people may be unaware of or prejudiced against.

It has been both a rewarding and surprising journey in developing the *CineDialogue* programme through funding by the General Synod of the Anglican Church of Australia's unique *Engaging Australia* project. Regrettably, this project has been discontinued and the reported findings of each project developed now lie dormant. As a consequence, it must be speculated that there is a lack of will to pursue serious engagement with the Australian community on their own terms which is ultimately detrimental to all concerned. However, there those who have been inspired by the *CineDialogue* programme and continue to put its techniques into practice to encourage genuine dialogue around movie-going. Thus, through both phenomenological practices and emergent conversations, *CineDialogue* offers many exciting and rewarding cinematic 'leaps of faith'.

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[24] *Ibid*., 25, 26.