

**Film, Catholic Church, and Faith: A Critical Review of Innocent Uwah's *Moral Dilemmas in Discourse of Cinema, Ethics & Society***

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**Abstract**

The intersection of cinema and Catholic theology has long been a terrain of both contention and possibility. While mainstream criticism often accuses film of moral laxity and secularism, this review challenges that notion, exploring how film, particularly within African contexts, can be a space for theological reflection and moral engagement. Innocent Ebere Uwah's *Moral Dilemmas in Discourse of Cinema, Ethics & Society* (2024) contributes meaningfully to this discourse by arguing for a more ethical approach to cinematic representation. The review evaluates the structure, content, and implications of Uwah's work through a theological and critical media studies lens, foregrounding its relevance to faith communities, African cultural production, and global cinema ethics. Recommendations are offered for ecclesial and academic institutions to deepen their engagement with film as a tool for moral instruction and social transformation.

**Keywords:** cinema, ethics, Catholic Church, faith, ritual, African cinema, representation, moral dilemmas

## **Introduction**

Cinema remains one of the most influential cultural forms of the 20th and 21st centuries. In Africa, its role has expanded beyond entertainment into arenas of identity construction, historical memory, and ethical reflection. For the Catholic Church, the power of images has always been significant—icons, sacraments, and liturgical performance all convey deep spiritual meaning. Thus, the convergence of film and Catholic faith is not as unnatural as critics might claim. Rather, it presents a fertile ground for dialogue, moral inquiry, and evangelization (Plate, 2008; Marsh, 2004). Innocent Uwah's latest publication offers a comprehensive and provocative intervention into this conversation. The book, *Moral Dilemmas in Discourse of Cinema, Ethics & Society* (2024), interrogates the ethical responsibilities of filmmakers, the moral formation of audiences, and the Church's potential role in cinematic production and critique.

## **About the Author**

Rev. Prof. Innocent Ebere Uwah is a Catholic priest, theologian, and scholar of film and communication. He holds academic degrees from Nigeria, Ireland, and the United Kingdom, culminating in a PhD in Communications (Film Studies) from Dublin City University. Uwah teaches at the University of Port Harcourt and was most recently a Combe Trust Fellow at the University of Edinburgh's Institute for Advanced Studies in the Humanities. His dual training in theology and cinema uniquely positions him to engage questions of faith, representation, and ethics with nuance and authority.

## **Conceptual Framework**

Before delving into the book's contents, Uwah clarifies key concepts:

- **Film** is understood not just as an artistic medium but as a cultural product that reflects, shapes, and interrogates moral consciousness.
- **Ethics** is explored both philosophically (via Aristotle, Kant, and Christian moral theology) and practically (via film narrative choices and audience reception).
- **Catholic Faith** emerges not only as dogma but as a lived tradition capable of informing and critiquing media practices.
- **Moral Dilemma** is defined as the tension between competing ethical imperatives, often embodied in film characters and narrative arcs.

## **Structure and Analysis of the Text**

The book is divided into **eleven chapters**, each engaging a different facet of the relationship between cinema, ethics, and society. The style is accessible yet scholarly, making the book suitable for students, filmmakers, clergy, and academics alike.

### **Chapter One: Cinema and Moral Consciousness**

This chapter lays the theoretical groundwork for the book. Drawing on both theological anthropology and media theory, Uwah argues that humans are inherently moral beings, and as such, all human creativity—including cinema—bears ethical responsibility. He critiques the prevailing notion that cinema is neutral or purely for entertainment, citing the Catholic Church's historical engagement with media (Pontifical Council for Social Communications, 1997).

### **Chapters Two & Three: Audience and Influence**

Here, Uwah engages classic theories of media effects. Bandura's (1977) Social Learning Theory is key to his argument that repeated exposure to immoral behavior in films may desensitize or normalize such behavior among viewers. He also integrates Stuart Hall's (1980) encoding/decoding model to explain how meaning is negotiated by audiences, noting that interpretation is shaped by cultural, social, and religious contexts.

Uwah's emphasis on African audiences is especially insightful. In a continent where oral traditions and visual storytelling are deeply embedded, film becomes more than passive entertainment—it becomes an active cultural force.

### **Chapter Four: Philosophical Foundations of Ethics**

This is perhaps the most intellectually rigorous chapter. Uwah maps the terrain of ethics from Aristotelian virtue ethics to Kantian deontology and utilitarianism. He then shows how these traditions intersect with Christian morality, particularly Catholic social teaching. The argument is clear: cinema, as a cultural artifact, should be guided not merely by market logic or artistic license but by ethical accountability to society.

### **Chapter Five: African Traditional Values and the Ethics of Film**

This chapter marks a unique contribution to the field of African cinema studies. Uwah critiques the colonial portrayal of African moral systems as inferior or "pagan," highlighting instead the ethical sophistication of African communal values such as **Ubuntu** and **Omoluabi**. He calls for a decolonized approach to cinematic ethics, where indigenous moral frameworks are integrated into both film production and criticism.

### **Chapter Six: Who Judges Film Morality?**

Uwah here introduces a tripartite model for ethical judgment in cinema:

**1. The filmmaker's intent 2. The ethical arc of characters 3. The interpretive role of the audience**

He uses biblical narratives—especially the story of Susanna (Daniel 13)—to show that moral judgment is rarely simplistic. Just as Susanna is vindicated through Daniel's discerning eye, so too must films be subjected to nuanced ethical analysis.

**Chapter Seven: Colonial Cinema and Misrepresentation**

In this chapter, Uwah conducts a postcolonial reading of films such as *Sanders of the River* (1935), *Tarzan* (1932), and *The African Queen* (1951), which collectively portrayed Africa as primitive, superstitious, and in need of Western salvation. He contrasts this with the emergence of postindependence African cinema, particularly the works of Sembène Ousmane, whose films assert African agency and ethical complexity. This chapter is a powerful reminder of how cinematic narratives shape moral and cultural hierarchies.

**Chapter Eight: Nollywood and the Ethics of Local Storytelling**

Here, Uwah turns his lens to Nigeria's own film industry. While acknowledging Nollywood's achievements in democratizing storytelling and preserving culture, he critiques the industry's frequent resort to sensationalism, moral ambiguity, and spiritual sensationalism. He urges Nollywood filmmakers to aspire to greater ethical clarity and narrative integrity, suggesting that the industry has the potential to be both commercially viable and morally edifying.

**Chapter Nine: Contemporary Ethical Dilemmas in Global Cinema**

This chapter explores a range of contemporary films that grapple with ethical complexity—from issues of abortion and euthanasia to war, sexuality, and artificial intelligence. Uwah's readings are sharp and balanced, recognizing the artist's right to explore human ambiguity while insisting that such exploration must not glorify moral relativism.

**Chapter Ten: Censorship, Freedom, and Responsibility**

Uwah discusses film censorship as both necessary and dangerous. Drawing on Catholic and secular perspectives, he argues for a model of **moral guidance** rather than **authoritarian suppression**. The role of the Church, he contends, is to offer prophetic critique and ethical discernment—not to stifle creativity. He critiques both state censorship and the Church's sometimes reactive posture, calling for proactive engagement through training, dialogue, and artistic patronage.

### Chapter Eleven: The Way Forward

The concluding chapter is a call to action. Uwah urges Catholic institutions, film schools, and parishes to recognize cinema as a modern pulpit. He advocates for:

- Faith-based film production.
- Institutional investment in Catholic media education.
- Ethical training for filmmakers and critics.

In his final remarks, he reaffirms the sacramentality of cinema—its power to reveal truth, confront sin, and point toward transcendence.

### Critical Evaluation

Uwah's book is a timely and necessary contribution to both African cinema studies and theological ethics. His interdisciplinary approach—blending theology, philosophy, media studies, and cultural analysis—makes the work richly layered and compelling. It offers new pathways for integrating cinema into faith-based pedagogy and moral discourse in Africa and beyond.

A minor critique could be made regarding the lack of deeper engagement with contemporary feminist and queer film ethics, which are increasingly shaping global film discourse. Including these perspectives would have broadened the book's inclusivity and theoretical robustness.

Nevertheless, Uwah's core thesis—that cinema can and should be morally accountable—resonates strongly in an age of ethical relativism and cultural commodification. His work invites religious institutions, especially in Africa, to reimagine their relationship with media, not as passive consumers or reactionary critics, but as active participants and ethical stewards.

### Recommendations

1. **Institutional Support:** The Catholic Bishops Conference of Nigeria (CBCN), diocesan offices, and Catholic universities should fund media initiatives that promote faith-based, morally responsible filmmaking.
2. **Capacity Building:** Workshops and retreats should be organized for Catholic filmmakers, critics, and catechists on the ethical use of media.
3. **Curriculum Development:** Seminaries and theological schools should incorporate courses on media literacy, cinema theology, and cultural criticism.
4. **Collaborative Platforms:** Interdisciplinary dialogue between theologians, filmmakers, philosophers, and educators should be encouraged to shape a morally responsive cinematic culture in Africa.

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