Film Analysis

The Intouchables

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On September 23, 2011, France released what would soon be one of its most successful films in history: *The Intouchables*. Its captivating harmony of friendship, comedy, and struggle connects with every audience as it draws upon the things that make us all human. It is important, then, to understand just what the film says about humanity and how it lines up with the Christian understanding of the divine image that all humans are created in. To do so, this analysis will first give a description of the film or “text”—the world “behind” the text, “of” the text, and “in front of” the text. Following that will be a brief overview of a doctrine of the image of God and ways in which the text both converges and diverges with this concept.

**Part I: Thick Description of the Text**

No film or story is independent of its context, and so critical readers must take into account the “world behind the text.” Vanhoozer says that “cultural texts embody the worldviews of their makers” (49). Who, then, was behind the making of this film? A pair of barely successful French directors, Olivier Nakache and Eric Toledano, cast the vision for the film. According to their November 2013 interview in the Toronto Standard, both of them had discovered the story ten years prior but just had not felt ready to do it justice. The original documentary *A La Vie, a La Mort* (*A Life, A Death*) told the story of Philippe Pozzo di Borgo, a man from one of the wealthiest families in France who became a quadriplegic after a paragliding incident—and yet it refrained from telling the story that interested Nakache and Toledano so much: his relationship with his caregiver, Abdel Sellou, known in the movie as Driss. This is the story that captivated the directors and became the one they would tell. When they approached Philippe, he was interested in their long-time dream because he had seen their other comedic words and did not want his life to be a pity party for the disabled. The directors did not want that either. Rather, Nakache described the film this way: “For
us, it’s a story about a friendship between two men. It’s a bromance. These two guys come from very different worlds and somehow connect. It’s a simply, beautiful story” (Crutsinger).

Part of the reason the story works so well is because the two men the movie is based on were so different. Philippe is the son of a French duke living his entire life as a part of the elite upper-upper class—a sort of modern-day bourgeoisie. Abdel immigrated to France from Algeria where he lived a life of crime as a skilled black market criminal. Despite their real-life differences, they also have real-life chemistry. During an interview Philippe had with the UK’s The Telegraph, he called Abdel and “their affection for one another [was] immediately apparent” (Farndale). They laughed and told jokes—one that Philippe would not translate because Abdel made an inappropriate comment about a woman who had interviewed them in the past. While not everything about Driss in the movie was true about Abdel, Philippe says that most of what they do in the movie was either real or something Abdel would have done. The most obvious difference between Abdel and Driss is their appearances. Abdel, a short and square-faced man from Algeria, wryly told the Toronto Standard, “I didn’t know I was black” (Crutsinger). In the movie, Bakari “Driss” Vassary—a tall and black athletic man—immigrates to France from Senegal. This move was made purely because the directing team wanted to cast actor Omar Sy for the character, and it does not detract from the real story. Both Philippe’s real friend and movie friend are immigrant criminals from Africa so their backgrounds line up well enough for the text to stay true to the original story.

To continue to best understand the film, it is important to critically process the “world of the text”—the values and concerns portrayed in the film. The Intouchables is a French studio film often labeled as a comedy, although viewers should not expect any cheap humor; this film has depth to it. A simple but profound feature of the text which reveals to viewers that it cares to go further is the thread of piano music throughout the movie. Had the directors chosen other
common sounds, these sounds would not have been able to lead the film the way that the piano could. So what particular depth does the text explore?

At the center of the film, every character, feature and scene portrayal builds towards the value and exploration of friendship. One approach to see this is by observing the structure of the film. The opening scene immediately grabs the viewer’s attention with Philippe and Driss caught up in a hilarious, suspenseful, and brilliant car chase. Alternatively, the directors could have just as obviously—albeit less artfully—thrown words on the screen that read “This film is about two friends.” Immediately afterwards, the directors go back to the beginning of the story to begin a sequence of scenes that build up a stark contrast between the two men that the audience just met. The first of which shows the camera panning across the row of applicants’ black dress shoes and landing on Driss’ ratty white tennis shoes. His appearance—jeans and a sweatshirt—stick out loudly against the ornate analog clock and Philippe’s Fabergé eggs lined up on the table across from him. Distinctions continue as Philippe and his assistant Magalie interview Driss. The two men listen to two very different kinds of music, an issue that is given life by their understandings of the name Berlioz. To Philippe, an educated connoisseur of classical music, Berlioz was a 19th century composer and critic. To Driss, Berlioz was the name of the project housing where his family lived.

No sooner do the directors flash multiple contrasts of the two men when Philippe asks a question that introduces the key to the entire story. In reference to Driss’ dependence on government welfare programs, Philippe asks him, “So you like living assisted? You don’t mind living off others’ backs?” At that point, the audience knows precisely what brings these two men together and, ultimately, the door is opened to the film’s belief of what friendship is. Across the span of the story, the directors choose a cadence—a rhythm—that goes back and forth between their differences and similarities, their friendship and individuality, highs and lows between two
imperfect people finding out what it means to come together. The film itself portrays this relational phenomenon beautifully.

Their relationship is a little wrinkly at first. Driss makes a sexual joke about Philippe’s hands at the art gallery, but Philippe does not quite pick up on the humor. As Driss learns to take care of Philippe, he shows a lot of reluctance to help him with his stockings and bathroom needs. The tension in these scenes reverses, however, when Philippe has a fit in the night and Driss comes to take care of him. Their friendship accelerates rapidly upon this turning point. That night in Paris they joke about sex, and Philippe opens up about his late wife and his passion for paragliding (the very thing that caused his quadriplegia). They laugh together at the opera. Driss enters into Philippe’s world and starts painting. They have a one-sided snowball fight and turn up the speed on Philippe’s wheelchair. They especially let each other in during the music scene on Philippe’s birthday, both inviting the other to enjoy his music. To drive home their idea of friendship, the directors showed Philippe turning to Driss when Elenoire missed their date.

Their separation at this point in the story completely drops the heart of the viewer—as well as the characters’. Driss struggles with his family while Philippe hates his new caretaker. His beard is a visual representation of his frustration and heartache, so when Driss comes back and shaves it with jokes, it shows the effect of their friendship together. Finally, the conclusion of the story epitomizes the selflessness required in true friendship. Driss goes out of his way to set up Philippe on a date with Elenoire, providing him a way to explore a new happiness.

So what would it look like for someone to live in the “world in front of” the film? Because the directors exhibit such a high view of friendship, so would the “reader.” Throughout the film, no one scene exists without either Philippe, Driss or both. This means that the other characters primarily are used to indicate how each man is growing for and from their friendship. This laser
focus on friendship would most certainly be the priority of someone influenced by this movie. In fact, friendship would even take precedence over family because family members were unreliable. Driss’ mom kicked him out, his younger “brother” was always ignoring him, and his little sister was always frustrated with him. Philippe’s wife passed away and his daughter was rebellious.

Unfortunately, someone living in the world of this movie may end up undervaluing their family because of this portrayal.

On the other hand, friendship is a very good thing, and it must be understood to be able to dwell in it. According to this film, friendship is a selfless act in which you invite another into your world and accept inhabiting theirs. Someone adopting this film’s philosophy would experience the special reward of the giving of one’s self and receiving another. The cover art articulates this well: “Sometimes you have to reach into someone else’s world to find what’s missing in your own.” Practically, what would this look like? Driss was always available for Philippe when he needed him—even when Philippe needed made fun of. Now, this may seem like an oxymoron, but this was imperative for the film (and the real story) to work so well. Because Philippe had spent so much of his recent years being pitied, there was a certain dignity that came along with being made fun of. Driss’ jokes spoke a language that Philippe needed—they made him feel like a normal person. For a persuaded viewer, this may manifest itself differently, but the principle remains. Friends will treat each other with the dignity of humanity and humility. Friends will communicate in ways that the other understands. Friends will always be available when needed. And friends will love each other where they are at in life, making them better at the same time.

Part II: Theological Interpretation of the Text

At the heart of this movie the directors explore humanity and what it means to be a human in this world. As Christians, we believe that humanity at its core is created imago dei—in the divine
image of God. At the very beginning of Scripture, Genesis 1:26a says, “Then God said, ‘Let us make man in our image, after our likeness.’” So what implications does this carry for humans? And how does this understanding help viewers better read the film?

A doctrine of the divine image can be separated into three parts, and readers find the first part right after God’s “Let us” statement. God continues in Genesis 1:26b by saying “And let them have dominion over...all the earth and over every creeping thing...on the earth.” Two verses later God commands humanity to “…fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion...” (Genesis 1:28). In some way God created humanity apart from the rest of creation. Scripture in these verses points to the idea of royalty. Michael Horton describes that the language “son was a legal category” and that “both genders are comprehended [as] co-heirs of the image of God and, in redemption, of God’s entire estate” (398). When Genesis was written, this language was read in stark contrast to the other selected royalties of the neighboring people groups. Tradition in the Church has often interpreted our uniqueness above creation as our ability to reason. Our ability to have thoughts about good and evil, right and wrong, beauty and ugly, and our ability to process them, make us stand apart from any other life form on earth. In my understanding, our uniqueness as divine image bearers point to both of these interpretations. God has placed us on this earth for his special purposes, and he has equipped us to participate with him in fulfilling them.

Secondly, the divine image that we hold means that we are designed for community—relationship with God and community with his people. God says in Genesis 2:18 that “It is not good that the man should be alone.” He follows this by the creation of the man’s helper, a woman. The fact that relationality is so deeply embedded into who we are should come as no surprise when considering the Trinity whom we are made in the likeness of. God himself is one, yet comprised of three persons—each perfectly and completely in relationship with the other persons. The Father,
Son, and Holy Spirit are whole communion, and we are purposed to mirror this attribute. Our first relationship must be with God himself. Although our sin has broken this connection, through the person of Jesus it can be restored. Imperfect humanity has the divine opportunity to relate with its perfect Creator in order to fulfill his Kingdom’s purposes. Our second order is to love God’s people. Our design realized is a fully-reciprocating self—one who gives of him- or herself freely and accepts others completely. Both directions of community are in fact the first and second greatest commandments, as highlighted by Jesus’ response to the Pharisees in Matthew 22:37-40.

Lastly, a doctrine of the divine image must include process. Unfortunately, an understanding of sin reveals to us that we cannot possibly fulfill our royalty or relationality in our present brokenness. However, Scripture teaches us that through Jesus and the Holy Spirit, we will ultimately be restored as proper image bearers. Throughout the New Testament, this language consistently fills our understanding of this process, such as “transformed,” “every-increasing,” “until Christ is formed in you,” “renewed,” and “new self” (c.f. 1 Cor. 15:35-49; Gal. 4:19; Eph. 4:23-24). In one sense, we are created in the image of God, and in another, we are still on the trajectory path to God’s image being fulfilled in us.

As we understand that humanity bears God’s image, we can use this doctrine as a lens through which to read The Intouchables—much of which converges with this understanding, although some parts diverge slightly. The entire film’s thesis of friendship reveals humanity’s desperate need to be in relationship with one another. In the movie, Philippe and Driss both come from places of relational voids. For Philippe, everyone around him is constantly letting him down or leaving him. His wife passes away. His daughter is going through a rebellious and self-absorbed phase. His personal assistants or caretakers do not last longer than a couple weeks. The rest of his relatives only show up once a year on his birthday to check up on him and see if he is still alive.
Others dismiss him for his impairment. For Driss, he did not even call his family when he got put in jail. His mom kicked him out of the house when he came back. His younger “brother” gets caught up in the wrong crowd and is distant when Driss attempts to talk with him. Even his relationship with his younger sister is not characterized by love and patience. Both men, as humans, needed to satisfy their design for relationship, and they were able to find it in rather unlikely partners. The movie, then, invites the viewer, to seek out relationship regardless of appearance, class, background, or even handicap. The producers choose to stay consistent with the realities of being human: people are created to be in relationship.

The producers also seem to grasp the idea that humanity has to undergo process before it can achieve ideal relationships. Although the two characters end up with a deep care for each other, they do not begin the movie that way. At first, Driss would not even touch Philippe’s legs. Philippe could not depend on Driss to answer his walkie-talkie. Then, as they began to open up and give of themselves, they grew closer. First it was through objects like Philippe’s art and Driss’ music. Eventually, Philippe opened up at the diner and Driss told Philippe everything when his younger “brother” showed up. By the end of the movie, their hearts are so close that their need for each other is so powerful that it practically drives both Philippe and the audience to tears. But the producers put forth a world where that moment could not have happened overnight, and their world converges with an understanding that our divine image is not yet finished. We have to learn. We have to grow. We are not automatically perfect at relationships from the start. It is a process.

Where the film misses the picture of humanity is our need for relationship with God. The two characters experience the need for relationship where those in their lives let them down, but appear satisfied (as much as possible) by their friendship with each other. It is dangerous for viewers to believe this, that there is nothing more to find than relationships on earth. Because we
are designed to be in relationship with God, we can never fully realize our necessity for relationship with him with any other person or idol. Regrettably this is not expressed as reality in the movie.

   Another, more subtle area where the film diverges from the doctrine of the image of God is its misunderstanding of sex. While neither of the men find relational fulfilment in a sexual relationship (as they find this with each other), they do both see sexual adventures as means to the end goal of being a human. Both men make jokes about needing sex from women on the street. They hire prostitutes for sexually-charged massages. Driss constantly makes sexual advances towards Magalie and promotes this behavior with Yvonne. For someone to inhabit the world of this story, this person would most likely believe that, as a human being, outer-marital sex is a natural and good thing. It must be that to fulfill your humanness, you must participate in these promiscuities. However, a doctrine of the image of God and understanding of humanity shows that, while sex with one person of the opposite sex leads toward a special intimacy, multiple sex partners actually hinders a fulfillment of the divine relationality. While this is far from the main point of the film, it is still a part of the world it invites the “reader” into.

   Appropriation

   As I watch this film, the beauty of Driss and Philippe’s relationship draws me in and makes me want to live within its conclusions about life. For all the places where it converges with the doctrine of the divine image, I believe it would be beneficial for me to learn from the story. As a human being, I must pursue relationships, regardless of the appearance or background of the other person. I can learn from the selflessness that Driss grows towards and the necessity that Philippe realizes. I can also learn from the resiliency that both display with each other—if Philippe was offended by Driss’ comments, he would have never been hired. Ultimately, this film reveals a lot of
truth about what it means to be human, and my life would benefit greatly if I put into practice the reciprocation that Driss and Philippe model.
Works Cited


