How We Run Our Movie Nights

Step One: Prepare yourself. Learn how to discuss a movie with others, think through what movies are from a Christian perspective. One of the best guides to this that I?ve come across is a book by Brian Godawa called *Hollywood Worldviews: Watching Films with Wisdom and Discernment* (Downer?s Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2002). Another good one is Michael Romanowski?s *Eyes Wide Open: Looking for God in Popular Culture,* revised and expanded edition (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2007), though Godawa?s book deals specifically with movies (and very helpful in thinking through how filmed stories work, since he is a practicing screenwriter). Of course, the best way to think through a lot of these issues is simply to watch a lot of films and think about them. Pretty soon, you?ll find that you?re developing ?instincts? about where to go thematically when you?re talking about these films.

Step Two: Always always always preview the movies before you show them. You want to do this for three reasons:

1. You?ll want to screen movies for objectionable content. This doesn?t mean that you should always disqualify a movie if there?s sex or violence or bad language (Godawa?s appendix about sex and violence in the Bible is priceless when thinking over this issue). But if there is very strong sexual or violent content, it can be a distraction ? at least it is to me. And that doesn?t help discussion. Of course, you also have to be aware of what is age-appropriate. If you?re doing this with middle and high-schoolers, you have to be more stringent than if you?re inviting folks who are college student age or older.

2. You?ll want to screen these movies for quality. My rule of thumb is this: If I can?t gladly watch a movie twice, I won?t show it to my students once. Sometimes the story is dumb, or the directing inept, or sometimes it?s something more subtle, like pacing (I don?t want students falling asleep during the movie). Or maybe the movie is just too depressing. That?s one of the reasons I didn?t recommend Love Liza. It?s a well written, powerfully acted movie, but it deals with so much pain in such detail, it makes you want to slit your wrists afterwards. That?s a reaction I?d rather avoid among my students.

3. You?ll want to screen movies for themes that lend themselves to discussion. You might find a great movie, but it just doesn?t lead to any themes worth discussing. But I find that to be kind of rare. If it?s a truly good movie, 9 times out of 10, it will be worth discussing.

If you preview a lot of movies (which you?ll end up doing if you have regular movie nights), you?re going to have to learn a new skill: how not to watch a bad movie all the way through. If you see enough movies, you learn to get a feel for which movies are worth seeing all the way through and which movies are just a waste of time. You need to listen to that nagging voice at the back of your brain that says, ?But I don?t care if they escape,? or ?I just don?t care if she finds true love,? etc. If you stop caring about the characters, turn it off. It?s not worth doing a movie night with it. There?s only one time I was tempted to turn off a movie that I?m really glad I watched all the way through (see Magnolia in the movie recommendations below). There have been by far more films that I wished I had turned off half-way through.

Other guidelines when choosing films to show:

Avoid movies that are too familiar (like Matrix). Otherwise, people either get bored (because they?ve already seen it eight times) or you get some rabid fan who dominates conversation. Neither of those is a good thing.

If you?re dealing with a younger crowd (college student and below), beware of older movies,

because they can come across as simply clichéd and insipid. One movie night I showed the archetypal cowboy-mythology film, George Steven?s Shane. I love this movie, despite some corny scenes. But my students simply couldn?t take it seriously ? and if they can?t take it seriously, you can?t expect serious discussion about themes in the movie.

Avoid movies that are too long (like all of the Lord of the Rings movies). I?ve found that for evening movie discussions, long movies just wear my guests down and they have little energy for good discussion. Two and a half hours is about the limit. (You can use clips to get discussion rolling, but you might leave some people disappointed if they came expecting a full movie).

Avoid movies that are agenda-driven or have an axe to grind. Several times, I?ve had good movies that I?ve passed over for movie night because it was just so forceful or obvious about wanting to press home some political point or other (gay marriage, abortion, you name it) that it wasn?t that interesting. What you want are movies that don?t take one side too easily, that leave room for ambiguity and complexity (in both the characters and the themes). Those are the movies that are fun to discuss.

What we?ve found works best are movies that are either recent and popular, but our guests haven?t gotten around to seeing (or they want to see it again); or movies that are recent and obscure that they haven?t seen, but they trust your judgment that it?s worth seeing (and that kind of trust takes time to build, believe you me).

Step Three: Invite folks. I?ve found that a face-to-face invitation or a personal phone call works best. E-mails are too impersonal and too easy to ignore. You also have to have a feel for the rhythm of how people plan their weeks. If I call students too far in advance, they forget. If I call students too late (say, the day before I plan to have the movie night), they?ve already made other plans. For my students, two to three days before the planned event works best. When I?m calling my list of students, I try to pray for them, too, as I?m going down the list. And calling them one by one helps me keep in touch with how they?re doing, what?s going on in their lives, things I can pray for ? even if they don?t show up. It?s a way of sustaining a relationship. I generally spend an hour or two calling through our list of 35 or so students or ex-students. It also helps if you have a regular schedule so that it becomes part of your guests ?mental furniture? (I?ve had students call me up on a Wednesday and say, ?Tomorrow?s Thursday. Is there a movie night??).

Step Four: Provide a warm, inviting environment. This is where having a Carolyn is so essential, for she is a truly gifted hostess. (No, you can?t have her ? she?s taken). Carolyn usually starts preparing a few hours ahead so that things don?t get rushed just before students show up, so that she can relax and enjoy their company. I usually just ask how I can help and vacuum or straighten up, or chop vegetables ? whatever she tells me to do.

One of our emphases is on food, and lots of it. Carolyn makes chocolate chip cookies (a rarity in the Czech Republic, and much appreciated by our students), a vegetable tray (for the vegetarians in the crowd), a tray of deli meats and fancy-schmancy cheeses, bread or rolls, chips, a bowl of fruit, and something special (we rotate week by week between chicken wings, grilled cheese sandwiches, hummus, spinach dip, layered bean dip, or black bean salsa). If you?re working with students (i.e. living alone and don?t quite know how to feed themselves the way mom used to feed them), food is crucial.

We also set out drinks, which for us includes juice, water, milk, soda, beer, wine and tea. If you are offended by alcohol or if you?re working with a younger crowd, don?t offer alcoholic drinks. But for us, in the Czech context, it would be very socially alienating not to offer any alcohol, and since my goal is to make our college students feel welcome, we do offer it. In our experience, since I?m their prof, they are always restrained in how much they consume. I?ve never had a problem with a student who has drunk too much at our home.

I?ve also found that putting on some good music also creates a friendly atmosphere (I?m kind of partial to Bill Frisell myself).

We also light tons of candles. It gives our living room this warm glow that (I hope) aesthetically

reflects the spiritual reality ? that there is light and life here and that we want the students to enter into it (at least temporarily, for the evening). It?s kind of an outward symbol (with the food, drinks, music and the rest) that we love these students and want them to be here.

Last but not least, in preparation, you need to PRAY. We always reserve some time before students arrive to pray for students? hearts, to pray for our hearts (that we?d love them the way Christ loves us), and most important, that the Holy Spirit would show up and be our guest. I really can tell the difference when he does. I mean, he lives in us, so he?s always there, but when we invite him to be our guest of honor, it really does make a difference to the way the students perceive the evening, how the conversation flows, etc. Occasionally, a student shows up very very early and we don?t get a chance to pray, and the movie night is almost always the worse for it.

Step Five: Chill, hang out. We tell students to arrive at 7:00 PM (which means that they?ll show up 7:15-7:30). We hang out with those who come early, eat and chat as people arrive, and then we start the movie between 7:30 to 7:45. Our goal is to create a relaxed atmosphere (especially important since it isn?t all that common to have a professor invite students to his home in this culture).

Step Six: Prepare for the ?event.? I announce that we?re starting. I turn off the music (that usually gets everyone?s attention), and I ask if anyone has to go to the bathroom or needs to shut off their cell phones (a friend even gave us a ?cell phone free zone? sign). The goal is to watch the movie free from distractions so they can think as they watch. Once this has been taken care of, I sometimes say a few introductory words about the film, what they should watch for. Sometimes it?s better not to, it?s better to let them enter this cinematic world fresh, open and unprepared. Then we dim the lights and let the film begin.

Step Seven: Transition back to the real world. I find that our guests (especially those who have seen the film for the first time) need 10 to 15 minutes to process what they?ve just seen. During that time, we?ll boil water for tea, direct folks to the bathrooms if they need them, and just give them some quiet, some time to digest what they?ve just experienced.

Step Eight: Begin discussion. After they?ve had a chance to transition back to the real world, I?ll get everyone to settle down and we?ll open discussion. I use the following questions (you can be flexible, be willing to follow any interesting lines of discussion that come up, but these provide a good frame):

?Who?s seen this movie for the first time? What did you think about it?? This gives first-timers the privilege of sounding off first (as opposed to the rabid fan who?s foaming at the mouth to say his or her piece). It?s also a good way of making sure everyone says something. Don?t let them just say ?I liked it,? or ?I hated it,? but always follow up and ask them why they reacted the way did.

?Who liked the film, and why?? This is a great way to see where the viewers sense common grace and beauty in the film. This question can lead all sorts of interesting places.

?Who didn?t like the film, and why?? This opens up issues of where the film rings false (i.e. where the film lies about reality, often to cover up its own idolatry). Or viewers can express their dislike of some theme, or something a character did that they didn?t like, and you can get into great discussions about why that character was wrong, what is evil, etc.

After I?ve given folks a chance to vent their pleasure or displeasure (but always to back it up with some thought about what specifically they liked or didn?t like), I?ll move on to this question: ?What are some themes that you noticed?? And we?ll start exploring the film?s imagery, leitmotifs, storyline, etc. Here?s where previewing the movie will pay-off, because you should have already spent some time thinking about this stuff, so you can guide discussion towards certain themes that you think could lead interesting places. In other words, you can allow the themes from the story to lead to bigger questions. If one character abuses another, you can talk about what real relationships look like and how they work. If there?s a scene involving reconciliation, you can talk about mercy and forgiveness.

One note of caution: Don?t try to force the gospel into this conversation. When we began movie

nights, I?d let the conversation meander for a while, and then I?d feel compelled to ?give the gospel,? in other words, to give a Christian reading of the themes in the movie. Students listened attentively (if somewhat uncomfortably), and then the conversation ended. It nearly always shut conversation down, simply because they felt it would be impolite to disagree with me when I had stated my opinion so strongly (postmodern students usually want to avoid conflict when possible). What I do now is that I try to introduce some small facet of the Christian worldview, and introduce it as naturally and winsomely as possible, so that the conversation can keep going. For example, when we were discussing Moonlight Mile and Joe?s conforming to what others expect of him for fear of rejection, I said, ?I think that?s something that everyone struggles with, but unconditional love removes that fear. That?s what the Bible says about Christ?s love ? that perfect love drives out fear, so you don?t need to live your life for others for fear of rejection.? And that?s all I said, just a small facet of the Christian worldview. It was enough to get them to think, but not enough to derail the conversation. My theory is that for students who come again and again, they?ll eventually see enough facets over time that they?ll be able to build a composite picture of what the whole Christian worldview gem looks like. And if they are one of my ?regulars? and they?re intrigued by these facets, they might just want to join our Bible study where we get to tackle a lot of these issues head-on. Anyway, it?s a delicate balance, and a lot of times I come away from a movie night thinking that I should have said more, or that I?ve said too much. I?m still learning how to do this well. Every movie?s a new lesson for me.

Overall, I make it a goal to listen more than I talk. I don?t always succeed, but that?s the goal.

Step Nine: Cool down period. Let the conversation wind down naturally. Try to feel when everything that was going to be said has been said (if someone really wants to keep going, let ?em ? they?ve got something important to say . . . unless you?ve got a rabid fan on your hands, in which case you may need to intervene or he?ll keep everyone there until 1 AM). Then I put on some soft music (which signals that we?re shifting from movie discussion to casual chatting), and we sit around and chill some more with the students. In American culture, it?s polite not to stay too late. In Czech culture, it?s impolite to leave too early. So after a particularly successful movie night, students may hang out until 11:30 or so (they would stay later, but the trams go to night schedule after 12 midnight). But there?s no rush ? the idea is to create this little oasis where time slows down and people feel like they can linger (a taste of eternity in time). However, if they stay very late, you?ll want to leave the dishes for tomorrow.

That?s it, that?s all of my secrets (all of the ones I?m conscious of, anyway). Feel free to adapt these however you want to. The next section is a list of movies that we liked and that seemed to have worked well for movie discussion nights from the last six years or so, along with the themes that we explored from each movie.

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