

Suspension of Disbelief – January 27, 2013

Suspension of Disbelief

by David Green

Much to my surprise, the other day I found out that I'm a film expert.

I received an email containing the summary of a meeting I'd attended a couple weeks ago. At this meeting, after I'd already left, it apparently was announced that next month, West Texas State University would be hosting a screening of the film, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, and that I would be the moderator of a discussion following the movie, along with a couple of WT professors. The email listed me as "David Green, film expert."

In fact, Mary Badham, who played *Scout* in *To Kill a Mockingbird*, will be at WT the next day to talk about her experience of making the film. I've always wanted to meet her, and I plan to ask her the burning question, "Did you get to keep the ham costume?"

Of course I already knew all about the event next month, and I'm really looking forward to participating in it. It's just that I'm so rarely referred to as an expert on anything, when I read the email describing me as a "film expert," it was rather shocking.

Truth is, it'd be a lot more accurate to call me a "film bore."

As my wife Ellen would be happy to tell you, I can talk about movies ad-nauseum. If you're ever having trouble falling asleep, just call and ask me to explain the meaning of the dream sequence in Alfred Hitchcock's *Vertigo*. I promise you'll be out like a light within three minutes.

It is true I went to film school, and had a stunningly brief and disastrous career as a screenwriter in Los Angeles many years ago. But one day as I was strolling along Sunset Boulevard I was struck down by a bright light and heard a voice telling me I needed to return to Texas, and pursue the lucrative profession of ministry.

That's not exactly the way it happened, but, hey, it's my story.

Truth is, we all create our own stories, our own narratives. Not only about ourselves, but every time we read a book, listen to a piece of music, gaze upon a work of art, or watch a TV show or movie. And even, when we have what I'll call a "religious experience."

We're all interpreters of the information we receive, and none of us can ever be completely objective.

Two people can read the same piece of literature, or watch the same film, or read the same passage of scripture, and come away with completely different impressions.

We create our own story in our mind, based on our previous experiences and expectations. We piece together different words and images, sights and sounds, and make unconscious leaps of interpretation to make some sense of what we're taking in.

We also make those kinds of interpretive leaps in everyday life. It can save our skin, for instance, if we're stopped at a traffic signal, the light turns green, but before we step on the gas and drive on through, we notice a big truck on the cross street barreling toward the intersection at high speed, even though we know their light has already turned red.

Do we keep on going, or do we stop?

Most of us would at least pause because we'd anticipate that driver is likely to keep on coming, run the red light...and we'd rather not get smashed up in the process.

Not only that, if that truck driver did race through the intersection in front of us, we then might very well curse them and make even more leaps of interpretation.

We might assign to that person all kinds of assumptions: they're a reckless yahoo with no regard for safety, or they were busy texting while driving and didn't see their light turn red, or, if we notice their truck had a bumper sticker making a political or social statement we didn't agree with, then we might really begin to attach all kinds of horrible intent to that person.

They're a dumb redneck, we might say to ourselves, someone who's obviously a selfish ignorant bully with no sense of social responsibility.

In fact, they probably suffer from some kind of deep-seated inadequacy complex to need to drive such a huge truck in the first place, and they're trying to prove that no one – and certainly not some kind of government intrusion on their personal liberty like a red light – can tell them what to do.

So, in an instant, we've created an entire story-line about that person without ever meeting them.

But what if we did meet that person, and discovered the reason they ran the red light was because their little boy in the seat next to them was having an acute asthma attack, and they were racing as fast as they could to the emergency room to save his life?

What would our attitude – and what would our story about them – then be?

When I was in film school, we were shown an early experiment to prove this point. Way back during the era of silent movies, a Russian film maker did a study with three separate audiences.

First, he'd made a motion picture depicting an actor sitting in a room, simply looking into the distance with a blank stare on his face. He then took that piece of film and edited it in three different ways.

Each edited version he showed separately to one of the three different audiences.

In the first version, he showed the footage of the actor, then cut to an image of an adorable baby in a cradle. Then, he cut back to the image of the actor.

When the audience was asked what they thought of the film, and specifically the actor's performance, they remarked at how obviously gentle, happy, and content the actor had been. He was clearly portraying the loving parent of this child, the audience said. The fatherly emotion was just oozing from him.

For the second audience, using the exact same footage of the actor, instead of showing the baby, he edited in the image of a woman weeping at a funeral. For this audience, the actor was obviously expressing deep sadness and compassion. They'd never seen an actor display such extraordinary empathy before.

For the third audience, again using the same footage of the actor, his image was juxtaposed with a scene of great suspense: a man mugging an innocent person on the street. For this, the audience applauded the actor for being furiously indignant at this cruel injustice.

The experiment demonstrated not only the power of film to evoke deeply emotional responses, and how simple editing – carefully placing images in certain sequences – makes a huge difference.

It also illustrated how our minds work to automatically process information and then create a story without consciously or even rationally thinking about it.

Particularly when we're reading in a good book or seeing a play or watching a film, we can have the experience of being so caught up in the story that we're unaware of anything else going on around us.

Even if what we're reading or watching is absurd or quite a stretch, our heart rate can rise, we can perspire, hold our breath, tense up our muscles, and basically feel as if what we're taking in is somehow affecting us personally.

Rationally, when we're watching a movie, for instance, we know full well that we're seeing shadows projected onto a screen, and hearing a recorded soundtrack. But none of that matters if we're really getting into what we're watching.

And if there is some distraction, like someone's cell phone going off, or another patron in the theatre decides to have a conversation with their friend, it's irritating because it takes us out of that moment we want to be in. It's as if we're dreaming, and suddenly someone's shaking us awake.

In fact, that's exactly what's happening in our heads. It's been proven that the same part of our brain that's most active when we're asleep and dreaming is also most active when we're watching a film or reading a really gripping novel.

Being in that dream-like state is called "Suspension of Disbelief." We're suspending the reality that we're looking at printed words on a page, or watching shadows on a wall.

On a deep-brain dreaming level, we believe that those words and images are somehow real, when we know in a waking mode that they're actually just words and shadows.

And if we think about it, we realize we're the ones processing that information in our own heads; we're the ones who are actually piecing together that information to create that story.

This is no accident; we've been conditioned to think this way. To be able to sit down with a bag of popcorn, look at a screen with images, and completely lose ourselves to the point where we laugh or cry or hide our eyes in terror.

I heard a story about a group of anthropologists who not long after World War II studied a small tribe of native people in New Guinea who'd been completely isolated from modern civilization.

These primitive folks had been living the same way for thousands of years, in a remote jungle on that island. More or less enjoying a stone-age way of life

At some point in their study, the anthropologists decided to show the members of this tribe a movie, of all things.

I could be wrong, but I believe it was *Stagecoach*, the John Wayne western from 1939.

But not only were these native people kind of freaked out by the apparent magic of the technology of a projected image and sound, they were much more interested in the physical reality of the projector and the screen. How it all worked. They had no interest at all in the story being told in the movie itself. It made no sense to them because they had no prior exposure to that kind of visual storytelling.

For them, the images were just disjointed pictures with no connection to one another. So, they did not watch it with any kind of suspension of disbelief.

Even though I can imagine the anthropologists – being so-called civilized, modern people – probably really enjoyed the film. After all, it was directed by John Ford and nominated for seven Academy Awards – including Best Picture – and it won three Oscars. Apparently the New Guineans were unimpressed.

In any case, you and I and most people on the planet have been conditioned to put things together in our heads in certain ways.

Each of us has a paradigm – a lens through which we view reality – that we've been taught. And over great expanses of time, we've been taught to suspend our disbelief.

Which is one reason why religion is so powerful, and why people have fought and died and still defend their religious beliefs as if their very lives depend on it.

Any modern, rational examination of the Bible tells us it's a collection of stories, myths, poetry, metaphor, and sayings compiled over many years, first transmitted orally from one generation to the next and then written down, and added to, edited, re-edited, and nuanced for particular audiences. And finally, put together in the form we're familiar with today, through a very contentious and politically-charged process.

It contains fantastic tales of mythological proportions. It borrows and weaves together sacred history that's been filtered and re-filtered for people in different times and places to illustrate a variety of understandings of how human beings might be connected to the mysterious and the divine.

There's nothing wrong, I believe, in seeing the Bible that way. With the way I understand and interpret it, I can see a whole lot of wonderful stuff in the Bible that's well worth our time and attention. It can be beautiful and moving and contains essential truths about what it means to live an ethical life filled with hope, justice, peace, and grace.

I can understand the metaphors and the myths for what they are, and knowing that some things might not be literally true doesn't diminish for me the truths that can be found within those pages. Many of those truths are so powerful they can move me to tears.

On the other hand, the Bible contains material I have a hard time with.

But again, I understand that if we study things like why a certain passage was written, and when, and for whom, then I can say, "Well, I don't agree with that point of view or even like that story, but I do get why it's in there, and where it came from."

So, when it comes to the Bible, like a whole lot of people, I can enjoy it, derive a lot of meaning from it, and sometimes even suspend disbelief. While at the same time, be fully aware that the stories I'm reading often amount to shadows being projected onto a wall.

It's safe to say my particular way of reading the Bible – and really, any writings from any religious tradition – is not shared by everyone.

I'm not presumptuous enough to claim that my way of interpreting scripture or understanding my relationship with God...or the spirit of universal love...or whatever name you want to give that, is in any way the only right way.

It's just my way. It's what I've been taught. It's what I've learned through my life experiences. It's my paradigm.

But we live in a world and a cultural context – in these parts especially – where a far different paradigm is very prominent, where any manner of suspension of disbelief is not permitted when it comes to the Bible or to faith. Where questioning is not allowed.

Imagine growing up and continuing to only be exposed to that way of understanding what it means to be a person of faith, and that particular lens through which you view scripture and religion is affirmed as the only legitimate way of seeing things.

Occasionally I find myself in a debate of sorts with someone who has that view. Sometimes they want to discuss something I've written in the newspaper or said in public. They often want to correct the error of my ways.

It's not always easy to have those conversations; sometimes it's like talking with someone who speaks a foreign language. It's as if they're from a distant planet, or from the jungles of New Guinea.

In a way, we are indeed speaking two different languages, holding onto two distinct ways of viewing reality.

Because, although we might be looking at the same image on the movie screen – so to speak – one of us is interpreting what we're seeing from a completely different point of view.

Again, that doesn't make their point of view wrong and my point of view right. We're just seeing the same thing differently. One of us is suspending disbelief completely, and one of us is appreciating how the movie was made.

But that does not mean we can't both appreciate the film.

Religious faith of any kind can rely so heavily on suspension of disbelief, though, it makes those of us who fancy ourselves as more rational thinkers often dismiss folks who steadfastly suspend their religious disbelief. We might call them ignorant or blind to clear reason.

I would hope we wouldn't be so quick to do so.

As a church, we might disagree with someone else's faith, but we're never in the business of tearing down bridges of understanding, either.

At the same time, whenever I see religious belief of any kind being used to demean anyone, whenever it's used to justify bigotry or violence, whenever religion of any brand fosters hatred or fear, I'll be the first in line to denounce it.

Any occasion when any human being is hurt as the result of religious faith always needs to be called to accountability, to be challenged.

Our world is simply too fragile a place. Most wars through history and even today around the world have at least some basis in a religious intolerance.

So many of our very own cultural tensions stem from differences of faith, between well-meaning folks who understand you have to suspend disbelief in order to be faithful, and those whose faith is not dependent on suspending disbelief.

That's a prime reason we are so valuable as a Fellowship. I see it as a key job we're called to do, to be people who say on the one hand, believe, but it's also okay to question belief.

To be people who affirm that we won't suspend our faith in reason, and intelligent inquiry, and acceptance of other points of view.

To be people who receive with open arms, those who no longer feel welcome elsewhere. They – and we – all must know that we can enjoy the movie we're watching; that it can hold meaning, and bring peace and joy and hope. But we also all need a safe place to learn how the movie was made.

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