

deep focus

FILM AND THEOLOGY IN DIALOGUE

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and kutter callaway



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To our family, friends, colleagues,
and students
who, like the finest films,
continually prod us
to open our eyes so that we may see
and our ears so that we may hear

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introduction

a phoropter for film

I didn't want you to enjoy the film. I wanted you to look very closely at your own soul.

—Sam Peckinpah, filmmaker

The Adjustment Bureau (2011) is a movie whose genre is hard to pin down. Matt Damon stars as David, an ambitious congressman drawn to ballet dancer Elise (Emily Blunt). Yet a mysterious bureau of men in black hats seems determined to keep them apart. Is *The Adjustment Bureau* an action/suspense thriller, like *The Bourne Ultimatum*, which this movie's writer and director, George Nolfi, also cowrote? Perhaps it is a political drama? But the plot revolves around a romance suffused with science-fiction elements (based on a short story by Philip K. Dick). Thanks to a character identified as the Chairman, it also includes evocative religious ideas that invite reflection around the theme of free will and destiny. Most cross-genre films don't work; *The Adjustment Bureau* is an exception. Nolfi has given us a movie that teenagers and adults alike enjoy—and then ponder.

When postproduction on the movie was complete, the studio was still trying to sharpen its marketing strategy and decided to reach out to the Reel Spirituality Institute at Fuller Seminary. They arranged for an initial prescreening of the movie at a nearby Cineplex with seating for close to three hundred. Nolfi was at the screening anonymously, as were the studio marketing people. Rob Johnston stood up after the movie and asked the audience two questions: How many believed that their parents had married the person God intended for them? And how many believed that their parents had freely chosen the person



The Adjustment Bureau (2011), © MRC II Distribution Company L.P.

they fell in love with? With each question, roughly half of the audience raised their hands, and then everyone laughed. What had been put into a story by Nolfi resonated with the stories of everyone in the theater. Somehow we are destined and yet free—at the same time.

A lively discussion followed about the film and about the audience's understanding of how destiny played out in their own lives. Is there, as Aquinas, Luther, and Calvin claimed, a secret plan, something in addition to God's revealed will that governs our lives? There is in the movie. At a second screening to a full house, a rabbi and an imam joined Johnston and Nolfi for an interreligious dialogue about David and Elise's free will, or lack thereof. How did we understand the God of Abraham, a God we all believed in, to be directing the lives of women and men? The same quandaries proved common to us all.

In an interview with the Writers Guild of America, Nolfi reflected: "Film is a way to raise larger questions in a way that people want to engage with as opposed to it smelling like spinach. Academic philosophers talk to a really small group of people who are also academics, but the question of what society values is hugely important for everything from whether or not the Egyptian army fires on its own people to whether we have health care in the United States that tries to include everybody."¹

Universal Studios asked Reel Spirituality to prescreen the film still a third time to a large audience in Orange County, California, where Craig Detweiler and Catholic nun Rose Pacatte, FSP, joined Rob for a postscreening discussion. Based on these screenings and conversations, the studio decided to market the

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movie as entertainment for adults that invited viewers to look closer and to delve deeper into life's meaning and possibilities. Reflection on free will and fate became part of the marketing plan. And the strategy worked. *The Adjustment Bureau*, which cost approximately \$50 million to make, grossed \$128 million worldwide!

Conversation around theology and film is not like eating filet mignon or truffles—something done only by a small elite but irrelevant to the larger population. No, being engaged by a movie and invited to look closer can be a weekly event that is as near as your neighborhood movie theater, where the story's deep focus reveals life's possibilities and problems. But not everyone can clearly see. As in life, many of us are aided by wearing glasses with carefully calibrated lenses. This book provides a series of lenses to help us discern more clearly the images projected before us.

In creating the appropriate lenses for the viewing glasses we wear, ophthalmologists make use of a phoropter. Though you might not know the instrument by its name, most of us know this machine. It is that oversized piece of equipment in the eye doctor's office used to determine the prescription for glasses. The machine switches multiple lenses in front of your eyes with the goal of finding that combination that can improve your vision. A phoropter is used to fine-tune your focus, to help your vision be as clear and accurate as possible. This book seeks to function as a phoropter. By presenting a series of lenses through which to view movies—narrative, audiovisual, critical, theological, ecclesial, historical, ethical, cultural, and converging—we seek to provide you, the reader, with tools (“spectacles”) to achieve a deep focus. After two introductory chapters (“Coming Attractions”), the next three chapters (“Act I”) deal with how the more formal aspects of film contribute to its meaning; another three (“Act II”) deal with the theological as a useful critical perspective; and the final two (“Act III”) suggest how a dialogue between the formal and the substantive aspects of film can clarify meaning.

A theological lens helped bring clarity to the viewing of *The Adjustment Bureau* by its studio. Just as film theorists have sometimes used feminist theory, or psychoanalytic theory, or perhaps postcolonial theory to bring a movie's story into focus, so theology can be helpful in providing a clarity of vision that otherwise might be lacking. Many films, on closer inspection, invite their viewers to consider life on a more spiritually centered level. They invite us to explore not only life, but Life. During modernity, such transcendent possibilities for film viewing were often questioned. However, since the turn of the millennium, an increasing number of viewers and film critics have come to recognize a movie's invitation to explore ultimate questions and to pursue theological possibilities. Movies can invite personal discovery and at times even prove revelatory.



Get Out (2017), © Universal City Studios Productions LLLP

A theological lens isn't the only one that can clarify our sight. Formal, critical lenses are equally important to our understanding. *Get Out* (2017) follows the conventions of a horror movie, as filmgoers literally scream at a young African American man, Chris Washington, to get out of the rural house of the diabolical Armitage family. Filmmaker Jordan Peele described his groundbreaking box-office smash as a “social thriller.” *Get Out* tapped into the cultural zeitgeist in bold ways, cutting through the patina of liberal politics surrounding race, class, and power. When asked to explain why audiences responded so positively to his cinematic provocation, Peele said, “I think people are scared to talk about race and when we suppress things—ideas, thoughts, feelings, fears—they need to get out in some way. I think ‘Get Out’ is a film that satisfies the need to think about, discuss and deal with race but it does it in a way that’s more comfortable because it’s fun.”² *Get Out* invites robust discussions of filmmaker intention, genre reinvention, and cultural tension.

An analysis of one key scene, “The Descent of Chris into the Sunken Place,” reveals so much about how cinema works. Sitting in her warm-toned house, psychologist Missy Armitage (Catherine Keener) begins to ask Chris (Daniel Kaluuya) about his past, focusing on the trauma of losing his mother. Chris is slowly hypnotized by the sound of Missy’s spoon, rotating around her teacup. The camera pushes closer to Chris’s tear-stained face as he recalls the feelings of helplessness that engulfed him. He flashes back to a suppressed memory of himself as a boy, sitting in front of a television, scared to confront the painful reality of losing a beloved parent. The shots alternate between Missy, the teacup, Chris’s hands, and his face, riddled with shame and grief. The intercut sounds of Missy’s voice, the circling spoon, and the musical score rise until

Chris is locked in place. Missy makes an ominous command: “Now, sink into the floor.” The music stops. She insists, “Sink.”

The scene cuts to Chris, falling to dark, bottomless depths as reality fades away. *Get Out* shifts to a fantastic, metaphorical place where Chris plunges further from the living room. There are no frames of reference in this black pit of despair. Words fail him in this limbo. More ominous musical notes rise. We are snapped back to Chris, still in Missy’s house, but staring directly at the camera. Director Jordan Peele breaks the fourth wall as Missy now also stares directly into Chris’s face (and at the audience). We see the horror from Chris’s perspective, staring out and being stared at. *Get Out* places viewers within the highly subjective experience of being turned into a helpless, mute object. Missy announces, “Now, you’re in the sunken place.” Chris cries out, but his voice is not heard. He is powerless to escape—paralyzed on the surface, reaching out in a desperate cry for relief from within a private, isolated hellhole. Acting, cinematography, and sound transport us all to a sunken place of unfathomable despair.

What is the sunken place? It is a frightening place of paralysis. It is riddled with inchoate longing: the horror of being voiceless, unheard, and unable to alter our situation. It is the experience of far too many African Americans across history and even today. Journalist Ross Lincoln called the sunken place “particularly horrifying because it works as a metaphor for not only the literal history of slavery, but for cultural appropriation and the use of social niceties to enforce social hierarchies.” This potent metaphor woke many to the feelings within a politically polarized America. Peele acknowledged the ways in which “we’re all in the Sunken Place,” tweeting, “The Sunken Place means we’re marginalized. No matter how hard we scream, the system silences us.”³

From this formal analysis of cinematic technique, we open up to a larger discussion of immensely important cultural touchstones. When we place a film like *Get Out* into deep theological focus, we may also sharpen our understanding of God and Scripture. We may read with new acuity the first verse of Psalm 22: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from saving me, so far from my cries of anguish?” The frustrated exclamations of Job—“Though I cry, ‘Violence!’ I get no response; though I call for help, there is no justice” (Job 19:7)—take on new urgency. The complaints of the prophet Habakkuk—“Why do you make me look at injustice? Why do you tolerate wrongdoing?” (Hab. 1:3)—emerge as both timely and timeless when placed alongside the sunken place of *Get Out*. Both *Get Out* and the Bible are laden with people crying out and reaching up in a desperate plea for help, for relief, for justice. Applying various lenses to film and theology can spark conversations of the utmost depth, urgency, and importance.

Indeed, *Deep Focus* was itself born from a series of ongoing conversations between the three of us about the cinema and its theological significance. As this conversation emerged, we learned a great deal not only about the power of creative collaborations but also about the vital role that an interpretive community plays in both expanding and clarifying one's vision. Thus, what started as a small group project has extended far beyond the three of us to include the perceptive insights of numerous other scholars, film critics, and filmgoers, as well as the historic theological tradition of which we are each a part. Our hope is that the book sparks similar discussion and reflection among fellow film fans, small groups, college students, seminary classes, and faith communities.

Let us, then, look through the rotating lenses of the following chapters as they help us deepen our focus. We will begin with a reflection on the power of story—on why we go to the movies in the first place.

coming attractions



the power of film

The task I'm trying to achieve is above all to make you see.

—D. W. Griffith, filmmaker

Sister Rose Pacatte, a film educator and reviewer for the *St. Anthony Messenger*, tells of going to the movie theater to see *The Missing* (2003). Dressed in street clothes, she sat next to a young professional woman with whom she struck up a conversation. Sister Rose asked, “Why did you come to the movies today?” The woman replied, “This is the third movie I’ve seen today. I think my boyfriend is going to propose to me today, and I’m not sure I am ready. I always come to the movies when I have to figure out my life.” “So you needed a retreat or spiritual direction,” Sister Rose commented, “but you came to the movies.” “That’s what I and my friends always do,” was the reply. “We can always find solutions in the movies.”¹

Stories like these abound, but they highlight a fairly simple fact: movies function as a primary source of power and meaning for people navigating the complexities of life in our contemporary world. Along with the church, the synagogue, the mosque, and the temple, movies often provide people stories through which they can understand the world in which we live. There are plenty of vibrant and meaningful places of worship. But as Sister Rose’s story suggests, both those within and those outside the church recognize that movies are providing primary stories around which we shape our lives. Movies block out the distractions around us and encourage an attentiveness toward life. Presenting

to viewers aspects of their daily realities, both intimate and profound, movies exercise our moral and religious imaginations. They allow us to try things on. From the cinematic stories we encounter, our spirits quicken.

Robert McKee, author of *Story*, wholeheartedly agrees:

Religion, for many, has become an empty ritual that masks hypocrisy. As our faith in traditional ideologies diminishes, we turn to the source we still believe in: the art of story. The world now consumes films, novels, theater, and television in such quantities and with such ravenous hunger that the story arts have become humanity's prime source of inspiration, as it seeks to order chaos and gain insight into life. Our appetite for story is a reflection of the profound human need to grasp the patterns of living, not merely as an intellectual exercise, but within a very personal, emotional experience.²

In other words, we could describe a world without stories in a number of ways, but “human” would most certainly not be one of those ways. We are narrative beings through and through. Stories not only structure our world emotionally, but they also serve as the “vehicle that carries us on our search for reality, our best effort to make sense out of the anarchy of existence.”³

In our contemporary world, cinematic stories are just as much part of our life as eating, sleeping, and interacting on social media. Box-office revenues in North America and around the world are solid despite the proliferation of online streaming services.⁴ Indeed, the perceived economic threat of the streaming revolution has, in many ways, reinforced and elevated the “event-like” pleasures of theatergoing. As *Los Angeles Times* critic Mary McNamara puts it, “There ain’t no home screen high enough, ain’t no smartphone wide enough, no noise-cancelling headphones deep enough, to ever replace the full body and mind immersion of going to the movies. ‘Going to the movies’ is a personal and cultural through-line, an ever-shifting ritual by which we mark our own changing lives.”⁵

With companies like Netflix, Hulu, and Amazon purchasing and producing their own slate of first-run films at increasing rates, film-going has shifted rather dramatically from the Cineplex to the home (or anywhere we carry a smartphone). The aggregate result is that more people are watching more films more often than ever before. Yet movies are more than profit margins and box-office receipts. Their broader cultural value cannot be reduced to the big data concerning Netflix traffic, social media impressions, and advertising dollars. Movies serve not simply as a commodity but as the primary storytelling medium of the twenty-first century, interpreting reality for us, providing us with a common language, and acting as a type of cultural glue.

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For instance, when the planes crashed into the towers on 9/11, witnesses said the scene looked like something from a disaster movie. As they recounted the terrifying details of being at ground zero on that fateful day, numerous Manhattan residents referenced the Bruce Willis movies *Die Hard* (1988), *The Siege* (1998), and *Armageddon* (1998) as a way of making sense of the violence and chaos they had encountered.⁶ Reality seemed, on that day, less real than the reels on the big screen. Their only frame of reference for this kind of terrorism was what they had already witnessed in movies. In the years that have followed, films like *United 93* (2006), *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* (2011), and *Zero Dark Thirty* (2012) continue to serve as constant reminders of that fateful day, prodding us neither to forget nor to overly romanticize the past. In many respects, these movies represent the primary material artifacts of our shared cultural memory.⁷

Thus, in ways both big and small, the cinema has become an important means of cultural communication, a contemporary language in need of understanding and explication—which is why certain institutions of higher education, like the University of Southern California, now encourage undergraduates to take at least one cinema/television course in order to learn how to “read and write” with media. It’s also why movies are commonly used as part of the core curriculum in such disparate fields as philosophy, sociology, English, religion, and psychology. Some even believe that cinema studies is positioned to become the new MBA, a means of general preparation for careers in fields as diverse as law and the military.⁸ Indeed, at the risk of overstatement, anyone who does not have some basic awareness of the power and meaning of film cannot possibly understand contemporary culture. It’s just that important.

A Deep(er) Focus

The power of a movie lies first of all in what transpires within the individual viewer as she or he gazes at the screen. Like any well-told story, certain films have the capacity to provide us with a richer variety of experience than would normally be possible. Films serve as a kind of deep focus lens for the viewer, bringing clarity and insight to otherwise opaque and enigmatic realities. Producer Jerry Bruckheimer declared, “We are in the transportation business.”⁹

Jerry Sittser’s book *A Grace Disguised* provides a powerful example of how film stories can bring about this deep focus. Jerry is a religion professor at Whitworth College in Spokane, Washington. The book relates his response to the catastrophic loss of his wife, his mother, and one of his daughters in a car crash in 1991. A drunk driver hit the van he was driving, and only Jerry

and three of his young children survived. Five years later, he wrote his book reflecting on how a person might grow through loss.

Sittser shared that among the things that helped him and his children to cope were the stories of countless others—friends, strangers who wrote to him, and even those they read about or saw on the screen. After commenting on the stories that had helped him personally, Sittser turned to reflect on the stories that were meaningful to his children, Catherine (eight years old at the time), David (seven), and John (only two). Quoting Sittser:

The children read books and watched movies that somehow touched on the theme of loss. John asked me to read *Bambi* dozens of times after the accident. He made me pause every time we came to the section that told the story of the death of Bambi's mother. Sometimes he said nothing, and the two of us sat in a sad silence. Sometimes he cried. He talked about the similarity between Bambi's story and his own. "Bambi lost his mommy too," he said on several occasions. Then he added, "And Bambi became the Prince of the Forest." . . . Catherine found comfort in Disney's movie version of *Beauty and the Beast* because the main character, Belle, grew up without a mother and, as Catherine has observed, became an independent, intelligent, beautiful person.¹⁰

Here then is the power of the cinema writ large. On a deeply personal level, this animated film about a compassionate, intelligent, and liberated woman (who loves to read!) helped to redeem the life of one little girl whose mother had died.

But Disney's version of Belle didn't have to be a bookworm. In fact, she almost wasn't. Speaking in October 1998 at a seminar in Hollywood, Linda Woolverton, the screenwriter of *Beauty and the Beast*, recounted her struggle with the executives at Disney to keep Belle as a reader, someone whose main love was books. The Disney brass felt that reading was boring when portrayed on the screen. They wanted a more active hobby, something more physical in nature. Linda argued, however, that by making Belle an intelligent woman with a love for literature, the film could provide a stronger, more positive role model for young female viewers. Linda won the argument, and Catherine Sittser benefited.

That Belle might have been different, and that even the slightest change to her character might have impacted a whole generation of filmgoers like Catherine, is a reflection of the real power of film as it comes to bear on both our individual stories and the larger story of our common culture. The character of Belle was so beloved that Disney brought her back for a live-action version of *Beauty and the Beast* in 2017 (starring Emma Watson as Belle). It was one of a number of films released in 2017 featuring strong female leads and/or written and directed by women filmmakers (e.g., *Wonder Woman*, *Lady Bird*, *Mudbound*, *Disobedience*, *Girls Trip*, *The Beguiled*, *The Zookeeper's Wife*). Lamentably, Hollywood still has

a long way to go when it comes to incorporating the voices of (strong) women (a topic we'll address further in upcoming chapters), but when taken together, the critical acclaim and financial success of these films underscores their power to capture the contemporary cultural imagination.

The year 2017 also happened to coincide with the twenty-fifth anniversary of director Penny Marshall's *A League of Their Own* (1992). Starring Geena Davis, Rosie O'Donnell, and Madonna as baseball players, and Tom Hanks as their begrudging manager, the movie tells the story of the first female professional baseball league, formed during World War II. At the time of its release, it was an important movie in its own right. But Geena Davis's anniversary reflection on the way it shaped not only her own sense of self but also that of the countless young girls who watched the movie over the course of its twenty-five-year history stands as a testament to the enduring power of film narratives. As Davis narrates,

[*A League of Their Own*] was huge. It was very pivotal to my life in multiple ways. One was experiencing the reaction of young girls to the movie and so many girls and young women saying, "I took up sports because of that movie." I still have the same number of girls and women telling me they play sports because of that movie now as I did then. It's like a rite of passage to see this movie. It's got remarkable longevity. Also, just on a personal level, I had never really played any sports, and I definitely couldn't play baseball when I got cast. And so I trained really hard, and it was the first time that I was told that I had untapped athletic ability, which was an incredible compliment in my book, and so I felt like I really did, and it changed everything about my self-esteem and my self-confidence.¹¹

Such is the power of film—not only for those who watch movies but for those who make them as well.

Sociocultural Power

As Geena Davis's comments suggest, movies are not only meaningful for individuals; they can also have a significant impact on the broader society. When a cartoonist named Walt Disney created the character Bambi, deer hunting nose-dived in one year from a \$5.7 million business to \$1 million.¹² On a more trivial level, sales of Reese's Pieces candy tripled within two weeks after their use in *E. T. the Extra-Terrestrial* (1982), while Tom Cruise helped boost sales of two brands of sunglasses—first Ray-Ban, which he wore in *Risky Business* (1983), and then Oakley, whose sales increased after the company paid to have Cruise use its glasses to receive instructions in *Mission: Impossible II* (2000). Similarly,

sales of pinot noir increased and became the wine of choice after being featured in *Sideways* (2004). The movie also spawned a tour of the Santa Barbara County wineries used as locations in the movie, just as Omaha, Nebraska, has its own tour of sites used in other Alexander Payne movies—*Citizen Ruth* (1996), *Election* (1999), and *About Schmidt* (2002).¹³

“Film-induced pilgrimages” of this kind don’t seem to be slowing down either.¹⁴ *Amelie* (2001) sparked tours of Paris, rejuvenating the corner of Montmartre where she “lived.” *Into the Wild* (2007) continues to call sojourners to Fairbanks Bus 142 in Alaska where twenty-four-year-old Chris McCandless died in 1992. And New Zealand tourism went up significantly as a result of *The Hobbit* films (2012, 2013, 2014), *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy (2001, 2002, 2003), and *The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* (2005).¹⁵

Beyond tourism patterns and consumer purchasing habits, though, certain films have played key roles in bringing about deeper shifts within the socio-cultural imagination. *Blackfish* (2013), for example, examined the plight of killer whales held in captivity at SeaWorld. In response to the film, numerous musical acts, business partners, and sponsors cut ties with the well-known marine zoological park. Government legislation banned entertainment-driven orca captivity in response to the documentary. The company’s stock value fell by 50 percent within a year of the film’s release. SeaWorld is now phasing out the orca show, and there will be no more breeding of these beautiful animals in captivity. A small, independent documentary film can effect real social change. From climate change (e.g., *An Inconvenient Truth* [2006] and *An Inconvenient Sequel: Truth to Power* [2017]) to America’s educational system (e.g., *Waiting for Superman* [2010]), or even the ill effects of corporate food production (*Super Size Me* [2004] and *Food, Inc.* [2008]), documentary films are uniquely positioned to raise our social consciousness and, in some cases, provoke actual change.

Film’s impact on society doesn’t always move in a progressive or even positive direction, though. Consider the example of smoking onscreen. In 2012, the US surgeon general released a report that illustrated a direct causal relationship between youth who watched smoking in the movies and those who started to smoke.¹⁶ Yet, in spite of these findings, tobacco use in the top-grossing US movies increased by 80 percent from 2015 to 2016, a marked reversal from the overall decline in tobacco use in major Hollywood films between 1950 and 2006.¹⁷ Reflecting on this unsettling recent trend, Craig Detweiler says, “The tension arises because filmmakers are often going for a particular look or feel. Smoke is very photogenic, and actors are always looking for something to do with their hands, a bit of business. . . . I think the challenge is for studios and filmmakers to put ethics ahead of aesthetics.”¹⁸ It is one thing to acknowledge the power of film to inspire and enliven; it is quite another to suggest that,

because film's aesthetic power is never straightforward or simple, filmmakers bear a unique kind of social responsibility with the mass art they create.

In addition to addressing (or sometimes failing to address) any number of social concerns, film has become, increasingly, where the public learns its history. *Dances with Wolves* (1990) offers us a Lakota perspective on the Civil War. *Schindler's List* (1993) chronicles the horrors of the Holocaust. *Good Night, and Good Luck* (2005) recaptures the paranoia of the McCarthy era. *12 Years a Slave* (2013) and *The Birth of a Nation* (2016) underscore our brutal, racist roots; *Malcolm X* (1992) and *Selma* (2014) show us the civil rights struggle; *BlacKkKlansman* (2018) uses the story of a black police officer in late-1970s Colorado Springs who infiltrates the KKK and links that story with white supremacists in Charlottesville today. *The Hurt Locker* (2008) and *Lone Survivor* (2013) give us our (limited) understanding of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan; some have argued that *MASH* (1970), though ostensibly about the Korean War, was meant to teach its contemporary viewers about the irrationality and inhumanity of the Vietnam War.

If the intent of a film like *MASH* is open to such differing interpretations, it would be difficult to harbor any illusion about director Steven Spielberg's intention in *Saving Private Ryan* (1998). Just as he hoped, it has become a primary shaper of opinion concerning World War II. Tom Hanks, the lead actor, took up the cause of veterans as a result of his experience. For some whose fathers and mothers fought in these wars but came home silent about the horrors they experienced, the film has brought new dialogue and healing. Younger people came to understand for the first time something of the sacrifices that were made during the war. Some, after seeing the film, even went so far as to reach out to veterans, who were in their seventies at the time, to thank them for what they had done.¹⁹

Culturally speaking, though, the power of film is not limited to merchandising, social action, or history lessons. In his provocative book *Life: The Movie* (1998), Neal Gabler views American culture itself as taking on the characteristics of a movie. Life in the West has become show business for many, where we each play a role and long for our moment of celebrity. Gabler argues that it is not politics or economics but entertainment "that is arguably the most pervasive, powerful, and ineluctable force of our time—a force so overwhelming that it has finally metastasized into life."²⁰ Motion picture entertainment—fun, accessible to everyone, sensuous, offering a release from order and authority—has captured the American spirit.

The conversion of life into an entertainment medium is pervasive. Gabler observes that in the late 1990s, we were coached in our roles by Martha Stewart, and our costume designer was Ralph Lauren. Since then, the effects have only been amplified. Ideas have become sound bites, reduced to 280 characters. Not

only do politicians appear first on talk shows like *The Late Show with Stephen Colbert* and *The Daily Show with Trevor Noah*, but news programming that once featured “hard journalism” is now pitched almost entirely for our enjoyment; it is prime-time fare. Hard news is increasingly written using the techniques of fiction, so that it can be read at Starbucks on a smartphone app. The apotheosis of this phenomenon was the election of Donald Trump to the highest office in the land—a reality-TV star who seems perfectly comfortable running the US government in the same way he hosted NBC’s *The Apprentice*. It’s crass and highly controversial entertainment, but his core demographic loves every minute of it. So it is only slightly ironic that, although the network ratings for his TV appearances as president are through the roof, his approval numbers could not be worse.

Blurring the lines between the “real world” and the “reel world” even further is the fact that almost everyone today carries a highly sophisticated camera in the palm of their hands. Our incessant need to capture it all on “film” causes many to encounter life primarily through the screen of their smartphone. Whether it’s a child’s first steps, a friend’s wedding, or something far more mundane, life itself has become a performance to be filmed, edited, and posted on social media, where the “real” event takes place. Indeed, filmed acts of violence like terrorist attacks, police shootings, and racially charged street demonstrations often take on a digital life of their own long after the actual events transpire. These cinematic displays not only shape the court of public opinion (and even the actual courtroom) but also demonstrate the ways in which our memories and firsthand experiences are now filtered predominately through a camera’s lens. The clever thriller *Searching* (2018) demonstrates that our lives have become so mediated via screens that an entire film could be composed from just the digital footprints captured on our devices. This is not about life and art simply imitating one another; it is rather that the two are no longer distinguishable.

As Gabler demonstrates, movies play an increasingly significant role in defining both ourselves and our society. Or as controversial director Elia Kazan said, film is now “the language of [hu]mankind.”²¹ Movies broaden our exposure to the world and provide alternate interpretations of life’s meaning and significance. Values and images are formed in response to life’s experiences, with movies providing the data of countless new stories. Movies have become a type of lingua franca. Who doesn’t know the story of *Titanic* (1997)? Think, too, of the millions of children who have seen *Toy Story 3* (2010) or *Moana* (2016). The greeting “Wakanda forever” crossed over from *Black Panther* (2018) into communities inspired by the robust vision of the technologically advanced African nation. *Crazy Rich Asians* (2018) recast the Cinderella story in a Singaporean context that became a source of profound ethnic pride for so many underrepresented

filmgoers around the globe. We all long to be seen, to relate to characters and their struggles on screen. Even in the church or the synagogue, theological discussion is more likely to happen following a movie than a sermon.²² Put differently, movies are more than entertaining diversions from what matters; they are life stories that both interpret us and are interpreted by us.

Silver Screen Sanctuaries

Even though most of us watch movies and, in some cases, are deeply affected by them, we seldom try to understand what we have seen, let alone relate it to our wider religious beliefs and practices. Film is seen as one thing, religious faith as quite another. Such a disconnect is understandable, at least on the surface. Movies are, on one level, a somewhat trivial form of entertainment, a luxury of modern life. Our spiritual faith, on the other hand, concerns our vocation and destiny; it is foundational. But such easy dichotomies crumble under closer scrutiny. Worship services also entertain (consider the pageantry and music), while movies sometimes engage us at the core of our being.

Reflecting on his experience as a young boy, director Martin Scorsese remembers going to the movie theater with his family: “The first sensation was that of entering a magical world—the soft carpet, the smell of fresh popcorn, the darkness, the sense of safety, and, above all, sanctuary—much the same in my mind as entering a church. A place of dreams. A place that excited and stretched my imagination.”²³ To borrow the words of French filmmaker Eric Rohmer, the cinema was for Scorsese “the cathedral of the twentieth century.”²⁴

In light of these kinds of comments, it is easy to make facile comparisons between screen and sanctuary: popcorn and Coke in place of bread and wine; ticket price for tithing; high ceilings to suggest transcendence; attendees speaking in hushed tones while they expectantly await the start; a certain ritual involved with where we sit and how often we go; a sense of disappointment—even betrayal—if the event falls short of expectations. But behind all such forced analogies is the primary fact that both cinema and church provide “life-orienting images.”²⁵ As Read Mercer Schuchardt suggests in a commentary on the website *Metaphilm*, “Like religion, a good movie really does answer the only three questions worth asking in life: who you are, where you come from, and what you should do.”²⁶

Or listen to George Miller, the producer of films as diverse as *Happy Feet* (2006) and *Mad Max: Fury Road* (2015): “I believe cinema is now the most powerful secular religion and people gather in cinemas to experience things collectively the way they once did in church. The cinema storytellers have become the new priests. They’re doing a lot of the work of our religious institutions,

which have so concretized the metaphors in their stories, taken so much of the poetry, mystery and mysticism out of religious belief, that people look for other places to question their spirituality.”²⁷

In the pages that follow, we will consider whether Christian theology, as Miller suggests, has become overly rationalized to the detriment of the life-transforming power of its original story. For now, we acknowledge that movies provide for many alternate forms of transcendence—encounters that take place outside the confines of the church but are nonetheless understood to be religiously significant.

For instance, Catherine Barsotti, our colleague at Fuller Seminary and co-editor of *Finding God in the Movies* and *God in the Movies*, points to Peter Weir’s *The Year of Living Dangerously* (1982) as a deeply spiritual film that had a transformative effect on her. Barsotti describes Weir’s film as a turning point in her life, a moment of conversion. Being immersed in the pain and poverty of Jakarta, seeing it both literally and figuratively through the eyes of Billy Kwan, she could not escape the question that Billy asks Guy, quoting Tolstoy (who is quoting Luke 3:10): “What then must we do?” Billy goes on to tell Guy that Tolstoy sold all he had to relieve the suffering around him. Guy is not persuaded, believing that government leaders and structures should be involved, not him. Billy himself had tried to respond personally by providing money for a young prostitute and her sick child. But when the boy dies from drinking polluted water, Billy can no longer avoid political involvement. Pounding out on his typewriter the same question, “What then must we do?,” Billy decides to challenge President Sukarno to feed his people. He hangs a banner over a balcony and is killed for his action. Quoting Barsotti directly:

“What then must we do?” I left the theater with that phrase and the agonizing eyes of the children of Jakarta burned onto the screen of my mind. In Luke 3, we first hear this question as John the Baptist is preaching repentance and calling the people to bear fruit worthy of their conversion. When the crowd doesn’t get it and asks, “What then must we do?” he tells them to live ethically and generously: “Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise.” Or to tax collectors, “Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you” (vv. 11, 13). In Luke 4, we hear Jesus echoing the same ethic and compassion as he begins his ministry with these words: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free” (v. 18).

A combination of people, events in my life, and the Holy Spirit had prepared me to see this film. It became a turning point, a recovery of sight. The next week I returned to my project at work, appraising a hospital, but I saw the world

differently. Within weeks I applied for a leave of absence and within months left for Mexico to work as a short-term missionary. Six months after my return, I resigned my position to start my own appraisal business in which I would work only thirty hours a week so that I could give myself to the youth of my church and community, to the financial and political struggle to build a shelter for women and children in my city, and to study in the area of cross-cultural theology and ministry. The last twenty-two years have included a variety of tasks, jobs, ministries, and people. And it seems that Billy Kwan's, Tolstoy's, and the Bible's question still rings in my ears, "What then must we do?"²⁸

Weir's movie became the means by which Barsotti heard her incarnate Lord compelling her to answer this question in concrete ways. And it changed her life.

Origin Stories

The three of us (Rob, Craig, and Kutter) can each identify a number of cinematic encounters that, like Barsotti's, have not merely communicated abstract truth that we later recognized as appropriately religious or orthodox but have actually transformed our lives. As academic theologians who have each published previous work in the area of theology and film, our first-order experiences with the revelatory power of film have motivated a great deal of our scholarly research and writing. Movies have functioned for us, in various times and situations, as cautionary tales, as moments of spiritual encouragement, and even as opportunities to hear God speak. They have served as occasions for encountering the Spirit's wider revelatory presence, both redeeming and redirecting our lives.

In what follows, we offer a few examples of our own personal stories, in hopes of setting the stage for the remainder of the book, which represents our attempt to grapple theologically with the power of film in our own lives and the lives of so many others.

*Craig Detweiler on Raging Bull (1980)*²⁹

Movies may have been my first love, but as I emerged from Martin Scorsese's *Raging Bull*, I was catapulted toward a different kind of obsession. Robert DeNiro's haunting portrait of boxing champ Jake LaMotta left me beaten and bruised. I watched the perils of self-immolation, as Jake destroyed his relationships with his brother, his wife, and his fans. Jake ends up alone, in jail, literally banging his head against the wall crying, "Why? Why? Why?" As a high school jock with my own independent streak, I recognized far too much of myself in Jake. As the film ended, director Martin Scorsese offered a curious counterpoint.



Raging Bull (1980), © United Artists Corporation

The credits read, “All I know is this, once I was blind, but now I can see.” I recognized the blindness in Jake and me, but I wondered, “What does it mean to see?” A violent, profane, R-rated movie had provided the spark to a spiritual search—film forged theology.

I had no theological terms to describe this phenomenon. I did not recognize that “LaMotta is such a guilt-ridden individual that he ‘atones for his sin by absorbing vicious punishment in the ring.’”³⁰ I was too young to understand how “the boxing ring has even been construed as ‘a metaphorical re-creation of the crucifixion.’”³¹ But this movie compelled me to action. I responded to a friend’s invitation to attend a Young Life meeting. This wild and wacky youth ministry offered fresh and funny home theater. Students gathered in basements and living rooms for singing, games, and a moving discussion of Jesus. It was shockingly relevant, particularly as I saw the loving principles of Jesus embodied by the adult volunteers. I listened carefully and weighed the options for almost a year. As a freshman in college, at Young Life’s Windy Gap camp, I committed all I knew of myself to all I’d heard and read about Jesus. It was a wondrous meeting: the beginning of a propulsive wrestling match involving my heart and soul that continues unabated to this day. Jesus continues to address my blindness and offer sustaining sight.

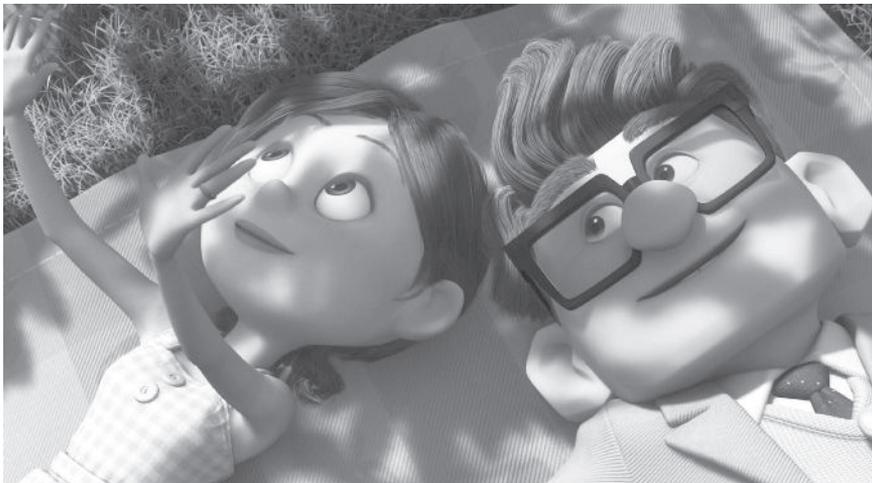
Kutter Callaway on Up (2009)³²

On the opening weekend for Disney/Pixar’s animated film *Up*, my wife and I settled into two theater seats located in the midst of a frenetically undulating

sea of parents and young children. Although this was certainly not strange for a Saturday matinee screening of what is ostensibly a children’s film, we became increasingly aware of the fact that not only were we surrounded by an overwhelming number of individuals whose raw energy belied their diminutive stature, but we were also apparently the only two filmgoers who had failed to arrive that day with a ready-made nuclear family of our own. As we observed numerous parents attempting to corral their children in preparation for the beginning of the movie, we were unexpectedly confronted with the sobering reality that life is so often marked by the palpable presence of an absence—a discernible lack that indelibly shapes who we are and how we see the world. More specifically, our lives were distinguished by the absence of children. After trying unsuccessfully for an extended period of time to bear children, my wife and I reveled in the joy of discovering that we had finally conceived. Yet, as the apparent randomness and absurdity of life would have it, we subsequently lost two pregnancies to miscarriage, each one further reinforcing a certain degree of helplessness and a commensurate loss of identity both as individuals and as a family.

It was this very juxtaposition—our personal experience of loss along with the presence of what seemed to be a surfeit of children—that formed the immediate context for our viewing of *Up*.

Given our personal experience and the context in which we viewed the film, the music in *Up* was nothing less than transformative for both my wife and me. The images of Carl and Ellie’s miscarriage during the “married life”



Up (2009), © Disney Enterprises Inc./Pixar

montage offered us an invitation to remember our loss and, in an important sense, functioned as an embodiment of our pain. But it was the music that expressed something that even the most explicit visual or narrative reference to our pain-filled story could not contain: the redemptive power of a hard-won hope.

Needless to say, I was unable to stop the film after the married life montage in order to request that each member of the audience complete a questionnaire concerning the effects of the film's music. However, it was clear from the muffled sobs and tear-stained faces of nearly every adult in the theater that our experience was certainly not unique. In a way that almost defies description, the music's ineffable presence seemed to fill the theater, uniting the individual members of the audience with both the narrative and one another. It suggested the presence of an otherwise hidden meaning in the events it accompanied—a deeper coherence that helped shape these events into a meaningful narrative. Thus, the music in this film not only afforded a series of discrete images a sense of narrative and temporal unity but also, for the briefest of moments, offered us a glimpse of meaning and purpose in the face of life's apparent meaninglessness. It was a powerful, spiritual, and perhaps even revelatory experience. And it all occurred in less than four minutes.

Rob Johnston on Becket (1964)³³

Nominated for twelve Academy Awards and starring Richard Burton and Peter O'Toole, the film *Becket* tells the story of Henry II, the Norman king of England, and his drinking buddy, Thomas à Becket. King Henry wanted free rein to live and act as he chose, to whore and wage war and tax the citizenry as he saw fit. His one obstacle to complete license was the archbishop of Canterbury, who had his own independent authority as leader of the Church of England. The archbishop often frustrated Henry's designs. In order to solve his problem, King Henry ingeniously decided to appoint Thomas, his companion in "wine, women, and song," as the next archbishop. Brilliant, except for one problem: Thomas decided to take seriously his new vocation—his calling to be God's servant—and to serve God rather than the king. King Henry tried to persuade him to compromise and accommodate to the wishes of his old friend (and king). But Thomas remained steadfast. As a result of his faithfulness, Thomas was martyred in Canterbury Cathedral on the altar steps.

When I first saw this film as a freshman in college, I did not much identify with Thomas's martyrdom (or subsequent sainthood!). But I did hear God calling me to the Christian ministry. My struggle with accepting the call to become a minister was with my image of the pastor as needing first to be a holy



Becket (1964), © Paramount Pictures

person. My Young Life leader, who ministered to me during high school, was such a person, as was my church counselor. I knew I was no saint. In the film, however, I heard God saying to me through his Spirit, “You need not be holy. Thomas was not. You only have to be obedient to my call.” And I responded like Thomas and said, “God, I will be loyal to you with all my being.” Here again is the power of film. Not only can it reveal and redeem, but it can also be the occasion for God to speak to the viewer.

I told of my call into the ministry at the first conference titled “Reel Spirituality,” which several of us organized in the fall of 1998 and from which the title of the book *Reel Spirituality* was taken. Fifty Hollywood screenwriters and directors and fifty leading pastors and church leaders had gathered to discuss “Storytelling as Common Ground: The Church and Hollywood.” When I was finished, one of the other speakers, Father Gregory Elmer, a Benedictine monk, commented that he had heard God speak to him, calling him into the monastic life, while watching the same movie! We could even identify the different scenes in the film where God had made himself known to us.

What is noteworthy in this “coincidence” is that the two of us saw the same movie, *Becket*, yet heard God’s call in unique ways. For me, the issue was obedience to the call to active service in the world, and I became a Protestant minister who teaches theology and culture. For Father Elmer, the call was to purity of heart and single-minded devotion, and he became a Catholic mystic. In the chapters to come, we will consider the importance of the viewer in understanding what makes a film work. We will also consider film as the occasion not only to know about God but to know God. However, at this point, it is enough to note that a movie’s story has the power to transform a life. It certainly did mine.

A Multiplicity of Lenses

Each of these stories presents us with a similar question, which we will pursue in earnest for the rest of the book: How do we understand and make sense of the power of film, not only in our own lives as individuals, but also in the broader society and in the community of faith known as the church? We suggest that a movie's power and meaning are best understood by bringing together a number of critical perspectives and allowing these interpretive lenses to interact and ultimately converge. Given our various sensibilities and experiences, each of us needs a different set of lenses to focus our vision. For instance, people like Craig who have film degrees will naturally understand certain elements of a film's formal structures far more capably than Rob or Kutter, who are both film lovers but not filmmakers. Along similar lines, it will be much more helpful for those unfamiliar with theological reflection to focus on incorporating a theological, ecclesial, or cultural lens into their critical engagement with film.

At the end of the day, the goal is not to become an expert in any one of these critical domains. Rather, the goal is to develop an audiovisual competence—a capacity to interpret and understand the art of film in a way that is both aesthetically credible and theologically faithful. It's not simply to see better and with more clarity what can already be seen but to peer through moving images in order to see what cannot be seen on their surface. To borrow from the apostle Paul, our goal is to “fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen, since what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal” (2 Cor. 4:18). That is the truly deep focus we are after—one that holds in view both the seen and the unseen, both the temporary and the eternal.

Discussion Questions

1. What film has evoked/invoked/inspired the strongest reaction in you personally?
2. What are the primary lenses you bring into your film-going experience?
3. Do you have a truly moving picture you point back to and reflect on as a turning point in your life?