

On Movies as Spiritual Discipline

Gordon H. Matties

A sign on one of my local video stores now advertises, “10 Movies, 10 Bucks, 10 Days.” I often wonder, Who are these people who can watch that many movies? But then I catch myself. I confess that if I did not have so many other commitments and interests, I could well be one of them. I have attended a number of film festivals during which I did nothing but watch movies. In February, 2005, I served on the Ecumenical Jury at the Berlin International Film Festival, where I watched forty movies in ten days. Since considerable time was devoted to jury deliberations, on most days I averaged five or six movies. But during the course of the year, my movie viewing is modest. I have watched only twenty movies in the past three months (yes, I keep a list).

Because it works at so many levels, film can have insidious power or extravagant grace. It offers a wonderful opportunity to bring experience, analysis, emotion, and action together.

Film festivals continue to flourish, drawing thousands of participants. Major festivals in Berlin, Cannes, and Toronto screen both popular and avant garde films, which somehow both reflect and shape the artistic and cultural climate of our time. Even more, the five hundred or so Hollywood movies produced each year support the lucrative “entertainment industry.” Dollars spent by entertainment consumers on those movies give a rough indication of the value viewers place on movie entertainment. For the weekend of July 1-3, 2005, the top grossing movies took in a combined \$137.1 million, with a cumulative box office income for those movies of \$1,223.8 million. The top ten grossing films of 2005 (through July 10) took in \$1,702 million, and the worldwide top ten grossed \$3,115.8 million (current statistics can be found at movies.yahoo.com and at boxofficemojo.com).

RESPONSIBILITY TO PAY ATTENTION TO MOVIES

We do well, therefore, to pay attention to the role and impact of movies within popular culture. And more particularly, we do well to hone our movie viewing skills so as to draw even that activity into the spiritual and theological disciplines of our everyday life. Bryan Stone suggests,

There is no single person, entity, organization, institution, or power in our society today that even comes close to rivaling the power of film and television to shape our faith, values, and behavior. . . . We must become more responsible as Christians for engaging film theologically—for attending to its tacit faith claims and critiquing its implicit pretense of mirroring reality. (7)

M. Darrol Bryant, writing almost two decades earlier, warned, “Due to the capacity of the camera to record, reproduce, and represent the natural, social, and human worlds—with a degree of realism unprecedented in the history of art—we, its audience, are vulnerable to being re-created by it” (103-4). Even the main character in E. L. Doctrow’s novel, *City of God*, states, in rather hyperbolic terms, that we might consider the

possibility, that movies are a malign life form that came to earth a hundred or so years ago and have gradually come to dominate not only our feelings, but our thoughts, our intellects. They are feeding on us . . . a tapeworm in our guts, one planetary tapeworm . . . using up the cities, the countryside, the seas, and the mountains. (109)

The problem, as the character points out, is that this life form is of our own making.

Although such caution may be warranted by the excesses of many popular movies, much recent theological reflection on movies is taking a more positive approach to the role of film. These writers assume that films play a significant role in everyday life. Rather than warning about the danger that movies might take over our minds, they ask questions about the role of movies in our lives, and invite us to draw movie-viewing into the realm of spiritual discipline and theological reflection. If movies have become part of our regular routine, in which even church fellowship groups are now resorting to movies (in addition to the Bible, of course!) as resources for generating discussion about what matters in life, we do well to become self-conscious about what we are doing with movies, and what movies might be doing with us.

It will no longer be adequate to use the old argument that books, for various reasons, are better for us than movies (Plantinga). Books, it is said, require the mind to make up its own pictures, whereas movies form images for us. We now know that just as it is better to read a good novel than a bad one, it is better to watch a good movie than a bad one. That statement, of course, requires us to know something about what makes for “good” or “bad” art. The charts of “star ratings” by movie critics in magazines like *Entertainment Weekly* or *Film Comment* show us that even critics do not agree.

A POSITIVE APPROACH

Movies, at their best, therefore, generate conversations, and those conversations (around the dinner table or at a party) belong to the discipline of discrimination. Our cooperative discrimination may be informed by our interpretive lenses as we apply aesthetic judgment, moral discernment, social analysis, or a variety of other evaluative criteria. The fact is, movies do things books do not do. As film theorist Christian Metz wrote, “The film will always be better at showing things, while books will always be better at saying them, and perhaps neither will ever break beyond this evenly matched contest” (69).

In other words, that I am not required to imagine what a character looks like does not mean I do not have to be actively thinking about the moral and theological significance of the film, or imagine the moral or emotional anguish of their characters. In fact, movies often engage the imagination more powerfully than literature because they do not usually tell us what characters are thinking and feeling. We are required to enter more subtly into the story by means of active interpretation and empathy (Plantinga). There is no inherent superiority of the heard over the seen. “Film appeals to both the eye and the ear, combining channels of information that must be grasped simultaneously in what is sometimes a rich tapestry of images, sounds, and words. Reading, on the other hand, is primarily an activity of the eye and not the ear” (Plantinga). As with books, some movies are better than others. Some are trash. Some are works of art.

Offering a psychological explanation of film art, Canadian film critic Brian Johnson suggests,

At their best, movies are like dreams, or nightmares. And the cinema is a kind of Freudian observatory, a collective couch where we can see our fears, fantasies, and cravings writ large. So often filmmaking is just the art of magnifying the repressed urge, offering a vision of what might happen if it were left unchecked. (85)

Thus, as Paul Klee puts it, “Art does not reproduce the visible; rather it makes visible” (cited by Johnston, 2000: 74). As an art form, film presents a mirror for our hopes for transformation, grace, and redemption, and a window into the human condition in the presence, or absence, of God. Using words like “mirror” and “window” implies that film works its magic using the medium of light. It is not that other art forms fail to engage these matters, but that film brings together a wider array of sensual arts (including light and sound) to show us what it means to be human in our world, and how we long for divine encounter.

A MEANS OF GRACE

Robert Blake goes so far as to say that “Cinema itself is a medium of contemplation. . . . Look at a movie, really look, and you will see the face of God.” Ken Gire suggests, only slightly less dramatically, “A moment that touches us, whether it is a moment at church or a moment at the movies, can be a means of grace whereby God speaks to us.” If it is true that God is with us in all times and in all places, as the writer of Psalm 139 affirms, then, says Gire, “it follows that no matter how distant the heart or how dark the theater, even there God can find us, touch us, speak to us” (11). Others, like Romanowski, would say especially there, because the human creation (film), even if it is flawed, participates in the world that ultimately belongs to God and participates in the process of redemption (see especially Romanowski’s two chapters “Faith and Culture” and “Christian Worldview,” pp. 34-54).

It is no wonder that current conversation about faith and film (especially the last ten years) has begun to explore the religious, spiritual, and theological role of movies in our culture. I was recently an external reader for a master’s thesis entitled, “*Forrest Gump*: Theological Text in a Postmodern Context” (University of Winnipeg). The author, Chris Wells, suggests that “Like ancient Greece’s theatre and medieval Christianity’s cathedrals, movies are now our culture’s primary source of storied meaning.” The cinema is one of the main places in our culture where the masses gather to experience stories that attempt to make sense (and sometimes make fun) of our lives and our world.

With their complex combination of plot, characterization, light, and sound, movies draw people into an illusion of reality more immediately than any other form of communication. Movies have an ability to generate immediate physical, intellectual, and emotional responses. Perhaps that is why more people in our culture watch movies on a given weekend than attend a worship service in a church. Such a change in practice has led scholars to rethink how films might be functioning religiously. Three examples, all of which are well worth reading in their entirety, illustrate that point.

HOW FILMS FUNCTION RELIGIOUSLY

First, John C. Lyden, in a recent book titled, *Film as Religion*, argues that even though film does not replace religion, “film itself functions as a religion” (34). His argument is not simplistic in that he builds on sophisticated studies of the religious function of myth and ritual in culture. Lyden’s chapter, “Existing Approaches to Religion and Film,” surveys both theological approaches (Protestant, which he labels “dialogical,” and Catholic, which he identifies as “synthetic”) and ideological approaches before developing his own approach to the “religious dimensions of film” or the “religion of film,” which is modeled on the practice of interreligious dialogue.

Second, Clive Marsh suggests in *Cinema and Sentiment: Film's Challenge to Theology* that films “are fulfilling at the very least a religion-like function” in Western cultures today. He suggests two religious functions of film. First, in their film viewing, people find themselves “in the process of developing a worldview and an ethic.” And second, in viewing films people are engaged in the practice of “basic meaning-making” (9). Film viewing may become a religious practice since that activity arises out of “a regular life-pattern, a respect for rest, participation in shared experience and recognition of a ‘holy place’ ” (9-10). Marsh’s insights are drawn from the experience of everyday life, in which conversations in response to movies are often a kind of “theological discussion—sometimes explicit, sometimes inchoate,” even among those who are not “identifiably religious” (10). Marsh’s point is simply “that film—as an example of an increasingly significant cultural medium—is getting the supposedly ‘non-religious’ to do a theology-like thing anyway” (12).

Third, Gordon Lynch, in *Understanding Theology and Popular Culture*, argues that since film viewing is one of “the practices of everyday life,” it may not only “serve religious functions in contemporary society” but may also be the resource for “a missiological response to popular culture” or even “a medium for theological reflection” (21). Lynch suggests that religions have three “functions”: first, a social function that offers an experience of community with “shared beliefs and values that provide a structure for their everyday lives”; second, an existential/hermeneutical function that offers resources (like myths, rituals, narratives) for helping people “to live with a sense of identity, meaning, and purpose”; and a transcendent function that “provides a medium through which people are able to experience ‘God,’ the numinous or the transcendent” (28).

Given those possible “religious functions” of film, it seems natural that those concerned with mission and evangelism, or with theological reflection in conversation with popular culture, should pay attention to the movies. Lynch’s chapter “Why Study Popular Culture?” (20-42) surveys a representative sampling of those who attend to missiological and theological responses to film.

RESOURCES FOR THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION

Each of the previous three scholars highlight the importance of bringing spiritual discipline and theological reflection to bear on film viewing. In the last few years such disciplined reflection on popular movies has resulted in a flowering of resources for thoughtful Christian movie viewers. I will mention five such resources here and direct readers to [my Web site](#) for a longer list. At the heart of all these approaches, whether they focus on thematic reflection, conversation with biblical texts, or on the practice of spiritual disciplines, lie two basic assumptions. First, these resources assume an

incarnational worldview. God is taking initiative to meet human beings and to draw them toward relationship. Divine initiative may be embodied by the artistic expressions of popular culture. Although God is fully known through incarnation in Jesus Christ, God in the Spirit/wind blows where it wishes. Second, that effulgence of the Spirit in human artistic expression belongs to the common grace that God imparts to all.

Robert Johnston

Although the theological themes of incarnation and common grace inform all six of the resources I will mention, Robert Johnston's work is the most explicit about those theological starting points. In *Finding God in the Movies: 33 Films of Reel Faith*, cowritten with Catherine Barsotti, the authors suggest that

The task of thinking as a Christian . . . is always a conversation between our faith and our culture, a dialogue between our stories and God's story. At its core, theology is interactional—a two-way exchange between Scripture and the Christian community on the one hand and culture and human experience on the other. (22)

The specific approach of this book is eclectic, seeking at times “to *dialogue* with movies, at other times to *appropriate* their portrayal of life, and at still other times to recognize the possibility of a *divine encounter* as the Spirit speaks to us through a film” (21). Although that approach was articulated more thoroughly in Johnston's book *Reel Spirituality*, this book provides a summary of Johnston's method and presents an accessible exploration of thirty-three popular movies under thirteen thematic headings, e.g., Choosing Life, Forgiveness, Faith and Doubt, Images of the Savior, and Renewing the Church.

Johnston's other recent book, *Useless Beauty: Ecclesiastes Through the Lens of Contemporary Film*, begins with a specific biblical text and draws six filmmakers and their films into conversation with that biblical book. The result is a rich exploration of analogies between Ecclesiastes and the thematic concerns of six challenging contemporary films: *American Beauty*, *Magnolia*, *Run Lola Run*, *Monster's Ball*, *Signs*, and *About Schmidt*. Each of these movies, Johnston claims, reflects an engagement with the messiness and meaninglessness of life as well as with its “beauty and fragility” (18).

At the heart of Johnston's approach is the assumption that movies, as a rich form of contemporary storytelling, may become fruitful conversation partners around what matters most in life. We do well, Johnston argues, not to come to a movie with ready-made theological judgments, but to allow the film to do its work and only then to bring our faith into conversation with the film (12). All too often Christian viewers assume that their first task is to judge a movie's appropriateness by assessing it according to

external (e.g., moral) criteria. Such prejudgments often miss a movie's deeper significance.

Gareth Higgins

Gareth Higgins' idiosyncratic, entertaining, and thoughtful book considers exactly what its title suggests: *How Movies Helped Save My Soul*. To be precise, Higgins writes about themes in the movies that resonate "for people who want to make sense of their own lives, of our place in the world, of the need for an encounter with God to heal us" (xvii). He writes in hyperbole: "Film should be treated with the same respect as church or poison, for it can change your life" (xix).

Working with a thoroughly incarnational model of everyday life, he draws on the dictum of David Dark, "There isn't a secular molecule in the universe," to suggest that "in a God-breathed universe, there can be no sacred-secular division" (xix). His book is therefore a creative apology for placing film into the category of "life-enhancing art" (xix). The book is a missiological exercise in that it explores the relevance of film for spirituality (a popular quest these days), but more, it is a plea for Christians to take the life-transforming power of the movies seriously as part of God's saving work in the world.

Roy M. Anker

Salvation, according to the Gospel of John, is about "light" coming into the world (John 1:4-5; 8:12; 12:46). Roy M. Anker's book, *Catching Light: Looking for God in the Movies*, continues the trajectory of discerning God's presence in movies (a light-formed medium) and through movie viewing. Building on Frederick Buechner's three categories of the gospel as tragedy, comedy, and fairy tale, Anker explores fifteen movies under four headings: Darkness Visible, Light Shines in the Darkness, Fables of Light, and Found. The analyses of movies as diverse as *The Godfather Saga*, *The Deer Hunter*, *Tender Mercies*, *The Mission*, *American Beauty*, and *Superman* are rich and thought-provoking. Like Johnston, Anker works by analogy, exploring the natural resonances of theological themes and movies that explore the hiddenness or absence of divine light, or the revelation of light in the world.

Grounding Anker's work is a deep conviction that divine grace is known most profoundly in the ordinary reverberations of human life. Of all the books mentioned so far, Anker's is the richest and most challenging. He does not simply retell the story of the film by highlighting theological themes. He interprets the film as a whole by paying attention also to the visual dimension of film—to the way the camera works, to the way shots are set up, to the interplay of light and shadow. Although Anker's creative essays do not shy away from the way movies depict the absence of light (since light is most

needed in the darkness), Anker focuses most significantly on the divine love that seeks to restore health and wholeness to all creation. That love is the light of hope even in the midst of darkness.

Pungente and Williams

Two Jesuit scholars, John Pungente and Monty Williams, have taken the motif of *Finding God in the Dark* (the title of their book) and applied movie viewing to the spiritual exercises of St. Ignatius. Rather than focusing on specific theological themes or biblical texts, as do Johnston/Barsotti, Higgins, and Anker, they bring fifty-two films into the practice of reflection as outlined by the four main headings of Ignatius's exercises: The Mercy of God, Walking with God, A Passionate Love, and A Transforming Life. Although thematic, these sections introduce forty-eight exercises, each of which is linked to a movie. Each exercise is described in considerable detail, providing Scripture texts and questions for prayer and reflection on that exercise. Following the description of the exercise, the authors offer a brief summary of the movie, questions about the movie, and two short sections on how the movie relates to the theme of the exercise and to oneself in the practice of the exercise.

Pungente and Williams seek to draw film into the arena of spiritual discipline by acknowledging that

Cinema is contemporary church. Beyond the postmodern axiom that image is reality—that what we see on the screen is God inasmuch as it creates and defines what is real for us—the cinema has taken on for most of our culture the effects and resources of religious worship. (15; cf. Lyden, Marsh and Lynch as cited above).

The most incarnational of all the authors surveyed above, Pungente and Williams work within a thoroughly sacramental view of creation and of cultural production. For them watching a film “is a profoundly spiritual act” as well as “a liturgical act.” They go so far as to say that “Going to the cinema is public prayer. . . . This prayer is an encounter with an ‘otherness’ that helps us define ourselves” (19).

That encounter is grounded in five prior assumptions. First, movie viewing takes us into a sacred space in which our engagement with the film is not passive, but involves the active process of identification with and interpretation of what we are experiencing. Second, media (film) literacy is also a kind of spiritual literacy, for it opens us up to God's self-communication through

“the Word-made-Flesh,” through the workings of the imagination. God is creative; the imagination is creative; and we are creative. In spiritual literacy, these creativities fuse in the act of contemplation. (16)

Third, “In contemplation, you open yourself to what you contemplate, just as what you contemplate opens itself to you” (16). In other words, when we desire to connect with God, God also desires to connect with us. Hence,

When one uses film as prayer, the same thing happens. . . . In contemplation, we are attuned to our imagination, we resonate with or come into conflict with what we value. As a result we enter a state of either consolation or desolation. (17)

These are not feelings but “indicators of the direction in which we are pointed based on our underlying attitude. One experiences consolation when one moves to the good and to the greater good, but desolation when one rejects the greater good” (17).

Fourth, the experiences of consolation and desolation do not occur in a vacuum, but in the context of the tradition of the church, which includes the counsel of spiritual directors, in conversation with Scripture, and in the theological wisdom of the larger community of faith.

Fifth, and in the light of the first four assumptions, film offers us a way of seeing ourselves, our humanity, in either of two ways. Through encounter with what we know, what we do not know, and what we do not want to know, we come face to face with a world that “extends beyond our immediate concerns and interests” (18-19). And then through that encounter we find ourselves experiencing “the basic opposition of consolation and desolation” (19). As we become aware of our experience of viewing the film, “There may be the consolation that the truth of the world is revealed, that its lies have been exposed. There may be desolation if one sees the human effort as all that is possible in such a world” (19). Whatever our experience of the film, that is a place of divine presence, “whose creativity is to maintain our life and to transform the disorder of history into a new creation” (19).

INCARNATIONAL THEOLOGY

The authors of the five works described above assume an incarnational theology that is reflected in the creativity of human culture (including the art of film) and that communicates God’s common grace to humankind. For some, that grace is perceived through the film narrative and thematic interests of the story; for others it comes through the experience of film viewing.

Robert Johnston, in *Reel Spirituality*, suggests that film viewing evokes both experiential and analytical responses (chapter 8, “Responding to Movies Theologically,” pp. 151-72). Roger Ebert has said that an excellent film engages one’s right brain (creative and emotional dimension) while watching the film, and one’s left brain

(analytical dimension) afterward. The complexity of film art requires such holistic engagement. As Pungente and Williams write,

Everything that is a human construct is a product of the imagination, and so manifests some trace of the divine creativity. Art raises that level of creative awareness to a self-conscious activity, and film combines the diverse manifestations of human creativity in sound, image, drama, and community in the most flexible and fluid ways to offer the most comprehensive shapings of space and time available to human consciousness. When we watch a film attentively, we participate in a form of contemplation that allows us to experience the imagination fully engaged in creating. We are not accustomed to thinking about it this way, but it is prayer. (20)

Whereas only Pungente and Williams speak so boldly about film viewing as prayer, their perspective is grounded in a thoroughly sacramental view of human experience in which God is present in and communicative through human cultural production, drawing us into the healing and transformation that God desires for all creation. All the other authors share that vision of God's saving work even though they articulate it in the more Protestant notion of common grace. All of them, however, seek to draw movies and the film viewing experience into God's hopeful transformation of all things. It is important not to view such ready appropriation of film as a capitulation to culture, nor to a "sentimental way of thinking about prayer" or spirituality (Pungente and Williams, 20). Film viewing will be transformational (rather than merely forming our worldview) when we become self-conscious of both our authentic *experience* of a film and our critical *engagement* with it.

A THREAT TO SCRIPTURE AND THEOLOGY?

Even so, it may seem to some readers that for these authors film has been appropriated to such an extent that it has replaced Scripture and theological tradition. Cinema houses have become the cathedrals of our time, and film their stained glass windows. Film now reflects "the collective unconscious of our time" (Pungente and Williams, 20), or offers the primary narratives that help us cope with a complex and troubled world.

Film shows us the questing of humanity in our time in ways that are symbolic of, and appropriate for, the postmodern consciousness. We contemplate them, as the icons of our time, because they provide us with the language of our communication with God. (Pungente and Williams, 21)

Such affirmations, however, only make sense in the light of Scripture and theological tradition, for without them we have no reference points for the trajectory of

God's healing and hopeful purposes for creation. And, of course, the appropriation Pungente and Williams make of film for contemplation within the spiritual exercises of St. Ignatius assumes a rich heritage of Scripture texts that shape and inform the exercises.

All of these reflections on the relationship between film and faith are a far cry from the cautionary approach to film (and television) in the Mennonite Brethren church for most of the twentieth century. It could be that my abiding interest in film derives from having a film-deprived childhood. Perhaps I have become naively enamored. Still, I try to supplement my viewing habits with as much critical reading about film as possible, and that for two reasons. First, because film offers such a powerful and compelling experience (especially when a good film allows me to suspend my disbelief and enter fully into the experience of the film), reading critical analysis about movies allows me to gain perspective and to evaluate my experience. And second, because many of the most recent resources, such as those I have mentioned above, help me to gain more perceptive viewing skills so that my viewing experience itself becomes richer.

FIVE WORLDVIEW QUESTIONS

I have also tried to maintain a critical perspective on film by adapting the basic worldview questions to both the movie viewing experience and to analysis of film (the first four of these questions were helpfully articulated by Walsh and Middleton, and applied to Israel and Jesus by N. T. Wright, 1992: 122-44, 243, 369-70). By working with these questions for some time, I have been able more fully to integrate my experiential and my analytical encounter with a film. These worldview questions can inform a theology of seeing—a way of interpreting what we see in dialogue with the Scripture, tradition, and theological conviction.

1. Where are we?

What kind of world does the movie depict? How does it draw me into that world? Do I identify with that world, or find myself repulsed by it? Is it a truthful depiction of the world? As Timothy Corrigan puts it, "Any cultural product or creation carries, implicitly or explicitly, ideas about how the world is or should be seen and how men and women see each other in it." Movies "are never innocent visions of the world" (87).

Does the movie present a mythic worldview that tells us what the world is like and how the world works (inviting us to consider ourselves as living in that world)? Or does the movie present an apology for the way the world works, defending this world against its detractors and critics? Does it, through its narrative action, investigate and describe the world, thereby inviting us to live vicariously into a variety of adventures and to test those adventures against our own experience? Or does it provide a satirical critique that

either ridicules or raises questions about the way things are in our world? Or, like a parable, does it seek to subvert our world, undermining the assumptions and inviting us to consider an alternative (Davis, et al., adapting the genre categories from John Dominic Crossan)?

The movie does not do the work of discernment for us, but by inviting us (and sometimes forcing us) to live inside another world for a time, we are faced with seeing ourselves and our world from another vantage point. And the perspective we gain allows us to make authentic choices about our own convictions and actions, identity and vocation in the world.

2. Who are we?

What does it mean to be human? What is human community? How are we invited, through identification with the characters, to situate ourselves in the world? How does the movie depict, among other things, human sexuality, violence, friendship, love, work, and vocation? Since movies usually intensify some aspect of human experience (e.g., comedy, perversity, apocalypse, encounter with an alien, war, cosmic battles, romance, horror), we are drawn outside our normal range of experiences (Ostwalt and Martin, 155). And in so doing, movies raise religious or theological questions about what we, as human beings, consider our fundamental commitments, virtues, vices, and truths.

3. What is wrong?

How does the movie depict the human condition? How did we get ourselves into this mess? What is the state of our earth? The political world? Gender relationships? What are the fears of the characters in the movie? What are the problems they wrestle with? How are evil and good presented in relation to each other and to the characters?

4. Is there a remedy?

Can health, wholeness, and peace be restored? Can relationships be mended? Does the movie present a hopeful, futile, despairing, or ambiguous world? Does the movie offer a source of hopefulness within or beyond human experience? Can humans solve their own problems, or are they essentially helpless? Does it offer a vision for restoration or healing of the brokenness of that world?

5. What time is it?

How are we able to read the signs of the times? Are we nearer to our salvation or to our destruction? Are we running out of time, or gaining on it? By the analogy of experience, is the movie time like or unlike our time? Is it like our past, our present, or our future? How do we situate ourselves in relation to movie time? Are we able to discern hints of the kingdom's presence? This fifth worldview question was added by N.

T. Wright in his second volume, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, as he brought eschatological concerns to bear on the worldview questions (138-43, especially 443-74). For an exploration of those questions as applied to movie viewing in groups, see my article, “Let’s Rent a Movie: Making Movie Nights Work.”

THE PURPOSE OF WORLDVIEW ANALYSIS

A worldview analysis of film is not intended first of all to find out what is wrong with the worldview of the movie (a focus of Brian Godawa’s book, and prominent in William Romanowski’s book). The worldview model I have presented is grounded in trinitarian theology. First, the worldview model is creational by being rooted in a strong conviction that *God* is present in and acting in human cultural production.

Second, this model is rooted in an aesthetic of the *Spirit*: This view affirms the presence of God in human creativity, since human beings are made in the image of God. They participate in the creative work of God, and therefore what they do results in a theological product. This creativity is part of the work of the Spirit of God in creation.

And third, this model is *christological*. God in Christ became involved in the particularity of human existence, in its ordinary messiness. According to the worldview model, films do not simply *illustrate* theology, they may actually make a contribution to theological reflection. Films help theology discover what needs to be said theologically. What are the questions? What is the agenda? Movies help us to see that as soon as we begin speaking about a theology of culture we are entering the terrain of missiology: the interface between the church and the world, the intersection of the biblical story and the Hollywood story.

Movies speak a language with multiple dialects, cadences, voices. Each aspect of the film contributes to the whole. Because it works at so many levels, film can have insidious power or extravagant grace. For this reason film invites critical reflection on experience. It offers a wonderful opportunity to bring experience, analysis, emotion, and action together. Film involves our whole being. Film therefore creates a context for discernment that is holistic—theologically, ethically, aesthetically, and spiritually.

Rather than simply becoming consumers of images, we do well to foster a theological way of seeing that helps us to unpack the way movies do their work. How do we reflect theologically, and in the light of Scripture, on the movies we watch? How do movies reflect the worldview of our time, wrestle with the great theological themes and questions, portray the human condition, and offer glimpses of transcendence and transformation? How do we bring our minds and our hearts to watching movies so that even this activity becomes integrated into the disciplines of the Spirit?

I suggest we do that best by a fresh reconciliation of vision and word (Ellul, 241). Perhaps, like the prophets, we do well to recover an ability to “see the word” (cf. Isa. 1:1). Movie viewing can open our eyes, the windows of our hearts, and draw us nearer to the heart of God who is the author of creative imagination.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Blake, Robert. “From Peepshow to Prayer: Toward a Spirituality of the Movies.” *Journal of Religion and Film* 6/2 (October, 2002).
- Bryant, M. Darrol. “Cinema, Religion, and Popular Culture.” In *Religion in Film*, ed. John R. May and Michael Bird, 101-14. Knoxville, TN: University of Tennessee Press, 1982.
- Corrigan, Timothy. *A Short Guide to Writing About Film*. 2d ed. New York: HarperCollins, 1994.
- Davis, Walter T., Jr., et al. *Watching What We Watch: Prime-Time Television Through the Lens of Faith*. Louisville, KY: Geneva Press, 2001.
- Doctorow, E. L. *City of God*. Toronto, ON: Random House, 2001.
- Ellul, Jacques. *The Humiliation of the Word*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1985.
- Gire, Ken. *Reflections on the Movies: Hearing God in the Unlikeliest of Places*. Colorado Springs, CO: Victor Cook, 2000.
- Godawa, Brian. *Hollywood Worldviews: Watching Films with Wisdom and Discernment*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2002.
- Higgins, Gareth. *How Movies Helped Save My Soul: Finding Spiritual Fingerprints in Culturally Significant Films*. Lake Mary, FL: Relevant, 2003.
- Johnson, Brian D. “Disease, Monsters and Metaphor: Contagion and Inner Demons Run Rampant in Three New Movies.” *Maclean’s*, 1 July 2003, 85-87.
- Johnston, Robert K. *Reel Spirituality: Theology and Film in Dialogue*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2000.
- _____. *Useless Beauty: Ecclesiastes Through the Lens of Contemporary Film*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2004.
- _____ and Catherine M. Barsotti. *Finding God in the Movies: 33 Films of Reel Faith*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2004.
- Lyden, John C. *Film as Religion: Myths, Morals, and Rituals*. New York/London: New York University Press, 2003.
- Lynch, Gordon. *Understanding Theology and Popular Culture*. Oxford: Blackwell, 2005.
- Marsh, Clive. *Cinema and Sentiment: Film’s Challenge to Theology*. Milton Keynes, U.K./Waynesboro, GA: Paternoster, 2004.
- Matties, Gordon. “Let’s Rent a Movie: Making Movie Nights Work.” *Ideabank* (March 2001).
- Metz, Christian. “Current Problems of Film Theory.” *Screen* 14 (Spring-Summer 1973): 40-87.
- Ostwalt, Conrad E., Jr., and Joel W. Martin, eds. *Screening the Sacred: Religion, Myth and Ideology in Popular American Film*. Boulder, CO: Westview, 1995.
- Plantinga, Carl. Letter in *Books and Culture* (July/August 2003): 5.
- Pungente, John, and Monty Williams. *Finding God in the Dark: Taking the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius to the Movies*. Ottawa, ON: Novalis; Boston, MA: Pauline, 2004.
- Romanowski, William D. *Eyes Wide Open: Looking for God in Popular Culture*. Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2001.
- Stone, Bryan. *Faith and Film: Theological Themes at the Cinema*. St. Louis, MO: Chalice, 2000.

- Walsh, Brian J., and Richard J. Middleton. *The Transforming Image: Shaping a Christian Worldview*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1984.
- Wright, N. T. *The New Testament and the People of God*. Christian Origins and the Question of God, Volume 1. Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992.
- _____. *Jesus and the Victory of God*. Christian Origins and the Question of God, Volume 2. Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996.

Gordon Matties is Associate Professor of Biblical Studies and Theology at Canadian Mennonite University and a member of River East Mennonite Brethren Church, Winnipeg, Manitoba. He maintains the [Movie Theology Web site](#).

© 2005 *Direction* (Winnipeg, MB)

This article may be printed or downloaded for personal use only. No articles may be additionally reprinted in any form without permission of the Managing Editor, kindred@mbconf.ca.