IN THE BOAT WITH JESUS:  
IMAGINING OURSELVES IN MARK’S STORY  

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It is a delight to contribute to a celebration of almost thirty years of *Mark as Story: An Introduction to the Narrative of a Gospel*. When I pondered what I might contribute to the celebration, I thought of an exercise in collaborative interpretation of the Gospel of Mark that I often conduct in a college classroom. All students of Mark’s Gospel are familiar with the three sea stories carefully positioned in Mark 4:35–41, 6:45–52, and 8:14–21. The first two of the three stories might be called “miracle stories,” and in a classroom setting they can raise all of the predictable interpretive challenges associated with making sense of ancient miracle stories in the postmodern, high-tech world of the twenty-first century. For a number of years, I have invited students to join me in a thought experiment in which we pretend to be a Steven Spielberg or George Lucas-type filmmaker, with abundant imagination and unlimited special-effects budget with which to create films of the three sea stories. Contemporary students have little experience interpreting two-thousand-year-old miracle stories, and they certainly step into the classroom with little acquaintance with literary theory, but they have plenty of experience in watching and making sense of movies and television. However, even though they have encountered the grammar, syntax, and rhetoric of film their whole lives, they usually have little conscious awareness of how films are constructed in order to affect their audiences. Even so, again and again in our classroom discussions, students are easily able to exercise their imaginations to propose countless ingenious ways to film Mark’s three sea stories. Invariably, we decide together that the filmmaker’s camera must, sooner or later, place the audience

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members “in the boat with Jesus.” Concerns about the ostensible miraculousness of these stories fade from our minds as we imagine ourselves, perhaps quite surprisingly, in the thick of the action on the silver screen. Thinking together about how Mark’s story might work as a film also helps us to understand better how Mark works as oral performance or written story. Thinking across the various media possibilities for telling, hearing, or seeing Mark’s story helps us to appreciate with sharper awareness its overflow of narrative potential.

When I agreed to write this essay, immediately I reread Mark as Story, to refresh my memory of its contents. I was not at all surprised to rediscover what a thorough, solid survey of the basic features of Mark’s story this book is. After all these years, Mark as Story holds up very well. One would still be hard pressed to find a better introduction to the narrative features of Mark’s Gospel for beginning and intermediate students of the Gospel.

One thing I was surprised to rediscover in Mark as Story was all the references to film. All these years I have conducted my Spielberg/Lucas thought experiment in countless classrooms, and I had forgotten the frequency with which Mark as Story invokes exactly this kind of exercise of cinematic imagination. Indeed, as I read, I found eleven passages in which the terms “film,” “camera,” or “lens” are explicitly invoked. Several of these passages are extensive, and together they almost comprise an introductory essay on the similarities and differences between cinematic and other forms of storytelling:

We have also been influenced by postmodern approaches, including various feminist, deconstructionist, and cultural interpretations. We have learned that every reading is a reading through a particular lens (xi)²

As a coherent narrative, Mark’s Gospel presents us with a “story world,” a world that engages and grips us, a world such as we experience when we get “lost” in reading a novel or watching a film.

As a way to grasp the notion of a story world, recall the experience of seeing a film: The images and sounds on the screen draw us into another world, a world with its own imaginative past and future and its own universe of values. For a time, it seems as if we are no longer sitting in a movie theater or our own living room but are immersed in a different time and place, sharing the thoughts and emotions of the characters, undergoing the events they experience. In a sense, then, this story world has a life of its own, independent of the actual history on which the film might be based.

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2. Page references are to Rhoads, Dewey, and Michie, Mark as Story. I use boldface to highlight film-related terms.
Clearly, we as viewers are engaging with a film through the filter of our own experiences, making our sense of this world as it unfolds before us. Nevertheless, depending on the power of the film and its relation to our lives, we may come away from the experience with a deeper understanding of life or a new sense of purpose or a renewed capacity for courage and creativity. We have entered another world, and it has changed us. Reading stories has the same power as seeing films, and in reading we participate even more fully, because as readers we ourselves visualize the world suggested by the words we read.

Thus, when we approach Mark as a work that creates a story world, we see that the statements in Mark's narrative refer to the people, places, and events as portrayed in the story. Just as a film may be a version of historical events, so also Mark is a version of historical events. Although Jesus, Herod, and the high priests were real people, they are, in Mark, nonetheless characters portrayed in a story. The desert, the synagogue, and Jerusalem are settings as depicted in the story world. The exorcisms, the journeys, the trial, and the execution are events depicted in the story world. It is this story world that readers enter. It is this story world that is the subject of our study. Thus, unless otherwise identified as helpful background information from the general culture of the first century, all subsequent references to people, places, and events refer only to the story world inside Mark's narrative. (4–5, italics original)

[Some] narrators are “third-person” narrators, unidentified voices who are in the narrative but external to the story, that is, a voice telling the story but not one of the characters in the story being told. The reader is not usually aware of such a third-person narrator any more than one is aware of a movie camera while watching a film, because the focus is not on the narrator but on the story. (39)

Such a situation creates tension and suspense, leading the reader to wonder: How will the authorities respond when they find out that Jesus acts as God's choice for the anointed one? Will the disciples ever figure out who Jesus is? And what will happen when they do? Hearing Mark's story for the first time is like watching a Hitchcock film in which the viewer is aware of a threatening situation at the opening of the film, then nervously watches the unsuspecting characters in the story become aware of the situation for themselves. (42–43)

The style of the Markan narrator is simple and direct, using ordinary language to tell this amazing story... The narrator's style is also terse, using few words to suggest images and evoke pictures... The style keeps the narration moving along, with occasional overviews, like long-distance shots in a film. Instead of “telling” about the story in generalities and abstractions,
the narrator “shows” the events by a straightforward recounting of actions and dialogue. (46)

In this pattern of repetition [“sandwiched episodes”], two similar episodes are placed in juxtaposition with each other. One episode is “sandwiched” (as an interruption) between the beginning and ending of another episode. In film, a scene will change in the middle of the action, leaving the viewer in suspense, while the camera cuts to another scene. The camera will return to resolve the action begun in the initial scene, thus creating a frame around the middle story.... Such sandwiching of episodes occurs frequently in Mark's story. (51)

Settings provide a world for the narration. Settings also present readers with a world to consider in their imagination. As with film, a spoken or written story draws readers into another time and place, into the possibilities and limitations of another way of viewing the world. Readers may emerge from the experience with some new ways of seeing their own world and a different sense of belonging in the world. (72)

Character analysis is really what we do all the time when we make judgments about people we meet or characters we encounter in a story or a film. In our study, we are only making explicit what tends to happen unconsciously as we size up other people and make decisions about them. We have simply tried to clarify some ways we look at characters before turning to the analysis of the characters themselves. (103)

You may have read a novel that kept you on pins and needles. To ask about the rhetoric of that story is to ask: How did the story do that to you? You may respond to a film with a softened heart toward people you had formerly condemned or with a sense of personal courage you did not know you had. To ask about the rhetoric of that film is to ask: How did the film lead you to react like that? Here we are asking about the rhetoric of Mark: What are the effects of Mark's story on the reader? How does the story work to create that effect? (137)

For those of us so used to stories with a resolution, it is tempting to dull the shock of this ending [of Mark's story] by adding in what we know from other Gospels or the history of the Christian movement. But imagine reading a story or seeing a film in which virtually everything is left up in the air, unresolved at the end. Mark's story is such a story: It is not resolved. It cries out for a resolution, cries out for the hope that someone will proclaim the good news. And who is left at the end of the story to do this? Not Jesus. Not the disciples. Not the women who fled the grave. Only the readers are left to complete the story! (143)
One way to help us to avoid reading our own selves into a story is to be aware of our limited and relative perspective. We cannot help bringing presuppositions to our reading experience. First, we bring the ideas and assumptions of our culture and society. Second, we read from a particular social place within a culture, in terms of gender, race, social class, and so on. Third, we each come with personal experiences, as well as with our particular beliefs and ethical commitments. All these shape the way we read—how we see a story through the lens of our experience. (148)

I cannot remember when, where, or how I started to conduct my cinematic thought experiment in my classes, but I must surely have been inspired once upon a time by reading passages such as these in *Mark as Story*. However, the more I sort through the closet of memory, the less certain I am that this was actually so. Upon reflection, I can recall a number of experiences and influences through the years that might also have encouraged me in this classroom exercise. I will describe briefly some of these possible influences, before turning to the main task of this essay, a summary of some of the insights into the sea stories in Mark that have emerged from years of classroom conversation.

1. **Narratology.** For many years I applied to the Gospel of Mark a version of literary criticism known as “reader-response criticism.” Along with many other biblical scholars in the 1970s and 1980s who were promoting new literary approaches to the Bible, I found the work of “narratologists” (scholars who study how narrative works) to be of immense value. In particular, many of us were reading, among others, the work of Gérard Genette and Seymour Chatman. In retrospect, I was always intrigued especially by Chatman’s work, in part because he always took care to compare and contrast the workings of narrative in different media, especially film. I can no longer recall how much of Chatman’s reflections of cinematic storytelling seeped into my own comprehension of how Mark’s Gospel operates as story.

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2. Biblical scholars engaged in film criticism. I should make clear that I do not regard myself as an expert in film—I am a mere amateur—however, many of my colleagues in biblical studies are genuine experts in the interdisciplinary study of Bible and film. I think especially of the work of George Aichele, Adele Reinhartz, Bernard Brandon Scott, Jeff Staley, Barnes Tatum, William Telford, and Richard Walsh. I have no doubt learned more than I realize from these individuals over many years.

3. Academic seminars in professional organizations. For many years I was an active participant in the Bible in Ancient and Modern Media Section of the Society of Biblical Literature, including a number of years serving as co-chair of BAMM with my colleague, Art Dewey. Since its origin in 1983, BAMM has provided an important (and often, in the early days, the only) venue in which the entire sweep of the media history of the Bible could be explored within the SBL, from ancient oral cultures to the emerging electronic age. Sessions on Bible and film are now common within SBL, but back in the early days of BAMM, ours were often the only such sessions included in the schedule of the SBL Annual Meeting. Most, if not all, of the biblical scholars involved in film studies that I have named in this essay have made valuable presentations in those BAMM sessions on the Bible and film.

The study of Bible and film has even found an occasional foothold in the rather more traditional and international Studiorum Novi Testamenti Societas. From 2003 through 2008, I was co-chair, along with Birger Olsson and Werner Kelber, of an SNTS seminar on “The Bible in History and Culture.” Here, too, our scope was wide-ranging, and over the course of five years we


6. For a variety of retrospective insights into the history of BAMM, including my own cursory sketch of the media history of the Bible, see Holly Hearon and Phil Ruge-Jones, eds., The Bible in Ancient and Modern Media: Essays in Honor of Thomas Boomershine (Eugene, Ore.: Wipf & Stock, 2009). My own essay in that volume is entitled “Why Everything We Know about the Bible Is Wrong: Lessons from the Media History of the Bible,” 3–18.
managed to devote several sessions to the reception of the New Testament in film.

4. Film production projects. My interests in the narrative features of the Gospels and the media history of the Bible led to two invitations to participate as a scholar-consultant in projects where portions of the Bible were actually turned into film. One of these was the “New Media Project” of the American Bible Society. From the late 1980s to the late 1990s, the New Media Project produced six videos of Gospel stories, as well as CD-ROMs and an extensive website. Ambitious in its vision and scope, ABS brought together biblical scholars, translators, artists, musicians, filmmakers, and many others in a collaborative, pioneering effort to “transmediate” the Bible “from one medium to another.” In spite of the many successes of the effort, regrettably, the American Bible Society decided to end the project in the late 1990s, and few traces of the project and its creations remain on the ABS website.

After my involvement in the ABS project ended, I had another brief fling with Bible movie-making. This was with the Visual Bible International, Inc. Here again I joined a team of biblical scholar-consultants, but this time with a commercial company that had undertaken a somewhat grandiose scheme to film whole books of the Bible. They were just finishing their first film, The Gospel of John, when I came on board, and my wife and I attended the premiere of the John film at the Toronto Film Festival in September 2003. I had been recruited to join the scholarly advisory team because I was reputed to be an expert on the Gospel of Mark, which was to be their next film project. This project also, like the ABS New Media Project, was intended to be a collaborative effort, involving scholar-consultants along with the rest of the creative team, from beginning to end. This project also ended suddenly and sadly. On Ash Wednesday of 2004, Mel Gibson’s film, The Passion of the Christ, was released, and any excitement that had been generated for The Gospel of John was quickly drowned by the tsunami of popular acclaim for Gibson’s film. That, combined with massive debts accumulated by VBI, followed later by charges of fraud


8. Several collections of essays were produced by the scholars involved in the ABS New Media Project, including: Paul A. Soukup and Robert Hodgson, eds., From One Medium to Another: Communicating the Bible through Multimedia (Kansas City: Sheed & Ward, 1997); idem. Fidelity and Translation: Communicating the Bible in New Media (Franklin, Wis.: Sheed & Ward; New York: American Bible Society, 1999); Robert M. Fowler, Edith Blumhofer, and Fernando Segovia, eds., New Paradigms in Bible Study: The Bible in the Third Millennium (London: T&T Clark, 2004).
against the producers, led to the bankruptcy and demise of VBI. The Mark film project to which I had hoped to contribute never materialized.

To summarize thus far, I must reiterate that I make no pretense of being an expert on film in general or on the Bible and film in particular. But as I reflect back over the past thirty years or so, it certainly appears that I have rubbed elbows with many scholars who do have such expertise, and I have managed to stumble my way into situations where serious, talented people worked hard to imagine how ancient biblical texts might be transformed into the new media of our day, including the medium of film. It is little wonder that at this point I cannot begin to reconstruct what might have led me to start my classroom exercise about filming the Markan sea stories. The inspiration for it might have come from any number of sources mentioned above, including Mark as Story. One thing is for certain: if anyone wishes to pursue the study of Bible and film, or to launch a Bible and film production company, there is an abundance of material, both in print and in film, available to guide the way, as well as a number of savvy individuals who have a great deal of experience in a host of relevant creative fields.

Now, at last, we turn to the main event of this essay, a report on my classroom thought experiment in which my students and I brainstorm about how we might film the three sea stories in Mark 4:35–41, 6:45–52, and 8:14–21. With each story I will quote the text first, using the New Revised Standard Version, then describe briefly how the classroom conversation often proceeds.

Mark 4:35–36 On that day, when evening had come, he said to them, “Let us go across to the other side.” And leaving the crowd behind, they took him with them in the boat, just as he was ...

To make sense of these verses, we need to look backward to what has preceded in Mark 4. Jesus has been sitting in a boat, on the Sea of Galilee, teaching a crowd gathered on the shore, ever since Mark 4:1. “Just as he was” is a reminder to the audience of Mark’s story that Jesus is already in the boat, on the lake, as the sea story in 4:35–41 gets under way. “On that day, when evening had come” also makes clear that verses 35–41 continue the episode begun in 4:1–34. This already presents a serious challenge to anyone attempting to film the three sea stories. However much biblical scholars or preachers have been inclined to examine each episode in Mark (or in any of the Gospels) as distinct, independent “pericopes,” the reality is that Mark as storyteller has often gone out of his way to connect one episode with another, sometimes in close proximity to each other, but sometimes leaping over many chapters to make connections. Anyone attempting to film the three sea stories only faces a dilemma, because it would be difficult at many points to film the three sea
stories without also filming the other, surrounding episodes that are in fact intertwined with them.

In our filmmaking thought experiment, the question I pose most often to my students is, "How would you position the camera to film this moment?" Clearly many options would be available to allow the movie audience to see Jesus sitting in the boat, presumably very near the shoreline, at first teaching the crowd, but then at last pulling away from the shore, in order to proceed "to the other side." One camera shot could adopt the perspective of the crowd on the shore, watching the boat pull away as it moves farther out on the lake. Another shot could be from the perspective of Jesus and the disciples in the boat, watching the crowd and shoreline recede into the distance. Still another shot could be from the side, allowing the audience to watch a growing gap between the crowd on the shore and the boat on the water.

Seldom do we have opportunity in class to discuss adequately settings, costumes, casting, music, and the like, but on occasion I can sneak in some consideration of these. For example, regarding setting, having seen the Sea of Galilee (or Lake Kinneret) in person, I happen to know it is a small fresh-water lake, nowhere near the size of Lake Erie, one of the Great Lakes shared by the United States and Canada. Lake Erie is quite familiar to all of my students in northeast Ohio. When one stands on the shore of Lake Erie at Cleveland, Ohio, one cannot see the opposite shore, which is Ontario, Canada, roughly 50 miles away. By contrast, the Sea of Galilee is only 13 miles long from north to south, and only 8 miles wide from east to west, and it is surrounded by hills, so there is no place to stand on its shores where one would not see the opposite shore. I confess to students that if I see a Jesus film and its lakeshore scenes do not show hills on the horizon, then I cease to think about the story that is being presented to me, and I instead begin to wonder where on earth the scene was shot: on the Mediterranean somewhere? the Atlantic? Surely not Lake Erie? As filmmakers, will we strive for verisimilitude in our choice of a setting to represent the Lake Kinneret shoreline, or will we settle for any shoreline anywhere in the world? Computer-generated graphics would allow us, I suppose, to create whatever horizon we might want our audience to see. Certainly computer-generated special effects might come in handy once the action gets lively out in the middle of the lake.

Also, seldom do I have the time to raise the question about what actors we would want to cast for our film, but it is at least fun to ask at this point how many actors we are going to put in the boat. Presumably Jesus is in the

9. Jesus is sitting in the boat in Mark 4:1, so I assume he is still sitting in 4:36. But that is an assumption.
boat with his “disciples” (*mathētai, μαθηταί*), because they were mentioned explicitly off and on through 4:1–34, especially in verse 34. But are all twelve of them in the boat with Jesus in 4:35–41? Mark does not say, so it is entirely up to the filmmaker to make the crucial decision. Here is an example of something that can be left unstated in an oral or written story, and thus left totally up to the imagination of the audience member, but in the cinematic retelling of the story one must decide precisely how many people are going to be in the boat. Are we to imagine thirteen men together in one small fishing boat? Once again, is verisimilitude desirable?

In the mid-1980s, a drought lowered the water level of Lake Kinneret, resulting in a remarkable archaeological discovery of a two-thousand-year-old fishing boat. With great ingenuity, the boat was rescued and preserved. As best the experts can tell, it is indeed approximately two thousand years old, and thus it dates roughly to the days of Jesus. There is no way to tell, of course, whether Jesus and friends were ever in the boat, but it seems reasonable to guess that the Gospels refer to boats very much like this one. At 26.5 feet long, 7.5 feet wide, and 4.5 deep, it is conceivable that thirteen men could have been accommodated in the boat, but that seems like a very tight squeeze to this landlubber, especially if the weather was threatening. Again, it would be the filmmaker’s prerogative whether to aim for historical verisimilitude or not in the choice of the boat. Filmmakers have to make myriad decisions about what their audiences will see and hear in the movie theater, decisions that oral or literary storytellers can leave entirely up to the imaginations of their hearers.

Back to the question of the camera, we also cannot help but ask a few questions about lighting for the camera. After all, the first two of the three sea stories explicitly take place at night (“when evening had come”; “when evening came”; “the fourth watch of the night” [King James Version]), so it must be dark, especially if the weather is understood to be windy. (Does that also imply stormy? cloudy?!) I remind students that countless television and movie scenes purport to show incidents in the darkness of night, yet lighting solutions are always available. Enough light from some source must be provided to allow the camera to show the audience what is going on!

Mark 4:36 ... Other boats were with him.

This is a throwaway line in Mark: nothing has been said before about these other boats, and nothing is said about them afterward, so I throw up my

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hands and ask, “What are you going to do with these other boats? Since Mark himself does nothing with them, shall we just eliminate from the script?” That certainly seems a reasonable choice. But if you do want to include them, how would you handle them? Do you want to have them floating along with the Jesus boat, as Jesus and crew float away from the shore? Would you have them still accompanying the Jesus boat out in the middle of the lake, once the storm is raging? Filmmaker’s choice.\(^1\)

Mark 4:37 A great windstorm arose, and the waves beat into the boat, so that the boat was already swamping.

At last the filmmaker’s imagination is invited to throw off all shackles: here almost anything goes. We would surely want a camera shot from within the boat, showing the waves beating into it, but there is no end to the possibilities for how we might shoot the boat from the outside looking in, seeing it tossed up and down in the waves. An unlimited special-effects budget would be especially useful in creating computer-generated images of the windstorm in the middle of the lake, in the middle of the night. If the boat is being swamped, that must mean it is in danger of sinking. On a lake, in the dark, in a fierce windstorm, with waves pounding into the boat, all lives are in peril.

Mark 4:38 But he was in the stern, asleep on the cushion; and they woke him up and said to him, “Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?”

Mark has given us a script that allows us wide latitude to choose camera angles up until this moment, but it is easy to secure agreement from my collaborators that in verse 38 we definitely need the camera in the boat, so we can have a close-up shot of Jesus asleep in the stern. Even as the boat is in danger of sinking, even as all on board are threatened with drowning (“we are perishing”), Jesus is sleeping through it all! I ask, “Shall we have the waves splashing over Jesus’ slumbering body? How about water inside the boat lapping into his mouth or his ears?” At the risk of dominating the discussion momentarily, I always insist that we must not only show Jesus sleeping; we must also have him snoring!\(^1\)

\(^{11}\) Both Matthew and Luke choose to omit Mark’s reference to other boats in their artistic retelling of Mark’s story (Matt 8:23–27; Luke 8:22–25), so it is clear that they decided to throw away Mark’s throwaway line.

\(^{12}\) In discussing this passage, Adela Yarbro Collins observes that in the Greek Septuagint version of the Jonah story, unlike the Hebrew Masoretic Text, Jonah is said not only to have been sleeping below decks, in the hold of the ship, but was also snoring! (Jonah
It is also good fun to ask my student filmmakers what they would like to do with the cushion on which Jesus slumbers. Since we are usually using a Gospel synopsis in my classes, it is easy to point out that Matthew and Luke both choose to throw the cushion overboard, omitting it from their revisions of Mark's story (Matt 8:23–23; Luke 8:22–25). Did Matthew and Luke merely find the cushion to be irrelevant and therefore expendable, or was there something offensive about the idea of Jesus not only sleeping but sleeping comfortably on some sort of cushion, while hardy fishermen were panic-stricken? This is neither the first nor the last time in filming Mark's sea stories where comprehending what Mark is doing goes hand in hand with comprehending what the other Gospel writers are doing in their own versions of the same story—more interpretive complications for budding filmmakers.

Mark 4:39 He woke up and rebuked the wind, and said to the sea, "Peace! Be still!" Then the wind ceased, and there was a dead calm.

Obviously, the filmmaker, perhaps in collaboration with the special-effects expert, would have countless possibilities for how to put before the audience's eyes the "miracle" of calming wind and wave. I am more interested, however, in the mundane question of the manner in which Jesus awakes. Mark does not give us many clues in his script. Does Jesus spring spritely to his feet and into action, or does he rise slowly, groggily, perhaps stretching and yawning before addressing wind and wave? I am pretty sure his "rebuke" should be sharp and loud, because I assume that the storm is noisy (another perennial question for the filmmaker: what sound effects should the audience hear?), and the word for "rebuke" in Greek (ἐπιτίμαω, ἐπιτιμάω) is the same word commonly used in exorcism stories, which I take to be fairly boisterous episodes.

Mark 4:40–41 He said to them, "Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?"
And they were filled with great awe and said to one another, "Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?"

I have long loved the unanswered, "rhetorical" questions in Mark. Long ago I sat down to work carefully through Mark, attempting to identify every

1:5; Adela Yarbro Collins, Mark: A Commentary [Hermeneia; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007], 260). I cannot remember whether I knew this once upon a time and incorporated that feature into my own personal visualization of Mark 4:38 or whether I accidentally stumbled upon the idea on my own. Regardless, I would insist on snoring in our film of Mark 4:35–41, to demonstrate to the audience how imperturbable Jesus is.

13. See especially Mark 1:25; 3:12; 9:25; a surprising double "exorcism" might also be implied by the use of epitimaō (ἐπιτιμάω) in Mark 8:30, 32, 33.
question in the story. The best count I could come up with was approximately 116 questions, many of them posed within the story without any explicit answer provided. In most instances, however, it is not too difficult to draw illuminating inferences from even unanswered questions. At this point I like to jump back to verse 38 and ask my students what the disciples’ unanswered question there reveals about what they are thinking. “If the disciples ask, ‘Do you not care?’ then what must they be thinking about Jesus?” “That he doesn’t care,” is the usual reply. Exactly so.

Then we move on to the unanswered questions in verses 40–41. From 4:40 it is not too difficult to elicit the inference that, one, Jesus thinks the disciples are afraid and that, two, he thinks they lack faith (or trust, courage, or confidence). At this point I make a confession to my students: I find it very easy, personally, to identify with the disciples’ terror, as well as with their bewilderment over Jesus’ apparent lack of concern. (How can anyone sleep through a raging storm in a small boat, as the boat is about to go down?) I find the disciples’ terror and their frustration with Jesus entirely believable and reasonable; I can imagine myself behaving in exactly the same manner.

At the end of the episode, the biggest question of all is the final unanswered question: “Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?”

14. Fowler, Let the Reader Understand, 126 and passim. Identifying the precise number of questions in the text of Mark is impossible, because of the nature of Mark’s Greek. For one thing, Mark likes to use double questions (see Mark 4:40) or single questions with multiple parts (see Mark 4:41), which makes enumerating the questions a challenge. Also, in Greek, as in other languages, the wording of a declarative sentence can often also work as the wording of a question and vice versa. If only we could hear Mark’s tone of voice, so we could determine whether he was intending certain utterances to be statements or questions (198).

15. If there is time, this is an opportune moment to discuss how, for Mark, fear and faith are opposites. Most of my students first arrive in my classroom assuming from their Christian upbringing that faith (πίστις, πίστος) is synonymous with belief, the opposite of which would be doubt. But if the absence of faith is fear, as seems to be the case for Mark, then faith is better understood as trust, courage, or confidence (see also Mark 5:36; cf. 6:50).

16. I can imagine the disciples screaming something like this to Jesus: “How can you sleep through this? Why don’t you wake up and die with us?” I doubt that they are waking Jesus in order to have him save them, because I doubt that they think he can! Since no words like these are given to us in Mark’s script, however, I am a little reluctant to insert them into my hypothetical film script, even though I think they would be a defensible interpretation of the disciples’ frame of mind. Also, if time permits in class, I have two anecdotes from my youth that I can share about being in small boats, once on a lake and once on a river, in the pitch-blackness of night. In neither case was there a storm, which was just as well, since I was already scared to death.
Working backward from the question to the thinking that must have led to it, it is not too difficult to surmise that the disciples do not understand who Jesus is! And this comes at the end of chapter 4 of Mark’s Gospel, approximately one-quarter of the way through the Gospel. The disciples have been called by Jesus to accompany him in all that he does, and they have witnessed his exorcisms, healings, and authoritative teaching, yet they do not know who he is? Apparently so. However, three-quarters of the Gospel remains to be told by the storyteller and experienced by the audience, so maybe we will have a chance to watch the disciples grow in understanding.

Bringing this part of our exercise to a close, I usually gain easy agreement from my collaborators that the camera had better be inside the boat most of the time, at least once we are past 4:37. In short, in most of Mark’s first sea story, the movie camera has got to put us, the audience, in the boat together with Jesus and the disciples. Speaking only for myself, I find it quite easy to identify with the disciples in this episode. Everything they say and do I find quite understandable and defensible in the situation portrayed by the storyteller, at least up to their final unanswered question. But I am willing to give them the benefit of the doubt on the “Who is this?” question, since I know that so much of Mark’s story lies yet ahead. I may think that I have begun to understand Mark’s Jesus fairly well by the time we reach 4:41, but if the disciples need more time to figure things out, surely we can allow them that courtesy, can’t we?

Mark 6:45–46 Immediately he made his disciples get into the boat and go on ahead to the other side, to Bethsaida, while he dismissed the crowd. After saying farewell to them, he went up on the mountain to pray.

Here we begin the second sea story, and just as with the first, we open with an allusion backward to the preceding episode in Mark, in this case the feeding of the five thousand (Mark 6:30–44). (Once more, our new sea story is explicitly linked by the storyteller to other, surrounding episodes. Once more, does it make sense to attempt to film this episode without also filming these other episodes?) In the feeding story, Jesus had fed a remarkably large crowd of “five thousand men,” and now he dismisses the crowd, while simultaneously sending the disciples out onto the lake in the boat, while he remains alone on the shore, even climbing a mountain. This is a very busy scene for a filmmaker,

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17. Oddly enough, it is indeed “men” or “males” (ανδρες, ἱσταμένες). Luke and John keep the “men” in their versions of the story, but they soften Mark’s precise head count to an approximate (“about”) five thousand. Matthew heightens the magnitude of the miracle by adding “women and children” to the “men” (Luke 9:14; John 6:10; Matt 14:21).
with countless possibilities and challenges for choosing settings and deciding upon the movements of the actors. But one thing is certain: whereas in the prior sea story Jesus and the disciples were in the boat together from beginning to end, in the second sea story we begin the episode with Jesus on the shore and the disciples in the boat, out on the lake. This multiplies greatly the possibilities for how to orchestrate the action that follows.

Mark 6:47–48 When evening came, the boat was out on the sea, and he was alone on the land. When he saw that they were straining at the oars against an adverse wind ...

First of all, it is evening once again, so this is another sea story that needs to play out in the dark. Once again, the filmmaker faces decisions about lighting, camera angles, and special effects, in order to allow the audience to “see in the dark.” Possibilities for lighting and camera positions are endless in order to show the audience the boat out on the lake—never mind that at night no one can see far! Similarly, it is up to the filmmaker’s imagination to decide how to allow the audience to experience Jesus “alone on the land.” No other character in the story is with him on the land, yet through the magic of the movie camera, we are there, too.

With verse 48, cinematic options are necessarily narrowed when the camera must make the audience see specifically what Jesus saw. This is crucial: we see along with Jesus, as it were, that the disciples are “straining at the oars against an adverse wind.” Once again, as in the earlier sea story, the wind is blowing, the going is rough, and the boaters are presumably in danger. We see this all from Jesus’ perspective, not from the disciples’ perspective. The camera might be positioned alongside of Jesus on the shore, or it might be positioned behind him (my favorite suggestion), peeping over his shoulder to let us experience the exact same angle of vision that he has with which to see the struggling boaters.

Mark 6:48 … he came towards them early in the morning, walking on the sea.

Here is perhaps the greatest cinematic challenge of all in this thought experiment: how to film Jesus walking on the water. Before tackling that, however, let us be clear about the time of night: “early in the morning” is literally the “fourth watch of the night,” which most scholars agree is from 3:00 AM to 6:00 AM.\(^\text{18}\) Thus, it is in the dead of night, with near zero visibility, presumably. On a clear, still, moonlit night, I suppose one might see a little way

\(^{18}\) Yarbro Collins, *Mark*, 333.
across a lake, but once again, in my world windy nights are often also cloudy nights, so the persnickety interpreter might well wonder how anyone could see anything at all under such circumstances. Here we must suspend our disbelief and allow the storyteller to tell his story the way it suits him. Even so, it presents a technical challenge to a filmmaker: how to film a night scene so that the audience can see perfectly well what is going on. With the right lighting techniques, computer-generated special effects, or film-editing techniques, this technical problem in filmmaking is easily solved.

Now we come to the walking on the water itself. When I ask students where they would place the camera to film this, often they want to jump immediately into the boat with the disciples and have the camera show the audience what the disciples see from the boat: Jesus walking toward us, across the water. I resist this suggestion and urge patience. Putting the camera in the boat might be the right move to make in verses 49–50, but I suggest that it is premature here in verse 48. Let us consider other possibilities, I suggest, before putting the camera in the boat and allowing the audience to see what the disciples see.

So disallowing a camera in the boat, for now, what are the other options? The options are virtually unlimited, as a few minutes of thought quickly reveal. As Jesus begins his walk across the water, toward the boat, the camera could be placed anywhere between the shore and the boat. Students dream up intriguing solutions, such as camera shots taken from jet skis or helicopters! Again, with an unlimited special-effects budget, almost anything is possible. But sooner or later, either the students or I will suggest that Jesus’ walk on the water begins from the shore, so surely we must have at least a few seconds showing Jesus step off of the land and onto the water. (More suspension of disbelief: people do not walk on Lake Erie, at Cleveland Harbor, but in the world of Mark’s story someone unquestionably does walk on water, so all reservations and misgivings about the possibility or impossibility of water-walking must be set aside, for the purposes of filming this scene. Thus does a biblical scholar avoid a lot of arguments in the classroom about whether “miracles” are possible or not!) Just as we might have placed a camera behind Jesus, looking out onto the lake, while he was still on the shore, I will always insist to students that a camera has to be placed on or near the body of the actor playing Jesus, as he steps out onto the lake. The storyteller makes it emphatically clear in his story that Jesus is walking on the water, and somehow the camera has got to make that a tangible experience for the audience. In other words, thanks to the magic of the movie camera, we get to join Jesus in his walk across the water!19

19. There is no way to prove this, but I suspect that Matthew had this same insight
Mark 6:48 ... He intended to pass them by.

How does one film intention, which most of us probably take to be an interior and therefore invisible state of mind? There are ways to attempt to achieve this: have Jesus trudge resolutely past the boat, not even glancing at it, perhaps with a stern look on his face and his eyes fixed on the distant horizon? Students invariably ask, "Why does he want to pass them by?" I have to confess to them that I do not have a great answer, and I tell them that this is the kind of interpretive puzzle into which scholars love to sink their teeth. I offer the possibility that the "passing by" of Jesus in Mark 6:48 is reminiscent of theophanies in the Hebrew Bible, where God "passes by." Moses or Elijah, granting them a glimpse of divine glory.20 Perhaps Jesus thinks that putting on a display of his (divine?) power ought to be enough to encourage and therefore rescue the struggling boaters. Perhaps he thinks that such a display ought to suffice to remind the disciples of the positive outcome of the earlier incident on the lake. But Mark does not explain Jesus' intention. Once more, a sideways glance at other Gospels is instructive: Matthew drops this statement from his revision of Mark, and it is also missing from the water-walking story in John's Gospel (Matt 14:22–34; John 6:16–21).21 In their Gospel scripts, these two storytellers omit any mention of intention, and we might decide to do the same in our Mark film.

One thing is clear: regardless of why he is doing it, we know without question that he is doing it. It is Jesus who intends to pass them by. We do not understand fully what he is thinking, but we are allowed into his mind to at least a degree, just as we also experience vicariously what his body is doing as it walks on the water. Through the magic of the camera, both our bodies and our minds are invited to imagine what Jesus is experiencing.

Mark 6:49–50 But when they saw him walking on the sea, they thought it was a ghost and cried out; for they all saw him and were terrified ... 

I probably spoke too hastily above, when I said that filming the water-walking is the greatest cinematic challenge in this episode. Mark 6:49–50 is

when he inserted the verses about Peter walking on the water with Jesus in his revision of the Markan story (Matt 14:22–23). Peter walks with Jesus on the water in Matthew just as the audience walks with Jesus on the water in Mark.

surely a greater challenge still, because it is essentially impossible to film! From Mark 6:45 up until now, the focus of the story has been upon the actions, perceptions, and intentions of Jesus: he made his disciples get into the boat; he dismissed the crowd; he said farewell to the crowd; he climbed the mountain; he was alone on the land; he saw that the boaters were struggling against the wind; he came walking toward them on the water; he intended to pass them by; and, finally, they saw him. Whether we are experiencing an oral, written, or cinematic presentation of Mark’s story, the story makes it unmistakably clear to the audience that it is Jesus who is doing all of these things and it is Jesus whom the disciples see. At the same time, however, the story also makes clear to the audience that the disciples do not grasp that it is Jesus who is walking on the water. Instead, they think it is a ghost. So how would we film this moment? Certainly, the camera must be placed in the boat at last, because finally we are being given the disciples’ perceptual point of view. The camera must allow us to see what the disciples see, but at the same time we cannot join them in their misperception of what it is they are seeing. We in the film audience know too much already: we know without any doubt whatsoever that it is Jesus walking on the water, not a ghost. So how do we film this? I am not sure that there is a good solution, but that does not prevent my collaborators and me from trying. Some suggest that the figure on the lake should be a gauzy white blob, thereby trying to represent visually the disciples’ misperception. 22 But playing devil’s advocate, I counter that idea with the suggestion that the figure walking on the water ought to be shown with crystal clarity, because, after all, we know it is Jesus, don’t we? It is certainly a challenge to put something on the silver screen that is simultaneously crystal clear to the audience but hopelessly incomprehensible to the characters in the film. An ambiguity that may work just fine in an oral or written story may be virtually impossible to put on film.

22. For a fascinating discussion of ancient beliefs about ghosts in connection with this episode, see Jason Robert Combs, “A Ghost on the Water? Understanding an Absurdity in Mark 6:49–50,” JBL 127 (2008): 345–58: “contrary to some depictions in modern media, in antiquity it was believed that ghosts did not glow; therefore, a minute amount of light was required for them to be seen. Rather than luminescent, ghosts are described as being as pale as death or as black as ash, having the image of their mortal body either in life or often at the time of their gruesome death” (351–52). As interesting as it is to consider ancient views on ghosts, in filming this episode for a twenty-first-century audience we should probably give primary consideration to what a contemporary audience would think a ghost should look like. (Hence, glowing?) As always, the filmmaker may have to choose between, on the one hand, striving for fidelity to the ancient perspectives of the original storyteller and, on the other hand, creating a cinematic version of the story that can be understood by a contemporary audience. It would do little good to film a ghost so that an ancient person would recognize it as such but a contemporary person would not.
Turning to the disciples’ terror in verse 50, a rich vein for conversation in my classroom exercise is the consideration of the many ways in which the first sea story is echoed in the second. For example, the first sea story ends with the disciples’ haunting question: “Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?” In the second sea story, Jesus once again displays his mastery over wind and wave, and once again the disciples do not comprehend. But whereas in the first sea story I am willing to confess to my students that I find it easy to identify with the fear of the disciples, in the second I find it impossible to join the disciples in their terror at the sighting of the apparition that approaches them. The camera may put me in the boat along with the disciples, offering me their perceptual point of view, but I know from the steady drum beat of masculine pronouns in Mark 6:45–52 that it is Jesus who approaches on the water. Moreover, I also recall Jesus’ mastery over wind and wave back in Mark 4:35–41. Even if we decided to film the “ghost” (phantasma, φάντασμα) in verse 49 as gauzy white blob, that would not fool me for one second. I would still know that this is Jesus who approaches, and I would be confident that all will be well for the struggling boaters. Jesus saved their lives (saving, so to speak, the audience as well) once before on the lake, and I suspect that he is about to do so again.

Mark 6:50–51 ... But immediately he spoke to them and said, “Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid.” Then he got into the boat with them and the wind ceased....

Here the rescue at sea is accomplished, just as the audience must surely have anticipated. Once again, echoing the earlier episode, Jesus speaks to the disciples’ fear, bidding them to take courage (tharseō, θαρσέω). The average student in my classroom will think little of the “it is I” comment, so I have to decide whether I want to provide some historical and literary background at this point. The Greek here (ego eimi, ἐγώ εἰμι) is in fact often a potent formula of divine self-revelation, regularly used by Greek-speaking gods and goddesses in the ancient world to reveal their majestic glory to their devotees. Once the Hebrew scriptures were translated into Greek, the God of Israel at times also reveals himself by using the ego eimi formula.23 This observation lends support to the inference back in verse 48 that Jesus is performing some sort of theophany.

The struggle of the boaters does not actually end until Jesus enters the boat in verse 51. It is at that moment that the storyteller explicitly states that the wind ceases, thus ending the problem originally observed by Jesus (and

the audience) from the shore, back in verse 48. Apparently, when Jesus is in the boat (with us), all will be well, no matter how severe the threat is from wind or wave.

Mark 6:51-52 ... And they were utterly astounded, for they did not understand about the loaves, but their hearts were hardened.

Surprisingly, even with the calming of the wind we are not through dealing with the fear and incomprehension on the part of the disciples. First, we are told that the disciples were “utterly astounded.” This should not be too hard to film. Whatever directorial instructions for displaying fear and amazement we have previously made to the actors playing the disciples should work again here. But then verse 52 becomes a huge challenge to film, because it is a psychological “inside view” into the disciples’ minds. Inside views are easy to offer or to receive in oral or written storytelling; they are much harder to handle in cinematic storytelling, unless the filmmaker chooses to record a narrator’s voiceover or decides to let us “overhear” what people are thinking, as they are thinking it. But since the disciples say nothing at this point, it is not even clear that they themselves are conscious of what they are thinking, nor is it likely that they grasp the aspects of what it is that they do not understand! It is entirely thanks to the storyteller that the audience of Mark’s story is made to know that the disciples do not comprehend (the loaves!), because their hearts were hardened (in modern parlance, their “minds were closed”). Strangely, the storyteller links their lack of insight and amazement in the water-walking episode to a different episode, the feeding of the multitude that preceded the water walking. Nothing explicit was said in the feeding incident about the disciples not understanding it— we had to wait until 6:52 to be told that, and then it is verbalized only by the storyteller, not by the disciples themselves. Apparently, in the mind of the storyteller, we will not understand the sea story unless we understand what happened previously in the feeding story, and neither will we understand the feeding story until we have encountered all of the sea story. As we have seen before, to film 6:45–52 thoughtfully we should anguish over the question of whether we actually need to film other episodes as well, in order that this episode might make sense. To put it another way, Mark 6:52 yields two episodes together almost as one. What appears to the eyes of a modern scholar to be two episodes may, in the mind of the ancient

24. The Greek is redundant (or “pleonastic,” in scholarly jargon) in order to emphasize the severity of the disciples’ bewilderment. Yarbro Collins (Mark, 317) translates the phrase thus: “they were very, exceedingly amazed within themselves.”

25. Fowler, Let the Reader Understand, 97, 123–24.
storyteller, have just been one. It is we who fail to see the extent to which Mark has connected his episodes, and it is we who have created our own interpretive problem by attempting too often to disconnect them!

Mark 8:14 Now the disciples had forgotten to bring any bread; and they had only one loaf with them in the boat.

Here begins the third sea story in Mark, the third and final time in Mark that Jesus and the disciples (and therefore the audience) are together in a boat. Unlike the two prior sea stories, however, this one does not hinge upon danger at night from wind and wave. Rather, the supposed problem this time is the disciples’ lack of bread ("only one loaf"), which echoes two previous episodes in Mark in which the disciples had only a few loaves of bread on hand. The first of these episodes was the feeding of the five thousand in Mark 6:30–44 (see esp. 6:38), and the second was yet another feeding story, the feeding of the four thousand in Mark 8:1–10 (see esp. 8:5). Mark’s third in-the-boat-with-Jesus story is thus also his third disciples-fret-about-lack-of-bread story. 26 We have already raised the question about whether the first feeding story needs to be filmed, in order to make the second sea story understandable to the audience. Now we need to ask if the second feeding story also needs to be filmed, so that the third sea story will make sense!

By plunging us immediately into the question of the bread, the storyteller bypasses all of the preliminary considerations about who is on the shore and who is in the boat that we encountered in the earlier sea stories. Again, this time there is no storm on the lake. The only storm, we might say, takes place entirely inside the boat, in the form of a fierce confrontation that erupts between Jesus and the disciples. 27 Since every bit of this episode transpires, not as action but as dialogue within the boat, that is where the camera will need to be positioned, throughout the scene.

Mark 8:15–17 And he cautioned them, saying, “Watch out—beware of the yeast of the Pharisees and the yeast of Herod.” They said to one another, “It is because we have no bread.” And becoming aware of it, Jesus said to them, “Why are you talking about having no bread?”

The disciples fret about having little bread on hand, and Jesus seems to follow suit by talking about “yeast” or “leaven,” with which bread may be made.

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26. I have been thinking about the interplay of all of these episodes for many years; see Fowler, Loaves and Fishes.

27. Ibid., 145.
That may be all we need to know about “yeast” in order to film this scene, but it would greatly enrich the audience’s experience if the audience knew that leaven is a symbol of moral corruption throughout the Bible. Thus, “yeast” or, better, “leaven” is probably intended by the storyteller to be an image of sharp negativity.

Regardless of what the audience may know about ancient attitudes toward leaven, clearly the Pharisees and Herod are sharply negative characters in Mark’s story. The audience has known since Mark 3:6 that the Pharisees and Herodians are conspiring to kill Jesus, so do we now need to film Mark 3:1–6 also, in order that the third sea story might make sense to the audience? Is the leaven of the Pharisees and the leaven of Herod an allusion to the ongoing threat against Jesus’ life in Mark’s story?

That “leaven” in verse 15 is not literal language, but instead a metaphor, is not difficult to discern. For one thing, nowhere in Mark’s story are the Pharisees or the Herodian faction ever shown busily baking bread. Presumably, therefore, their bread-baking practices are not the real issue at hand. Furthermore, when the disciples do take literally Jesus’ leaven language (“it is because we have no bread”), Jesus directly challenges them (“Why are you talking about having no bread?”). Without question, therefore, the storyteller has put us in the realm of metaphor and not literal language. This is a crucial insight to have at the beginning of the episode, as a frustrated Jesus is about to hurl a series of devastating metaphors, one after another, at our companions in the boat.

Mark 8:17–18 ... Do you still not perceive or understand? Are your hearts hardened? Do you have eyes, and fail to see? Do you have ears, and fail to hear?

Reminiscent of the multiple unanswered questions in the first sea story, we have here also one unanswered question after another. And just as we gained experience earlier in working backward from unanswered questions to the thoughts that must have given rise to them, so also here it is not too difficult to draw inferences from Jesus’ questions. Do the disciples not perceive or understand? They may be able to perceive at the basic level of biological sense perception, but if the question is really whether they understand or not, then the answer can only be no. The audience member may remember the storyteller’s comment back in Mark 6:52, where it was stated explicitly that the disciples did not understand the walking on the water because they did not

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understand the feeding of the five thousand. Are the disciples’ hearts hardened? A gain, in Mark 6:52 the storyteller told us emphatically that this was so, using exactly the same language. Do they have eyes, but do not really “see” and ears but do not really “hear”? Without doubt, it is as if the disciples in Mark’s story are habitually “blind” and “deaf.” Consistently, Mark has portrayed for us their total lack of comprehension of anything that has happened to them in the company of Jesus.

The two metaphors of blindness and deafness are especially interesting because Jesus is portrayed in Mark’s story healing one deaf mute (7:31–37) and two blind men (8:22–26; 10:46–52). The episode of the healing of the deaf mute occurs just a little bit before the third sea story in Mark, and the first healing of a blind man comes immediately after the third sea story. While the deafness in Mark 7:31–37 and the blindness in 8:22–26 appear to be literal, in the world of Mark’s story, the use of deafness and blindness as metaphors in the storyteller’s language in 8:14–21 makes me wonder whether the storyteller is opening the door just a little, inviting his audience members to think metaphorically even when a story’s language at first appears to be literal.29

If time allows, a rich conversation may take place in the classroom about the use of metaphor and other nonliteral language by this storyteller and other biblical authors. This is a conversation that needs far more class time than we ever have available. One of my persistent challenges as a teacher is how to get literal-minded students to awaken to the importance and richness of nonliteral (figurative, symbolic, poetic) language. I am convinced that, if we are able to step through the storyteller’s magical portal leading us to the land of metaphor, wonderful new worlds may open before us. My challenge is to persuade students to join me in stepping through that portal.

Mark 8:18–20 “And do you not remember? When I broke the five loaves for the five thousand, how many baskets full of broken pieces did you collect?” They said to him, “Twelve.” “And the seven for the four thousand, how many baskets full of broken pieces did you collect?” And they said to him, “Seven.”

29. Mark has also signaled that “seeing” and “hearing” may be taken metaphorically back in Mark 4:12, where Isa 6:9–10 is quoted: “for those outside, everything comes in parables; in order that they may indeed look, but not perceive, and may indeed listen, but not understand; so that they may not turn again and be forgiven.” Mark 4:12 is a difficult verse to interpret, because in it Jesus seems to be talking about “outsiders,” and we may still regard the disciples as “insiders” at this point in the story. But when we arrive at Mark 8:18, there can be little doubt that the disciples have shown themselves to be “blind” and “deaf.” These “insiders” have turned out to be “outsiders” after all.
Jesus’ questions continue, and now he focuses on the two feeding stories. Once again, to make sense of the third sea story, apparently we also need to comprehend the two feeding incidents. Once again, we have to consider the possibility that filming the three sea stories will not make sense to the audience unless we also film the two feeding stories.

Even though it is well established that the disciples do not understand Jesus, have hardened hearts, and neither “see” nor “hear” what Jesus has done, apparently they can count to twelve! They recall that, after the feeding of the five thousand, twelve baskets full of leftovers were collected, and seven baskets of leftovers after the feeding of the four thousand. As we sit in the boat with them, it is interesting for us to hear them say this, because they made no such comment in the feeding incidents themselves. In fact, one of the most extraordinary features of the two feeding stories in Mark is that no one in the stories—neither Jesus, nor the disciples, nor the crowds—makes any comment about how astonishing the feedings were. Now, later, in the boat with Jesus for one last time, we learn at last that the disciples were at least able to count the baskets full of leftovers in both incidents. But even though they could count to twelve, apparently they could not put two and two together to conclude that anything out of the ordinary had happened! Yes, they can count to twelve, but Jesus’ questions lead us to infer that he suspects that they really do not understand at all; their hearts are hardened; they are both “blind” and “deaf.” The disciples twice provided loaves and fishes out of their own supplies, twice distributed them to the crowd, and twice collected the leftovers—and the best they can do is to count to twelve?

Mark 8:21 Then he said to them, “Do you not yet understand?”

With this anticlimactic verse, our third sea story and our filmmaking experiment end. Is there any doubt about the implied answer to Jesus’ final question? That is easy to answer. However, the more thoughtful students will ask, “What were they supposed to understand but did not?” That is not so easy to answer.

One of the dangers of highlighting the three sea stories in Mark, two of which are “miracle” stories, is that one runs the risk of implying to one’s film audience that, to understand Jesus correctly, one simply needs to grasp that he possessed miracle-working power. I think it is rather clear in Mark that the disciples largely do not comprehend Jesus’ “deeds of power” (dunameis, ὁνήματας), but I think it is also clear that deeds of power are not the totality of what Jesus is about in Mark’s Gospel. Indeed, it is widely recognized that, when we arrive at the second half of Mark’s Gospel, the wonder-worker of the first half of the story gives way to the suffering Son of Man who renounces
power and authority and who advocates being least of all, even slave of all. If we insist on understanding Jesus as miracle worker par excellence, based largely on Mark 1–8, we run the risk of losing the self-sacrificing servant of all, based largely on Mark 8–16. In short, when students ask me what it was that the disciples did not understand in 8:21, I tell them honestly that I am not entirely sure. I do not think it is possible for us to understand fully what the disciples do not understand. From our three boat trips with them and Jesus, we have surely come to understand a lot, and at times in those stories we definitely understand more than the disciples, but here at Mark 8:21 we might be wise to consider that we still have a lot to learn about Jesus, as do the disciples.

To summarize, I find this exercise to be a valuable way to lure students into thinking seriously about how stories work as stories. Few of my students have any experience in reading and interpreting ancient texts, but they have abundant experience in viewing television and movies, so their experience with more familiar forms of storytelling can be enlisted to help them to begin to make sense of less familiar forms of storytelling. Whether we are encountering ancient religious texts or contemporary secular films, the mental discipline of critical examination of storytelling needs to be encouraged and taught—it does not come naturally to anyone. Also, thinking together collaboratively about how we might put a portion of Mark’s story on film is a valuable way to promote reflection on the differences in storytelling possibilities between various media. In an ever-increasing multimedia world, we all need to develop skills in “transmediation,” the ability to translate “from one medium to another.”

Finally, one exegetical lesson about Mark’s story that can be learned from this exercise is the extent to which these three episodes are connected, not only with each other, but also with the other episodes in Mark’s story that are interspersed amongst the three sea stories. For example, can we legitimately film the first sea story without also filming Jesus teaching from the boat in Mark 4:1–34? The linkages between the three sea stories and the two feeding stories are also strong and clear: Does it make sense to film the sea stories apart from the feeding stories? What about the linkage between the Pharisees and Herodians in 8:14 and 3:6? Or the possibility that the metaphorical “blindness” and “deafness” of the disciples in 8:14–21 is meant to be linked in the mind of the audience members with other, surrounding episodes ostensibly involving literal blindness or deafness? The list could go on and on. In

30. Fowler, Let the Reader Understand, 146. What it is exactly that the disciples ought to understand about Jesus in Mark 8:14–21 (and often elsewhere in the Gospel) often lies behind a veil of opacity (209–20).
light of these connections and echoes within Mark's story, it is interesting to observe how some scholars persist in attempting to identify and isolate two parallel pre-Markan cycles of miracle stories that they think lie behind Mark 4–8.31 This effort attempts to disconnect not only one sea story from another but also one feeding story from another, and maybe one healing story from another, and so on, typically breaking these matched pairs of stories apart and putting them into separate cycles of stories that Mark supposedly inherited from his predecessors. Such an effort effectively severs the ties that bind together many of the episodes in Mark 4–8. Why any of us persist in ignoring or negating Mark's narrative skill in explicitly linking one episode to another baffles me. What Mark the storyteller has joined together, let no filmmaker or biblical scholar put asunder!

31. For example, Yarbro Collins (Mark, 91 and passim) embraces without discussion the hypothesis advanced by Paul Achtemeier that Mark incorporated two already-existing, parallel cycles of miracle stories into his composition of Mark 4–8. See Paul J. Achtemeier, “Toward the Isolation of Pre-Markan Miracle Catenae,” JBL 89 (1970): 265–91; idem, “The Origin and Function of the Pre-Markan Miracle Catenae,” JBL 91 (1972): 198–221. Actually, a number of such reconstructions of supposed pre-Markan cycles of miracle stories have been proposed for many years. Besides Achtemeier's hypothesis, there are also the reconstructions proposed by Luke H. Jenkins, Vincent Taylor, Leander Keck, Rudolf Pesch, and Heinz-Wolfgang Kuhn. Once upon a time I examined all of these proposals and found them all to be problematic (Fowler, Leaves and Fishes, 5–31). In general, the matched pairs or triplets of episodes in Mark should be credited to the storyteller Mark, and not to hypothetical pre-Markan storytellers.