

Haines Lyon, Charlotte:

'*Kill Bill Volume 2: A Film Worthy of Meaning Making?*'

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Current Contents

Past Issues

Kill Bill Volume 2: A Film Worthy of Meaning Making?

Abstract

In 2004 forty seven people in their twenties and thirties from the UK and Ireland, agreed to participate in research regarding their film watching. A key aspect to the research was: what evidence exists in viewers' own perceptions of films shaping or influencing held worldviews?

The results provided data confirming our hypothesis that audiences often make meaning via the experience of film watching. It also challenged the common assumption; if there is to be meaning making then a film must be of sufficient quality.

Kill Bill Volume 2, watched by 47% of the participants, provided evidence that viewers are able and do make meaning whilst watching a film, despite that film being dismissed as a poor violent cartoon by many critics. There are accounts of exploring various concepts in life whilst watching this film.

With particular reference to the *Kill Bill 2* responses, this paper will explore the evidence gained that audiences use a wide variety of films to make meaning in their life.

Key Words: Meaning Making, *Kill Bill*, self reflection, church, audience, cinema

Introduction

Let me start with a short anecdote. I first presented a seminar on *Kill Bill Volume 2*, when at a conference on film and faith, when I was asked to look at film and women.

During one of the plenary sessions, the key speaker said that films such as *Kill Bill* were pure evil and offered nothing positive to audiences. They could only affect people negatively. Imagine his shock when I, eight months pregnant with my first daughter, challenged him on his evidence for this - he had no empirical evidence, only that it was "obvious". When I told him that some of the responses received during my research indicated a certain amount of moral reflection when watching the film, he was almost apoplectic. It was partly due to that and other similar reactions to *Kill Bill Vol 1* and its sequel, that has led to this paper, which incidentally was presented in Edinburgh when I was eight months pregnant with my second daughter.

Clive Marsh, Annette Hill and Martin Barker (Marsh, Hill and Barker) and other media studies professionals are recognising that audiences do not simply passively consume films. It has been suggested by Clive Marsh (Marsh 2004) that audiences may well use cinematic experiences as one of several places that they might make meaning in their lives. However little empirical research has actually been done to support such theses.

When undertaking this research, there seemed to be a common position that was taken for granted in church circles that films could only provide such a function if they were explicitly moral or highbrow. Whilst my research provides a plethora of information regarding this topic, this paper examines the responses to *Kill Bill 2*. Not only do they show instances of making meaning whilst watching a film but they show that a film often dismissed as simple cartoon violence can provide a space for doing so. It should be noted that the research project was only funded for six months but the sheer amount of data means there is much more work that could be done. The research was carried out as part of a report for the Methodist Church looking at issues surrounding people in their 20s and 30s and was not intended as an academic piece of work.

The Research

In 2004 the Methodist Church agreed to fund research that enquired into the way cinema goers in their 20s and 30s interacted with film. The research was not constructed specifically to explore cinema-goers' religious ideas. Its purpose was to explore how people responded to and used film, and how the practice of cinema-going fitted into their life-structure. This would inevitably be of interest to religious groups. The making of meaning in contemporary society does, however, clearly extend well beyond what religions do. The research team was led by Dr Clive Marsh, author of *Cinema and Sentiment*.

With the kind agreement of Ster Century I visited their busiest cinemas in Romford, Edinburgh, Leeds, Dublin and Norwich. Customers who appeared to be in their 20s and 30s were approached and asked if they were willing to take part.^[1]

Each person was given a pack of questionnaires, the first asked about demographics and film watching habits. The second was to be filled in for every film they saw over a three-month period. This asked about who they went with, where they saw the film and then questions about the film. E.g. *Were there any characters that particularly affected you? – If so please say why. What themes or issues, if any, did the film make you think about?*

Respondents were asked to return between four and eight second questionnaires depending on how many films they could see in the time. Once returned the respondents were sent a final questionnaire asking them to reflect on the research process. This was because we suspected that the very fact of asking people to take part in the research might actually change the way a person thinks about film. Certainly this third questionnaire provided a useful insight as to how participants thought they had engaged in the process. For the purposes of this paper I will be concentrating on the responses to the second questionnaire to the film *Kill Bill Vol 2*. Further details of the questionnaires can be found in the appendix.

Two other groups were also approached; Waltham Forest Hockey Club in East London and a group of students at Nottingham University. The Nottingham students were studying a Theology and Film module. Most were third year theology students: single honours, or joint with English or philosophy.

Out of 125 people who originally agreed to take part in the research, 47 people returned at least some completed forms. We received one incomplete copy and 46 complete copies of Questionnaire 1, 280 of Questionnaire 2 and 43 of the third and final questionnaire.

We had hoped for a greater proportion of the 125 people to take part, but we had assumed that most people would have only watched four or five films. In actual fact the average number of films watched by each person was six. This meant that we had 280 second questionnaires returned at the end of the project. 52 different films were watched between the participants.

When negotiating with Ster Century, it was suggested that because we were specifically targeting people in their 20s and 30s it would be sensible to start during the time that *Kill Bill 2* was showing nationwide. *Kill Bill 2* was the fifth most frequently viewed film (behind *Harry Potter 3*, *Shrek 2*, *The Day After Tomorrow* and *Troy*) with 47% of participants viewing it. According to the UK Box Office Archives, *Kill Bill Vol 2* was in the top 10 for eight weeks. (UK Film Council)

Despite attempts to have equality between the sexes, those that participated were split unequally. There were 20 male (43%) and 27 female (57%) respondents. *Kill Bill Vol 2* was watched by almost exactly the same ratio of men and women. At the time it was assumed by some cinema managers and some colleagues it may be a “mans” film as it was so violent. The responses show this to be untrue.

Meaning Making

Meaning making was used as a deliberately vague term that we have used to capture a range of responses. It could have been too simplistic and narrow for example to look for moral construction. We wanted to discover how people interact with film. Do they simply passively consume or actively engage with it. Does a film affect them or do they also affect it? Is watching a film a process in which people might make meaning? By this I do not necessarily imply that I think viewers are coming up with new ideas about life, although that is not ruled out. Rather I am talking about a reflective process. Does the process of watching a film provide space for a viewer to reflect on their life, their worldview, their values? Are such views, values and morality challenged, confirmed or affirmed? If the answer is yes, especially with a film such as *Kill Bill Vol 2*, then surely this might have implications for filmmakers, the film industry, academics and many others. Is *Kill Bill Vol 2* a film worthy of meaning making?

The results

There was a vast quantity of data that would benefit from further analysis but the realities of limited time and money mean that it would need to be part of a future project, however there is of evidence of meaning making. Whilst over half of the third questionnaires, that reflected on the research process, mentioned that the point of watching a film was for “entertainment”, “escapism”, “enjoyment” or “fantasy”, there was acknowledgement that films did on occasion provide space for forms of meaning making.

Interestingly though, in the second questionnaires there seemed to be evidence of the type of reflection we were looking for, followed by denial that the film provided anything other than entertainment. For example respondent 38 (Male 23 Film and Theology student) wrote that he felt:

“Unease at watching someone be [sic] buried alive. . . ” and thought there were “Christian parallels in a Superman analogy.” [used by Bill in the film] He goes on to say that he “Had an exam on Christian martyrs the next day so thought about the extremes of human torture – compared with the recent photos of US soldiers torturing Iraqi prisoners.”

I would argue that although the respondent says the film was like a cartoon and didn’t connect with his life, it has provided him with the opportunity for self reflection.

Similarly respondent 17 (Female 21 Film and Theology student) dismissed the film as too far fetched and having no connection to her life. This was despite saying that the film made her think about,

“Justice and revenge and what length one will go to seek them. Moreover if such violent means are really necessary and if they every really free one from the sense of injustice and hurt.” [sic]

Some films including, but not exclusively, documentaries such as *Fahrenheit 9/11* provided an educational aspect – that is to say provoking an “I never knew that” response. *Kill Bill 2* did not elicit this type of response but it did provide responses indicating a variety of meaning making in common with other films.

One way of analysing the response to *Kill Bill 2* is to group them under dominant headings. Five types of response are especially prominent: affirmation of social taboos, personal identification with characters, using a “what if” scenario, reflecting on specific issues and entertainment.

Affirmation of social taboos.

Annette Hill writes in *Shocking Entertainment* that viewers used violent films to “reaffirm social taboos and individual experience.” (Hill, 106) This is revealed in the responses.

“A lot of killing! Is killing ever justified? “ (Respondent 31: female 28 student)

"How the bride had double standards when it came to the value of life."

(Respondent 12: male 31 IT worker)

"I am quite a pacifist and so it was interesting for me – how I could square those pacifistic beliefs with the enjoyment of such a violent film (albeit comedy violence). I wondered if the film was glorifying violence and if so should I have liked it?"

(Respondent 13: male 22 Film and Theology student)

There was also unease exhibited by four respondents that they liked characters and were sympathetic to them despite the fact they were extremely violent. For example:

[Identified with] "Bill – despite what he had done you can understand why he did it."

(Respondent 12: male 31 IT worker)

"We discussed how kiddo is an assassin yet you think she is a good person throughout the film, just as you would not blame Julia Roberts for being a prostitute in pretty woman." (Respondent 8: male 21 student)

"Even though Uma Thurman is a bad character I still felt sorry for her because she was trying hard for her daughter." (Respondent 15: female 22 student)

Personal Identification with Characters.

Evidence of personal identification with characters and even inspiration by them was apparent.

"Although it was violent there was a lot of passion. I am a very passionate person.

(Respondent 27: male 24 Assistant Manager)

"Characters who had limbs cut off – think it's a difficult thing to lose a limb and would not like to have that happen to me." (Respondent 26: female 27 Occupational Therapist)

"The character played by Uma Thurman and how emotionally and physically strong she is." (Respondent 15: female 22 student)

"Uma Thurman's character – her will power and determination was inspirational . . . The image of Uma being buried alive and the horrendous nature of such an experience. You really feel for her and feel such hopelessness. The feeling of explosion and "you go girl" when she gets out really stayed with me." (Respondent 17: female 21 Film and Theology student)

"Am jealous of Uma Thurman's body. Need to lose weight. . . . I liked the character that Uma Thurman plays because she is pretty, intelligent and able to kick everyone's arse." (Respondent 14: female 26 student)

Five people also mentioned that they were inspired to either take up or learn more about martial arts though one admitted that it would probably be a fairly short lived ambition.

What if scenarios

Annette Hill also asserts that viewers use such films to experience in a safe environment “a range of complex and sophisticated responses to violence. They would not be able to do this in any comparable way in real life.” (Hill, 107) A good example within the responses^[2] is:

“It did make me think what I’d do if someone killed my family however. Would I seek vengeance in a violent manner?” (Respondent 13: male 22 Film and Theology student)

Thinking About Issues

Perhaps the least appreciated aspect of *Kill Bill 2* by critics was motherhood. This featured in six responses.

“Driven by revenge yet motherhood protection was equally strong. Her [Uma Thurman’s character] was impressive.” (Respondent 1: female 29 IT contractor)

“Could relate to the lead character and the need for vengeance, but then again maybe coz she thought she lost her baby.” (Respondent 5: female 24 designer)

Grappling with issues such as betrayal (3 responses), love (3 responses) and revenge (7 responses) was also obvious when asked what themes and issues the film made viewers think about.

“The story is about love and betrayal, emotions everyone feels at some point, and always good when other people go through them too.” (Respondent 9: male 30 waiter)

Entertainment

Finally whilst there is obviously much evidence of people thinking and being challenged by the film, it was also apparent that people enjoyed the film as a piece of entertainment – though the two were certainly not mutually exclusive. It is interesting to see what role entertainment plays in people’s lives.

“It let me escape the day to day drag of work and life . . . After we left the cinema I was exhilarated and happy. I was bouncing up and down play fighting with my boyfriend. (Respondent 5: female 24 designer)

“It made me smile that day.” (Respondent 8: male 23 student)

"Real feel good factor at the end of film." (Respondent 16: female 29)

Conclusion

Fewer and fewer people in UK use the church in any direct way of meaning making but do so in a variety of settings including the cinema. It is not just a one off process but one of continual reflection. I am not claiming that film should take undue credit for providing a place for reflection or meaning making. However we do need to recognise in a multimedia age and at a time when the church is losing its influence, film does have a role to play.

Despite this research being based on such a small sample, preventing us from much statistical analysis, I would argue that there is enough evidence to be able to further develop some specific conclusions.

It is clear that film audiences do (on occasion at least) use film as a place for reflection on issues that are relevant to their lives and society. Such a process may challenge their thinking or simply reaffirm their moral code. Indeed Marsh argues "Both for those who are identifiably religious, and those who are not, [cinema going and film watching] are fulfilling at the very least a religious like function." (Marsh, 2004, 9) He explains this religious function as "...the complex way in which [films] move us, get us thinking, compel us to make links and draw contrasts with life experience past and present. . ." (Ibid.)

This process of meaning making is arguably more autonomous than carrying out such practices in traditionally religious settings. This may excite some people but also cause panic to those who may wish to play gatekeepers to morality. The very fact that a film such as *Kill Bill 2* can provide at least some evidence of self reflection and meaning making should serve as a warning to such custodians.

It is too simplistic and misguided for would be moral guardians to ask how they can ensure people are thinking about films correctly or at least attempt to help people glean the correct message from a film. Such behaviour however is commonly seen in some churches and, I suspect, in other areas of life. The speaker who denounced the *Kill Bill* films for example is a prolific writer of Christian books about film and an influential figure in the evangelical church with regard to film and cultural thinking. Various Christian groups have set up websites (e.g. the Bible Society's www.reelissues.org.uk) and produced resources to enhance Christians' film watching.

Neither can we dismiss films as too violent, shallow or entertaining to provide opportunities to make meaning. It is interesting to note that the aforementioned website lists as its sample films all films that may have some obvious spiritual link such as *The Da Vinci Code*, *Evan Almighty*, and *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*. Whilst this particular paper has looked at the responses to *Kill Bill 2*, I should say we have received similar responses to other films such as *Shrek 2* and *Harry Potter 3*. That is to say, whilst the films could be and were dismissed by the respondents themselves as pure entertainment and really aimed at children, there was still evidence of reflection and meaning making.

Despite there being evidence of autonomous meaning making, there is also evidence of it being in some respects a communal activity. One might argue the very process of cinema going is communal, in terms of often going with others and being in a shared room creates certain expectations – often behave in certain ways at certain times, however this needs further exploration. What we can look at though is the evidence of interacting with others in the research. The research also showed that 96% of people discussed the film in some way afterwards. 17% of all 280 film viewings had led to specific discussions about issues raised in the film. We were surprised by the social function that continued after the film, often in a bar, pub or food place as many went for a drink or a meal as part of the cinema going experience. This raises the question of why it is so difficult to continue this social experience in the cinema after a film with many internal bars and cafes closing during the film. The cinema industry may wish to look at how they can enhance such social practice and possible meaning making by providing appropriate environments to do so.

Interestingly the final questionnaire that was sent to respondents asked about their experience of the research and there was evidence that the viewers enjoyed the process of being prompted to reflect on the film as part of a formal process. Indeed one person expressed disappointment that it was coming to an end. Could this be a sign that film groups may soon be sitting alongside book groups? Book groups whilst often linked to more formal clubs are often simply a group of friends who choose the books and discuss them between them. Having an external prompt however formal may be beneficial.

Finally, if film inhabits the tangled web of meaning making as I have described then this should be of interest to a variety of disciplines such as Cultural Studies, Social Theory, Philosophy and Theology. This research points to a more varied and inclusive process in which people reflect on their lives and make meaning. If people themselves are crossing traditional boundaries to make meaning then such disciplines need to work together more to explore and study this. There certainly needs to be less suspicion of each other when it comes to Theology and other areas. If we are concerned as a society as to how individuals think and act and how they make meaning then it is vital that we all take all films and their audiences seriously.

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Appendix

The three questionnaires used in the research:

Questionnaire 1 was used to gather personal information about each respondent, using the following categories and questions.

Age

Gender

Ethnic origin

Occupation

Relationship status

Whether a parent

Number of people in house

Annual income

Highest qualification

Place of work

Type of location of home (e.g. city, town, village)

Number of different cinemas visited regularly

Location of cinemas visited (e.g. vis-à-vis home, work)

Frequency of cinema-visits

Whether going to the cinema alone or accompanied (and if latter, who with?)

Frequency of watching films at home on DVD and/or video

Whether a subscriber to film magazines

Whether a subscriber to film channels via cable or satellite

Whether a purchaser of film-viewings via cable or satellite

Types of films enjoyed

5 favourite films watched during 2003

Most important factors when choosing a film to watch

Questionnaire 2 was completed for each film watched, and used the following questions.

- 1) Date
- 2) Name of film watched
- 3) At which cinema did you watch the film?
- 4) Approximately how many screens does this cinema have?
- 5) Why did you go and see this particular film?
- 6) Please state whether you watched the film alone, or who you were with and the nature of your relationship with them, e.g. '5 friends and partner'.
- 7) What did you do after the film e.g., 'go for a meal', 'go home with friends', 'go shopping'.
- 8) Did you discuss the film with anybody afterwards? What was the nature of the discussion?
- 9) What are the first reactions, thoughts, words or pictures that come to mind when you think about this film?
- 10) Is there anything about the film that has stuck with you?
- 11) Were there any characters that particularly affected you? – If so please say why.
- 12) Were you aware of any emotions or physical feelings during the film or immediately after it? If so please describe.
- 13) What themes or issues, if any, did the film make you think about?
- 14) What ways if any, did this film connect with your life?

Questionnaire 3 enabled each respondent to reflect on the whole process, using the following questions.

- 1) How have you found this process of keeping film diaries?
- 2) Have you changed the way you think about films that you go and watch?
- 3) To what extent, and in what ways, did you think and/ or reflect on films before you joined this project?
- 4) Do you consider that films affect your life? Please state why you think they do or don't.
- 5) Would the answer to the above question have been any different before you became involved with the project? If yes please state why.
- 6) Do you think that films ever help you think about life's big questions? If so please say what kind of questions.

Notes

[1] It should be noted that there was a small financial reward for doing so; £5 per questionnaire completed and postage was refunded.

[2] Whilst there was only one such response for *Kill Bill Vol. 2*, there were other such responses to other films, which we felt justified the creation of this category.

Biographical note

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