

How to Watch and Evaluate Bible-videos Critically

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Published in *Global Missiology*, www.globalmissiology.org. July 2018

Abstract

Bible-videos are powerful but treacherous communicators, especially when used cross-culturally. This is why it's important to watch and evaluate videos critically before using or adapting them for new audiences. This article discusses some important principles of image creation and interpretation, which are foundational for developing the skills needed to watch videos critically and to evaluate them. The article ends by giving general practical steps to follow in order to assess Bible-videos before adapting or dubbing them into a different language, or using them for ministry in different settings.

Introduction

It's nighttime. Jesus walks into the moonlit frame from the right to a shrine. Soft music is playing. Jesus briefly looks upwards, puts a cloth on his head, places his hands on the shrine and kneels down. He folds his hands and rests them on the shrine. A sideways close-up of Jesus portrays his face half hidden by the cloth while he is praying. The camera zooms in on the shrine as drops of blood appear on it. This confirms that Jesus has presented a prayer of petition to the shrine, which he sealed with a few drops of chicken blood.

This is how some people in northwestern Benin, West Africa, saw and interpreted the scene at the Mount of Olives from the JESUS Film (Merz 2010). What went wrong? Why didn't they understand that Jesus was praying directly to God, his Father? That his agony was so great that his sweat fell like drops of blood?

Images are treacherous communicators, especially when they are used cross-culturally. Despite this, Bible-video images can facilitate how people understand biblical texts and allow them to discover who Jesus is and what he did for them in ways that a text can't. The purpose of Bible-videos is to help communicate the Word of God well and to provide images that enhance texts visually by making them more concrete and accessible. How do we assure that this happens in a good way?

Rather than choosing the media that you like most, this article discusses both theoretically and practically how you can evaluate Bible-videos before they are adapted and dubbed into a different language, or used for ministry in different settings. Doing so is a crucial step towards assuring that a video communicates accurately and well to various specific audiences within specific cultural settings.

The article examines some principles of image creation and how we interpret pictures. A basic understanding of how images work is important for developing the skills needed to watch videos critically and evaluate them. Culture plays a crucial role at every level, from image creation to interpretation and evaluation. The article seeks to give general practical steps that you

can follow so that you can evaluate cultural factors that shape how Bible-videos communicate. These steps are essential for deciding whether specific Bible-videos are suitable for specific audiences and cultural settings. It may also give you hints about communicational difficulties that you may need to address as you work towards adapting and dubbing videos in order to maximize their communicational efficiency.

What are Videos?

The medium of film was invented in the late 19th century. At that time, people often placed an enormous and uncritical faith in media and technology. Especially in America many Christians were enthusiastic about the new medium and quickly recognized its power. They expected that film would revolutionize mission. They thought that its images could be understood everywhere and by everyone. Film could thus tear down all communicative barriers and, for some, even reverse the effects of the linguistic confusion that resulted from building the Tower of Babel (Schultze 1990: 31). It's not surprising that film came to be an important medium in the work of evangelization and mission worldwide.

From today's perspective, having the hindsight of over 100 years of experience with film, we have gained a more nuanced and critical view of the media of film and video. We certainly still consider them powerful, but we've also learnt a lot about their limitations.

What sets video—as well as other visual media—apart is that “[i]mages initially make us *feel* rather than *think*. ... Images don't invite you to argue; they give you an experience” (Hips 2009: 76). This means that often we don't think about videos, we watch and enjoy them, and often let them impact us emotionally. Due to their experiential nature, videos are more than meaningful; they can shape our lives and even become part of them. Seeing videos with our own eyes, and experiencing them emotionally, can make them seem real and true regardless of what exactly we understand when watching them. This powerful feature of visual media is both their strength and their weakness.

Scholars of media and communication have long recognized that when it comes to communicating a specific and precise message, movies and videos are not as reliable as people assume them to be. James Monaco (2009: 72) recognizes parallels between movies and language. But unlike language, he notes that images don't have a determined grammar. A grammar supplies a framework that limits the meaning of words and presents them in well-structured sentences that make meaning concrete. Images neither have a specific grammar nor a determined structure to follow and guide how you “read” them. This makes their interpretation more challenging and far less definite than language. Indeed, the same video can mean different things to different people and thus have quite different, and even opposing, effects on them. This is why we have to learn to *think* about videos and how to watch them critically. Such thoughtful engagement will help us to understand visual media with all their strengths and limitations and allow us to use them more effectively.

In order to better understand how videos work, we need to look at two important aspects of visual media, namely how images are created and how we interpret and understand them.

Creating Images

Images used in media are deliberately created and composed. Those who make images have the power to decide what they show. There are various parameters and tricks in image creation: How do you use the camera? How do you position things and people within an image? How do you use shadows and light, especially by using artificial light sources? Furthermore, special effects virtually remove any limit of what images can show especially when digitally enhanced. The best and most credible images are often the ones where the effort and deliberation that went into creating them is not obvious. Accordingly, the most natural images are in fact often the most artificial ones.

Bible-videos also follow these principles of image creation. Additionally, filmmakers need to add a lot of visual information that is absent from the biblical text, since the Bible doesn't supply a complete film script (Flesher and Torry 2004; Hope 1975). Wayne Dye and Tim Hatcher add: "A video must specify details that would be quickly rejected ... if they were included in a written translation" (2014: 3). Some of the questions that filmmakers need to ask are: How did people look? What did they wear? How did they behave? What gestures and facial expressions would they have used? How did they express emotions? What were their houses like? In what order did people enter rooms, and who would already have been inside? When talking, would people be sitting or standing? What things did they use in daily life? What and how did they eat? What forms of art and music did they have and when did they perform it? What colors did people use and how did they use them? What was the weather like? The Bible only rarely gives indications of such things, which means they must be added to any visualization of biblical texts. Since it's widely accepted that around 80% of communication happens through visual means, it's crucial to pay careful attention to the images of videos.

Some of the information needed to help visualize the Bible comes from historical and archeological knowledge. Throughout the centuries, such information has not always been researched and accessed sufficiently. As a result, there are many misconceptions about biblical times and culture that "have been created by writers and artists who knew nothing of how people actually lived, ate, or died in the first century A.D. They read their own cultural experiences back into the New Testament" (Bell 1998: 11). This trend continues today, and much of the specific content of images is guessed or provided intuitively. This is where filmmakers need to rely on themselves as artists and communicators in order to create images that they think are suitable and credible for their primary intended audiences. Filmmakers create images that feel good and natural to *them*. They thus create images based on their own cultural backgrounds while also thinking of their intended audiences. For example, Bible-videos made in America or Europe have often portrayed Jesus with brown hair and blue eyes, identifying him as a white man (Dye and Hatcher 2014: 6). This seems an obvious historical inaccuracy, since we can safely assume that Jesus was Middle Eastern looking. Sometimes filmmakers have justified this inaccuracy by saying that they chose an actor who could portray Jesus naturally. It seems, then, that it can be more important for filmmakers to portray Jesus to their intended audiences in a way that fits their understanding of what is "natural" based on their own cultural backgrounds. In this instance,

historical accuracy becomes secondary. Following this principle, it isn't surprising that Jesus films made in India have Indian actors, including for Jesus (Friesen 2012).

Bible-video images, then, always depend on the cultural backgrounds of their creators and their primary intended audiences. This is also evident in how Bible-videos portray gestures and body language. Most American and European Jesus films, for example, show Jesus touching women and making direct eye contact with them, which demonstrates his care and compassion towards them, at least to American and European audiences. In other cultural settings, including the Middle East and Asia, men never touch women in public—and may avoid looking them in their eyes—unless they are their wives. Jesus touching women thus raises serious questions of his sexual morality. In some places, Christians have decided that American and European Jesus films should *not* be shown, since they communicate in a way that is contrary to the biblical texts.

Bible-videos and movies are thus inevitably visual interpretations of Scripture from a specific perspective and cultural background, even if the spoken text comes straight from the Bible (as translated). Movies and videos always show people and their behavior in a way that is culturally specific. They simply can't do it otherwise. We have come to recognize that images, although potentially meaningful to everyone across the globe, always carry in them the cultural background in which, and for which, they've been made. Images are never culturally neutral.

This leads me to the next important principle about how we understand and interpret video images.

Interpreting Images

Interpreting images is an acquired skill. Somebody who has never seen a picture before will find it hard to make sense of it. Even which side is up may not always be clear. But people can learn to understand images fairly quickly, especially when they are animated. These days, most people grow up with images and they acquire the necessary interpretive skills already in their childhood. We quickly forget that the process of interpreting images is in fact complex and complicated. We do it naturally and intuitively, and the meaning we gain from images is usually what we accept as valid and true.

Just as images are never created in a void, they never speak into a void either. Images are always culturally situated, not only during their creation, but also at the receiving end. We always need to draw on what we already know in order to make sense of images. How otherwise would you know what you see, if you don't already know something about what you see? For example, if you don't know what Roman soldiers look like you may not realize that they are present in Jesus films. Instead, for some audiences in West Africa, maybe the people dressed in red and wearing hats are in fact fetish priests, since they resemble fetish priests as portrayed in Nigerian videos. Or, for some people from southern Africa, maybe they're not actually people but gods, since only gods wear hats. What we know about life always depends on our experiences and cultural backgrounds. This, in turn, determines how we interpret images. In this way, our culturally conditioned knowledge necessarily plays a crucial role in what images mean.

When Europeans or Americans watch the scene of the last supper in a Jesus film, they may not notice how Jesus gives the bread to his disciples. If they see that he gives the bread with both hands at the same time, it may not mean much to them. Maybe it's even a good thing, since he passes the bread to both sides, therefore considering those on his left and those on his right in equal measure. But if somebody watches the same images from a cultural background where using the left and right hand has a specific meaning, they will notice this. If people usually give food with the clean right hand, then they would ask themselves why Jesus used his dirty left hand instead? He surely had a purpose for doing so; otherwise he would have used his right hand. Some watchers in northwestern Benin have concluded that Jesus used his left hand to give food to Judas to show him that he knows about his betrayal, or that Jesus used his left hand to give food to those who will go to hell. Others were simply distracted by this apparent oddity and couldn't explain his actions.

Both image creators and image interpreters work within specific cultural settings. The more these two settings differ from each other the higher the likelihood of communication difficulties. Things present in images that have no specific meaning for the creators may suddenly become meaningful for those who interpret them, such as a rock becoming a shrine (see Introduction) or Jesus' use of the left hand. At other times, viewers may overlook and miss images that portray something that is meaningful to the creators. More commonly, image interpreters see something that they recognize as being important, such as people wearing red clothes and hats, or Jesus touching women, but they interpret them differently from the way the image creators intended. In all three cases the intended message has not been clearly communicated, and the effects can be quite serious. Cultural difference between image creation and interpretation can thus lead to people understanding videos in quite different ways than their creators originally intended. In the case of Bible-videos this can distort the message sometimes beyond the acceptable.

This relationship between image creation and interpretation raises important questions when we think of preparing Bible-videos for use in a different cultural setting for which they originally had been created. While language translation often presents its own challenges, music and especially images are harder if not impossible to translate or adapt (Merz 2010). Sometimes some images can be left out, but this can only be done if permitted by the owners or copyright holders of the videos and if such cuts don't affect the main plot of the story. This is why the communicative potential of the images of Bible-videos and movies should be evaluated for their suitability *before* adapting them for cross-cultural use for specific audiences. If, once evaluated, you find that there are only minor problems, it may be possible to address these in various ways. If the primary intended audience had major and widespread problems interpreting a Bible-video or movie, then maybe a different product should be considered for adaptation.

Having looked at image creation and image interpretation, it is now time to discuss in more detail how to go about evaluating a Bible-video.

How to Evaluate Bible-videos

To evaluate Bible-videos you need to watch them critically. You need to constantly and deliberately question how the images work together with the text: What do the images

communicate? Do they fit the language spoken alongside them? Does the movie content correspond with your prior knowledge of the biblical text? Where are there differences and discrepancies between image and text? Are there things in the images that distract you from the main message? Are there things present in the images that you think shouldn't be there? Evaluating movies critically is usually much easier said than done and can take some practice in order to do it well.

To start with you need to have a version of the video to evaluate in a language that you—or any other person doing the evaluation—understand well. Think carefully for which audience you want to evaluate it. Be as specific as possible. For example, is it for discipling Christians who speak language X, or for evangelizing speakers of language Y who have virtually no knowledge of Christianity?

There are three different ways or steps to critically watch and evaluate videos:

1. You can watch the video yourself and evaluate it for yourself and your cultural setting. This is an excellent way to start, and it will allow you to judge a video's general potential. Don't assume that if you like it and if it works for you that it will also work for everybody else around you. For example, if you're already very familiar with the Bible, you already have the background and knowledge needed to understand the video well. People around you, even if you share their general cultural setting, may not be as familiar with the biblical accounts as you are. They may find it much harder to make sense of Bible-videos and are more likely to interpret them in different ways to you. If this is a concern, you should follow steps 2 and/or 3 in addition.

Once you have successfully accomplished this step, ask others to do the same to get a wider range of opinions.

2. You can watch the video with a specific intended audience in mind that you know well. This is best done when you're already familiar with the video and if you have a good knowledge of the intended audience. The best way to do this is to think of one person you know well and who represents the primary intended audience well. Constantly ask yourself how this person would understand the movie on the basis of what you think they know. You need to be aware that this is a bit tricky, because often you have to guess how people might interpret images. You can never know for *sure* how others will interpret images and videos, even if you think you know them well. This second step can still be very useful, as it can help you identify potential communication issues that you can then use for step 3.
3. You can ask others who are part of the primary intended audience to watch the video with you and then discuss it with them. Ask them to tell you what they have understood, what they liked about the movie, what they didn't like about it, and what they've learned from it. In order for this to work, you need to motivate people to speak. The more they explain the video to you in various ways, the better an idea you will get about how well the video communicates. Some people are very good at retelling the story they understood from the video, while others are quite hopeless at doing it.

If you use this way of evaluating, it's important that you have a good knowledge not only of the video you seek to evaluate, but also of the cultural backgrounds of the people you watch it with. The aim of this evaluation is to figure out how other people interpret the message of a video. This means that you should accept and take seriously what they tell you without judging them. Do not try to correct them. This is especially important when you don't agree with what they tell you or when their interpretation sounds outrageous, blasphemous or insulting as compared to your interpretation of the video.

This step is also a good way to talk with people about the potential communication issues that you identified under step 2. It's important that you find good questions to ask people about the potential issues. You could also reshoot them specific clips or scenes from the video and ask them what they see. It's always important to learn from people directly, and not just to assume that what you think you know about them is correct.

For all three steps, it's extremely helpful if you have an idea of how images are created and how we interpret them as discussed in this article. This will help you to better question both the images and their interpretations.

Since images address your feelings, it's also important to learn to listen to your feelings. If anything in a video strikes you as a bit odd in any way, pause the video and think why this might be so. What is it about the image that makes you feel odd or that jars with either what you know about the Bible or with the spoken language in the video? Study the image in detail and ask if there is something in it that adds meaning when you think it shouldn't. Is there something missing in the image that you think should be there? Or does the image tell you something in a way that you were not expecting according to the spoken text and/or your biblical knowledge? Is there a behavior, gesture or facial expression that is unexpected and could cause problems? If necessary, take time to think about the images and how they have been composed. If you can think how an image could be changed for better communication, then this will also help you to identify what might be wrong with it. All this will help you watch videos critically and evaluate them for their potential to communicate a biblical text well.

When you identify communication issues in videos, you need to keep track of them. Note the scene of the video, the time when the problem occurs, and add a description of the problem you have identified. This list of problems then can be used as a basis for discussion of how communication issues could possibly be resolved.

Conclusion

This article has given some general points of how to watch Bible-videos and movies critically. Such videos can help their viewers learn more about the Bible and discover Jesus for themselves. Images should complement and enhance the biblical text by explaining and illustrating it. In order to assure that this happens well, it's essential to evaluate Bible-videos for specific audiences not only before they're used more widely, but also before they are dubbed and prepared for use in various languages.

Images and videos, as well as other visual media, are always human interpretations of biblical texts. People necessarily draw on their own cultural backgrounds and knowledge to create images that look natural to them. Similarly, when audiences watch videos, they interpret the images according to their own culturally determined experiences and knowledge. This complex process can sometimes lead to a significant mismatch in communication, even to the extent that the original biblical text becomes distorted beyond the acceptable. We have a responsibility to assure that Bible-videos communicate as well as possible, without distorting the biblical message.

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