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HUMN-407-01

11/13/2014

Classics on Screen: Analyzing Ben-Hur Classical World Film

Introduction to Essay

The movie, Ben-Hur is a classical world film that represents the ancient Roman civilization. The film was directed by William Wyler as an epic historical drama movie in 1959. The main cast features Charlton Heston, who plays the role of Judah Ben-Hur, Stephen Boyd as Messala, Jack Hawkins as Quintus Arrius, Haya Harareet as Esther and Hugh Griffith as Sheik Ilderim (Wallace 5).

The plot idea pegs back to the beginning of the 1st century where a merchant and a rich Jewish prince, Judah Ben-Hur lives in Jerusalem. His old childhood friend, Messala arrives with the Governor as the Roman Legions serving commander Officer. The old friends are happy and enthusiastic to meet after a long time. However, their political views and ideals are different and hence separate them. At the governor's welcome parade, a tile from Ben-Hur's house accidentally falls down and injures the governor. Messala knows the innocence of Ben-Hur to the awful accident but decides to punish him and his family. Messala throws Ben-Hur's sister and mother to prison whilst he is sent to the galleys. Ben-Hur swears that he was going to revenge and claim freedom for the people from the Roman rule (Wyke 19).

This paper will draw analysis of the film in the view of its genre, plot, themes and contexts from the movie itself and various scholarly articles. The film will be analysed drawing lessons and historical contexts of the Roman Empire and the 1st Century. Lastly, this paper will

offer an alternative movie with similar historical settings in its storyline. From this, the paper will offer further suggestions for more analysis and research on classical world films.

Introduction to Film and Genre

The film, Ben-Hur, is an entertaining film that illustrates a Roman historical event that led to the crucifixion of Jesus. The roman historical genre of the classical World Series featured prominently in the early 1950's to mid1960's (Ramage & Ramage 7). These films had elements that differentiated from other genres produced at any other time. First, the films depicted some ancient facts and known truths to the audiences to expound their idea of the historical happenings of the past. The films take the second person narrative by illustrating an event that happened long ago. In Ben-Hur, the movie film points at Roman Legion emperors and rulers like the Pontius Pilate as known in the Roman history. Secondly, the props, costumes and sets used in the historical films are lighter, irregularly textured to give a visual understanding of the context of the storyline. Thirdly, the editing design and techniques used are different. These films are longer because their base contents borrow from a rich base of historical events that is best captured by longer films. According to Paul (227), Ben-Hur film had a screenplay script running for about 4 hours. The director, William Wyler, estimating the costs and available space, reduced the script to run for approximately 3 hours to cover the space available and costs planned and budgeted for the film.

For a given audience, a historical film elicits different expectations. The most specific expectations are the eagerness to acquire better knowledge of historical events, compare the film settings to common literature and enhance understanding of the traits of different historical characters, whether good or bad. Other audiences expect entertainment, emotional reactions and learning experiences by watching the films.

Contexts of Ben-Hur Film

The film was set in the 1st century, a period between 30 B.C.E.-330 C.E. when the Roman Empire ruled in the Jewish territory (Wallace 5). This period marked the oppression for the Jewish people where they hoped for a saviour to free them from slavery. The film's prologue illustrates the historical background in Jerusalem at a time when Jesus was born and widely became recognised for his radical teachings. It records the imperial decree given by Emperor Augustus that required all persons to be taxed and counted in their place of birth. In Ben-Hur film, Jesus is depicted to give encouragement and support to the main actor Judah, in his oppression. The film also depicts how his mother and sister were sent to prison and contracted leprosy—a common disease at the time. The film also depicts the prisoners' stroll from Jerusalem to Nazareth, which are Jewish towns in history till present. Judah is given a cup of water by a carpenter, Jesus, when he was denied water by the Centurions. At the end of the film, Jesus is sentenced before Pontius Pilate before Judah could meet him to ask him to heal his Mother and Sister from leprosy (Wallace 105). However, at Jesus' crucifixion, they are miraculously healed. This clearly sets precedence of the historical setting of the film.

Ben-Hur film was made after World War II, a socio-cultural period where evil was condemned and good encouraged in the society in 1959 (Matsumoto et al. 11). This was after the world had witnessed a period of hostility, war and oppression, which had elicited vehement reactions in the whole world. This is the period between the early 1950's and mid 1960's where the audiences demanded for epic films to describe past occurrences in relation to the modern occurrences in a subtle way (Ramage & Ramage 7). This socio-cultural period consisted of a society reeling from World War II and looking for epic encounters through different avenues

like music and films to assist in healing the wounds created and encourage peace and progression among the society.

Different industrial contents affected the film production. Finding a cast and location for Ben-Hur film was a specific challenge. The demands for a more subtle film by the American population that portrayed the victory of Christian morality over paganism were also a challenge. This required spectacular displays of colours, buildings, places and origin by the Hollywood producers. Ben-Hur film was adapted from the 1880 novel, *Ben-Hur: A Tale of the Christ* written by Lew Wallace. MGM bought the rights to use the book for filming where the Jewish's freedom from oppression took centre stage from the Roman pagan imperial rule. The film was made in widescreen format and shot at Mussolini's built studios at Cinecitta. The technology imposed on the screenplay was splendid. The film was recorded in blocked wavelengths that brought different colours depicting the ancient period with simultaneous multiple frames. This made the film to utilise its budget of \$15.175 and recovered \$14.7 million through its marketing period in a few weeks. This made the film to be acclaimed as authentic, and a realistic production of the historical and ancient Roman Empire embedded with Bible trilogy (Ramage & Ramage 10).

Ben-Hur Film Plot, Characters and Themes

Judah is the main character in the film who suffers at the hands of the Roman Empire rulers. He is sentenced to gallery slavery and later exiled to Tyrus. He agitates for his freedom and revenge as he was sentenced unfairly without trial along with his servants and family for a roofing accident. He is full of bravery and mercy which is depicted by him facing the Macedonian Pirate Warships and saving the Roman admiral Arrius from drowning despite the oppression he gave to the Roman flagship slaves. Melissa is also a main cast who previously was a friend to Judah but changed his ideals to favour the Roman system of governance and rule. His

desire to climb the leadership ladder in the Roman Empire led him to betray his friend and set tough regulations to enact fear on the rich, respected Jewish merchants. However, he dies tragically during the chariot race scene, whereby he is severely injured and wrecked by being trampled by the horses (Wallace 98).

Various themes are elicited by the film. The most prominent theme is the quest for freedom and vengeance. After Judah and his family are sentenced unlawfully, he returns to Messala and says in anger that he hopes God would grant him Vengeance and prays for the long life of Messala to see the ending of the story. Judah's quest of vengeance is also portrayed in the roman flagship en-route to fight the Macedonian pirates. Whilst the other prisoners tire and suffer heart attacks from rowing the ship, Judah stays strong. Arrius, the Roman admiral, admires the determination of Judah and comments that Judah had the spirit to fight back the Roman Empire, but a good greater sense to control his vengeance. He also openly comments that Judah's eyes are full of vengeance and that this vengeance had kept him alive. The vengeance ends when Judah defeats Messala in the chariot scene and witnesses how Jesus was crucified whereby he says that he felt Jesus voice from the cross taking away his sword and his vengeance altogether. The theme of vengeance is meaningful and significant to the modern society. At the period of filming Ben-Hur, the world had witnessed a serious war between different nations in the World War II. The vengeance portrayed in the war led to the destruction of property and death to millions of people. Being the aftermath of war, the film discourages vengeance and supports peace as illustrated through the acts of Jesus to Judah and the references to Bible quotes. Therefore, the theme of vengeance becomes a meaningful and crucial for the modern audiences.

The rise of Christianity is another major theme in the film. The film depicts Jesus, who is known in the Bible trilogy. Jesus is considered in the film as a good carpenter, and Judah recognizes him in the end by saying 'I know this man' and hence gives him water when he was being taken to Golgotha. In the film, Esther, Judah's fiancée repeatedly speaks about the beatitudes that Jesus had earlier taught in the Roman Empire. At the Judea scene, Esther repeatedly tells Judah that blessed is the merciful for they will receive God given mercy. She then tells Judah to make peace with himself by saying blessed are the peacemakers for they would be termed as Gods children. This shows the rise of Christianity in the movie. This theme is meaningful in a modern society. This film was constructed when most of the American society had a good understanding of the Bible. In the present world, the knowledge of the Bible has spread which has significance. As depicted in Ben-Hur film, good tramples the evil, a notion well illustrated in the Bible trilogy. Therefore, the film appeals to the modern societies in the building morality hence meaningful to these audiences.

The power of the Roman Empire is illustrated in the film. The Eunuchs are portrayed to have excess powers and authoritative rule in the kingdom. They are portrayed to have these powers in different scenes. In the chariot scene, the sheikh, who is the leader ushers the competition. The Pontius Pilate, the Roman Empire, delivers a ruling to crucify Jesus. Messala also gives a ruling to imprison Judah and other Jewish society members. This theme has an effect to Modern societies in a variety of ways. It encourages and demands respect for authorities to give judgements on the societal issues as required. In addition, this theme of power is meaningful to modern societies because the citizens are ruled by various institutions of power that requires fair and justified rulings.

The theme of love is also portrayed in the film. This love is portrayed between Esther and Judah albeit at a marginal rate. The love is first seen in the film when Esther is introduced in the film as she descended elegantly while Judah admiringly looks at her. The slow rhythmic motion, the major chords emphasis on positive sound and the scoring of strings in the film emanates a warm romantic feeling from the audience for both Judah and Esther. However, Esther is engaged to another Jewish merchant despite the love that she has to Judah. They depart when Judah says that were it not for her engagement, he would have kissed her goodbye. The emotional feeling of love is enhanced when Esther replies that if she was not engaged, then there would be no goodbyes to be uttered between them. Upon the return of Judah to his hometown after four years, the film depicts the same room where they met before they became separated, and Judah learns that Esther did not proceed with her marriage. This theme is meaningful to the audience. This is because the victory of love brings the best in people in the modern society. In the film, Esther manages to convince Judah not to retaliate, to return evil with good and that she had lost the Judah that she loved. Esther says the act of retaliation would not differentiate Judah with Messala. Judah is convinced and goes in search for his family. In the modern world context, the theme of love could be used to encourage harmony and discourage hate and vengeance hence meaningful to the society.

Suggestions of Similar Movies for Theme Analysis

Ben-Hur is a film that was made to convey the struggles of the Jewish for freedom and oppression in the historical setting of the Roman Empire. It uses the bible trilogy, the ancient Roman rulers and the past historical settings to shape the plot of the film. This film was created in 1959, a period when classical morality films were preferred in the society. The film, Quo Vadis is a classic example of a movie set on the historical settings of the Roman Empire that

covers the themes of morality, rise of Christianity and power of rule as the issues in that society. This movie influences the emotional aspects of the audience in the same way as Ben-Hur. In fact, this film was made almost the same time as Ben-Hur's after the World War II in 1951. The film is also similar to Ben-Hur as it was adapted from the 1896 classical novel *Quo Vadis*, written by Henryk Sienkiewicz. Ben-Hur, on the other hand, was adapted from the 1880 novel, *Ben-Hur: A Tale of the Christ* written by Lew Wallace. Other films like Troy are set in the Roman historical settings. Troy appeals to audiences through the struggle of freedom by the people from the Roman Empire hence elicit the themes of vengeance, love and rule of power as recorded in Ben-Hur. I suggest the further research on the use of verbal cues in the movie as they emancipate the emotions of viewers in certain historical settings as elicited in the book, '*Over the Edge: Remapping the American West*' (Matsumoto et al. 11). In addition, I suggest the use of the website, *Film Music Notes* on <http://www.filmmusicnotes.com/thematic-transformation-in-rozsas-score-for-ben-hur/> that complements the analysis of techniques and style of music as used in classical films. Through the website, specific insights from the use of slow ramming, high speed and unwinding music in historical films can be analysed and learned. The website also provides a discussion on ways to acquire and target various themes in classical films through the analysis of music used in the films scenes hence expanding the knowledge in classical art films.

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