

Whispers in the dark

Jesuit TV host analyzes movies to help viewers understand what the filmmaker is trying to achieve

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RICK WHELAN SPECIAL TO THE STAR
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In his autobiography, filmmaker Frank Capra warned audiences to be careful about who whispers to them in the dark.

According to John Pungente, creator and host of Bravo's award-winning *Scanning the Movies*, some of those whispers may be tinged with the divine.

Scanning the Movies, celebrating its tenth anniversary, is definitely not a thumbs-up, thumbs-down kind of movie-review show.

In the first place, Pungente is not so much a critic as he is an educator.

He is also a Jesuit priest who runs the Jesuit Communications Project in Toronto. And he is definitely not interested in selling movie tickets.

But he is passionate about giving the movie-going audience the tools to look at a film with a deeper understanding of the filmmaking process.

On a recent afternoon, Pungente, along with Tiina Soomet, his executive producer, and Dan Robinson, his director, met in a sunny boardroom in the CHUM building on Queen St. W. They were planning the next episode of *Scanning the Movies*, which was to examine the new Leonardo DiCaprio film *Blood Diamond*.

Pungente and his team spoke in a kind of shorthand that only long-time colleagues acquire. They easily communicated to one another how they wanted this particular episode to unfold.

Before too long, they had assembled a working model of what the show would look like, which clips and interviews would be included and which salient points to emphasize.

Blood Diamond is a political thriller that deals with the brutality of African politics, the conflicts inherent in the diamond trade and child soldiers.

After his colleagues departed, Pungente sat back in his chair at the boardroom table and reflected on his 10-year run as film professor.

"I work in media education and I always wanted to do a show about film. We live and breathe media. They are all around us and here we are like Marshall McLuhan's fish ... they don't know they swim in water!

"This is Media Literacy Week (Nov. 19-24). Who knew that? Media literacy is a mandated part of the



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John Pungente says that although media literacy is on the curriculum in every province in Canada, there is an acute shortage of teachers who are trained to teach it. He is working to remedy that situation.

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curriculum in every grade in every province in Canada. But there aren't a lot of people teaching it because there aren't a lot of teachers trained to teach it. That's the work I'm trying to do."

Pungente helped develop a program called *Scanning Television* which was a huge success. And *Scanning the Movies* was a natural sequel.

"Then CHUM came onside. CHUM has been wonderful ... they have been supporting me in education for 20 years."

At about this time, Bravo was looking for a show for Cable in the Classroom and they thought *Scanning the Movies* sounded like a good idea.

"We got initial support from Warner Bros. just to get the project going and from there it just sort of grew like *Topsy*," Pungente says with a touch of wonder.

"Our first episode examined the film *Wild America*. After it was screened, CHUM vice-president Paul Gratton said to me 'You can run it at 8 o'clock in the morning but we're also going to run it at 8 o'clock in the evening because I think it's good!'"

Pungente has a life-long attachment to film. He was born in Bay but when he was 2 years old his family moved to Brandon, Man.

"My father was a theatre manager and that's sort of how I got started in all this. Movies were my babysitter," he says. "I've been watching films right from the time I had to be put somewhere."

He entered the Society of Jesus in 1957. He holds masters' degrees in both English and film and also has a master's of theology degree from St. Mary's University in Halifax.

He is the author of a number of books on the media, including *Finding God in the Dark*, which he co-authored with fellow Jesuit Monty William.

Finding God in the Dark combines spiritual literacy with media literacy to make mainstream movie-making a way to promote spiritual growth. The book took first place at the Catholic Press Association Awards in 2005.

From the feedback he gets, Pungente says he thinks people appreciate the way he talks about themes in movies and the way to look at movies.

"Nobody's ever talked to them that way before. They're used to critics saying 'Go see this!' or 'Don't see that!' They're not used to people carefully analyzing the elements of a film in a way that might help them understand what the filmmaker is trying to achieve. The best way to confront the media is to be knowledgeable about them."

Pungente does not aspire to be a media basher. He says there are enough of those out there.

"What we're saying is 'Look! Here are the tools to understand a movie, a TV show ... a rock video. Apply these and then you decide whether it's good or bad.'

"The thing is ... when people begin to understand how the media work, they begin to demand better media. People want more out of the media than what they are currently getting. And that's a good thing."

Pungente knows the media are a powerful tool and can be used to mould public perceptions — sometimes to the detriment of the truth.

"That opening sequence in Leni Riefenstahl's *Triumph of Will* when Hitler descended from the heavens in his airplane like a god! Hitler understood the value of media much more than the Allies did."

Pungente's take on pop culture is as unique as it is refreshing.

"I think *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* is one of the best television series that ever existed," he announces with the simple conviction of an expert.

"It was filled with moral lessons. It didn't preach at you but it taught you all sorts of things. It was especially good for teenage girls. Buffy was a role model. Her monsters were metaphors for growing up in the teenaged world."

Pungente applauds the notion of people finding spirituality in television shows.

"God doesn't confine himself. He is everywhere. Shows like *Buffy* and *Joan of Arcadia* and the current Heroes are giving kids basic values.

"There was a time when just church, school and the family gave young people their spiritual values. Now it's the media.

"In *Joan of Arcadia*, Joan was always being spoken to by God in the guise of other people. Which is wonderful because God does speak to us through other people. He certainly doesn't need a bolt of lightning or a burning bush."

Maybe just the incandescent flicker of a television or movie screen in a darkened room.

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