

Think Like a Filmmaker:

lessons from filmmakers for worship designers

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The camera pulls back to a wide shot and then sweeps over the landscape. Our own kinesthetic identification with this motion lifts us into the air like a bird in flight even though we are planted in our movie theater seats. The musical score expands into goose-bump intensity, notes lifting and soaring not just in our ears, but in our whole bodies. We have become part of the action—our own neurological Epcot Center-esque experience. Now let your imagination cut to another scene. The music swells as a colorful procession enters the space. Dove-kites fly overhead, calling your eyes to the upward regions of the sanctuary architecture. Bells begin to peel with surround-sound from ringers in the balcony and a single candle held aloft makes its entrance as the worship leader gestures for all to stand. In some ways it is a superfluous gesture—so ready are we to rise to new heights in this moment.

As you can see, there are similar sensations occurring in these two scenarios. Much has been written comparing worship to theater. But I believe it is the art of filmmaking where we “ritual artists” can learn valuable lessons. Yes, there are differences between a live event and a pre-recorded-edited-to-the-hilt movie. But I invite you to focus on perhaps a different set of observations that can give you new lenses through which to understand your art form as a worship designer.

Filmmaking deals in what I call the “layering” of the senses in order to tell a story. Verbal dialogue happens, but it is not the only—or at times even the primary—medium of communication. Music sets mood, tone and context. Visuals, including color palettes, lighting contrast, panoramic or close-up, create concise and often deeply symbolic contributions to the sequence of events. Actions become carefully thought out because of their immense impact. And dialogue is compact and rich. Ahhh... liturgy, eh? Well, at least the kind of liturgy that moves us on a spiritual journey from beginning to end rather than what I refer to as “plug-and-play” worship (you know, just plug in the scripture, the hymns and the sermon and *voilà*, you have yet another paint-by-numbers unremarkable experience).

I call what we do in planning worship “design.” And as designers, we are ritual artists. We take some pretty incredible stories and transformational messages and we try again and again to bring them to life in deeply meaningful ways. And as the church begins to claim the power of the arts and to practice this in ever more complex ways (especially in the ways emerging generations are practicing it), worship designers need more tools for their artistry. So, let’s see what we can learn from filmmakers.

Jon Boorstin, in his book *Making Movies Work*, reminds us that **every detail can be important to meaning**. “A film is a universe where chance is never an excuse for anything, from the color of a dress to the creak of a door; it is a series of hundreds of very particular decisions, and every single one of them must be felt.” From the mood of the

music that is playing as people enter the room to the transitional movements from one thing to another, a worship experience is a series of decisions thought through—or “felt” through—during the design process, during the walk-through, and even in the moment (this is where we depart from film in that we get to improvise and edit even and especially in the presence of the whole body). In a recent worship gathering where I was leading a group in a symbolic experience of cleansing by washing hands, it occurred to me in the moment of inviting the congregation to this action that even the discarding of the paper towels we were using to dry our hands was a significant symbol of “leaving our trash behind.” My mention of this in that moment made even something I thought was incidental, important. Indeed, every detail can be important to meaning.

Filmmakers know that **we don’t want to just “watch it,” we want to be “in it.”** In his book, *Powerful Persuasion*, Tex Sample uses the terms “critical distance” and “critical immersion” to describe an important difference between modern and postmodern sensibilities in communication. Rather than “listening-from-afar” being a primary mode of taking in information, there has been a shift to the desire to be *immersed in an experience* of that which we are seeking to know. Boorstin says filmmakers know that “people don’t just want to watch a movie, they throw themselves into the experience... they want to lose themselves in what they’re seeing.”

Being immersed requires attention to every aspect of the environment of the space itself. The art director on a film is essential to the whole “feel” of the movie. Again Boorstin explains, “If the art director does the job well, his [or her] **environments are a metaphor for the actions and emotions of the story.**” When we enter a space, we get an immediate “hit”—a visceral snapshot of what we imagine will happen here. Worship designers in the 21st century are focusing more on creating environments in which to enter. This attention is deepening and enriching our entire worship experience.

Color and lighting contribute to the energy of the moment—whether that is a cool and calming energy or a bright, vibrant and celebratory effect. Have you ever wondered why it is difficult to get the congregation to participate energetically in a dimly lit room or why you can’t create intimacy and warmth under fluorescent lights? Ask a filmmaker why. The wrong lens on a camera or botched lighting on a set can call for an extra day of shooting just to correct it. It really is that important to the experience of the story.

Being immersed sometimes requires that listening happen not just with our ears, but with our hearts. Musical underscoring can create an emotional landscape for hearing a word rather than simply an intellectual one. As you watch movies or television for the next few days, begin to really focus on what the composers do with the mood, volume, pitch, and especially timing to enhance the words and action. **Sound—even the sound of silence—creates experience and mood**, says Boorstin. Literal vibratory difference in pitch and rhythm creates different energy and reactions. This is a full-on bodily experience—a key component of immersion in the moment and immersion in the story. As you are designing worship, think about how the previous or next musical piece might “weave” its way into the words of the worship leader or the liturgy that precedes or follows it. And remember, as important as musical underscoring may be, equally

important is when *not* to use it. Silence is also a design element. Silence is a *sound*—which is different than “dead space.”

There are many more lessons to be learned from filmmaking that will be included in my worship leadership book coming out next year. But let me leave you with one more. **Editors are one of the most crucial members of a filmmaking team and editing is an essential skill to develop for worship designers and leaders.** “The art of editing is in large part sensing the difference—feeling that edge where we teeter into boredom,” Boorstin tells us. A worship service that *flows* is one where designers and leaders are intensely attuned to the right timing for both the parts of the service itself, and also the transitions. As leaders, we must synchronize our internal clocks with that of the whole body of worshipers or we are in danger of being oblivious to the fact that we’ve sung that song too many times or that we need to breathe into this moment just a while longer. A leader who can give a reader just the right cue to get to the microphone at just the right moment is one who is, in the moment, making timing decisions that will effect the ability of the body to stay “in the flow.”

We are ritual artists. Look through this lens as you watch the next movie you go to. Our goal is to tell the most amazing Story in the most compelling way. This takes technique, an artist’s eye, and being tuned into the movement of the Spirit and the spirit of the Body.

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