

William D. Romanowski

CINEMATIC FAITH

*A Christian Perspective on Movies
and Meaning*



CINEMATIC FAITH

*A Christian Perspective
on Movies and Meaning*

William D. Romanowski


Baker Academic
a division of Baker Publishing Group
Grand Rapids, Michigan

© 2019 by William D. Romanowski

Published by Baker Academic
a division of Baker Publishing Group
PO Box 6287, Grand Rapids, MI 49516-6287
www.bakeracademic.com

Printed in the United States of America

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—for example, electronic, photocopy, recording—without the prior written permission of the publisher. The only exception is brief quotations in printed reviews.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Romanowski, William D., author.

Title: Cinematic faith : a Christian perspective on movies and meaning / William D. Romanowski.

Description: Grand Rapids : Baker Publishing Group, 2019. | Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2018036416 | ISBN 9780801098659 (pbk. : alk. paper)

Subjects: LCSH: Religion in motion pictures. | Motion pictures—Religious aspects. | Motion pictures—Moral and ethical aspects.

Classification: LCC PN1995.9.R4 R66 2019 | DDC 791.43/6823—dc23

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2018036416>

ISBN 978-1-5409-6205-8 (casebound)

Scripture quotations are from the Holy Bible, New International Version®. NIV®. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.™ Used by permission of Zondervan. All rights reserved worldwide. www.zondervan.com. The “NIV” and “New International Version” are trademarks registered in the United States Patent and Trademark Office by Biblica, Inc.™

19 20 21 22 23 24 25 7 6 5 4 3 2 1



Contents

List of Movie Musings	vii
Preface	ix
1. Why a Christian Approach?	1
2. Culture Communicates: Biblical Principles for a Peculiar Means of Expression	15
3. Moviemaking Magic: Poetic Portals and the Power of Perspective	31
4. Creating an Illusion of Reality: Film Form and Content	47
5. Connecting the Dots: Style and Meaning	67
6. Redemption American-Style: The Melodramatic Vision	95
7. The Yellow Brick Road to Self-Realization: Classical Hollywood Cinema	115
8. A Man's Gotta Do What a Man's Gotta Do: American Action-Adventure Movies	137
9. Stop Taking My Hand! Gender and Mainstream Hollywood	155
Epilogue	197
Notes	199
Film Index	217
General Index	221

Movie Musings

Interpreting Time Loop Fiction in <i>Groundhog Day</i> (1993)	11
Manipulating Space and Time in <i>Arrival</i> (2016)	28
<i>Blade Runner</i> (1982) and <i>The Imitation Game</i> (2014) as Movie Metaphors	40
The “Married Life” Sequence in <i>Up</i> (2009)	60
Creating the Illusion (and History) in <i>Lincoln</i> (2012)	63
Pattern and Meaning in <i>The King’s Speech</i> (2010)	80
Dramatizing Drone Warfare in <i>Eye in the Sky</i> (2015)	83
Art and Ethics in <i>Rear Window</i> (1954)	87
<i>Titanic</i> (1997) and the Melodramatic Outlook	106
A Classical Hollywood Film: <i>Rocky</i> (1976)	126
A Creative Alternative: <i>Do the Right Thing</i> (1989)	131
A Biblical Blockbuster in the Making: <i>Noah</i> (2014)	147
There’s No Magic in Boxing: <i>Million Dollar Baby</i> (2004)	165
Boy Meets Girl in <i>La La Land</i> (2016)	171
Narrative, Character, and Perspective in <i>The Blind Side</i> (2009)	181

Preface

C*inematic Faith* is a primer for navigating the world of film—specifically, American film and culture—from a Christian vantage point. This book is written for moviegoers who are interested in the relationship between faith and the cinema. I have kept in mind educators who might make use of this book for courses in religion, popular culture, film and media studies and production, or in church, ministry, and other educational settings. Although the scope of this study is limited to American Christianity, all people of good will are likely to have similar concerns about film viewing, the effects of film and media, and representations of identity groups.

This book is a sequel of sorts to my *Eyes Wide Open: Looking for God in Popular Culture* (first published 2001, revised edition 2007) with a focus on the American cinema, the subject of my research and teaching interests. There are different kinds of movies, including documentaries and experimental films, but I am focusing on fictional or narrative films—the ones seen by most people. Fictional films intend to tell a story. They draw our interest, focus our attention, and engage our thoughts and emotions by involving us in a process of trying to understand their meaning.

With Hollywood being the dominant film industry worldwide, American movies are easily accessible and broadly discussed. In any given year, about seven hundred films will be released theatrically, according to the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA, www.mpa.org). Films move in and out of theaters and come out on Blu-ray/DVD, pay TV, or streaming services in a matter of months. This milieu of constant movement presents a challenge when writing about the cinema; the new becomes old rather quickly, and a movie that scores at the box office this year might well be forgotten in the next. And so, relying on enduring “popular” films as illustrations has an

advantage: they are likely to be familiar to readers or, if not, readily available on DVD or streaming services.

The movies treated in these pages are a mix of classic, older, and more recent films (several of which I've used in courses that students have expressed enjoying very much). I consider a variety of films, including award winners, popular releases, and some very good ones that have flown under the radar. This is in accord with the world of popular art and culture, where we cannot necessarily equate artistic excellence with popularity or commercial success. I intend to offer effective and workable illustrations that, along with related tools for analysis, can be used as touchstones in talking about other movies along the same lines. The aesthetic criteria that I take up in a *Movie Musing* about *Rear Window*, for example, can be applied just as well to any other movie. Then again, there are many other ways to consider this Alfred Hitchcock classic.

And while we're on the subject, the *Movie Musings* are just that: reflections that take a certain slant on a movie and that illustrate key ideas. These treatments are not meant to be thorough or complete. After teaching for many years, I've discovered that a full-blown film analysis is often of less value in generating discussion than one that introduces an idea and raises questions suggestive of a point of view.

One aim of this study is to heighten enjoyment and aesthetic appreciation with a deeper understanding of the ways that movies express *meaning* and, in doing so, convey life perspectives. A second aim seeks to acquaint readers with the mainstream American cinema, with the way it shapes our imagining of the world, and consequently, with how to think critically about dominant cultural beliefs expressed in movies from the vantage point of Christian assumptions. Making critical engagement a routine part of the movie-going experience is a central concern.

This book highlights the benefits of a faith-informed approach that centers on art and perspective. It aims to offer an accessible and workable approach, one that is consistent with the way we experience movies, becomes easier with practice over time, and produces (ideally) results that make the effort worthwhile. As I will argue, emphasizing the role of faith—and specifically Christian faith—is valuable because perspectives, whether religious or secular, can and do make a vital contribution to the movie-going experience. In offering this approach, I hope to show how to take an interpretive stance without being dogmatic about it. A key feature of this approach is the realization that various perspectives exist that could—and should—foster dialogue leading to a deeper understanding of movies and life. Indeed, considering movies in terms of their veracity to our real-life experience constitutes an important

benefit of the cinema; movies give us one way of making and testing discoveries about life.

A few details before moving on. I make a stylistic practice of letting scholars, commentators, and film critics speak for themselves as much as possible. I refer to critics regularly, not only to glean insights but also to show how we can benefit from reading critical reviews. I do the same with scholars and commentators as a way of pointing to the work of others who have shaped the ideas and arguments in this book. It's a way of inviting readers to follow up my sources toward a fuller discussion. I invite you to check out the eSources available at www.bakeracademic.com/CinematicFaith. These eSources contain additional info, such as summary points, sidebars, links to movie clips, and other fun stuff. Box Office Mojo (www.boxofficemojo.com) is the source of production and box-office figures.

Some readers may be more familiar with a different vocabulary for thinking about film in terms of faith. As you'll see, I make use of perspective and culture, concepts that have to do with the creation of symbolic meanings as a way of understanding and acting with purpose in life. I will occasionally use the terms *worldview* and *ideology*. A worldview refers to a basic interpretation of reality. Worldviews tend to be largely static, sweeping models of reality that are available to comprehensive analysis. Moreover, worldviews belong more to the historical period and culture perhaps than to the ordinary folks who live in them. Ideologies typically have to do with power relations in society—social, political, economic—and specifically a ruling group's control over the governing ideas or “official” version of reality. With that in mind, I use the term *ideology* to refer to a specific social platform—propositions and policies—as manifestations of a cultural system. These concepts are obviously related, each offering a different slant on a common concern and describing the context and outlook from which people make sense of life and live meaningfully in the world.

Spoiler Alert

I'm aware that as a matter of journalistic practice, film reviewers are supposed to refrain from revealing story twists, character revelations, and surprise endings. And not all readers will have seen the films considered here. For that reason, I provide some context for those who may not have seen a film, but be forewarned: the sort of analysis done here necessarily involves discussing films in detail, including identifying plot points, conflicts, and their resolutions. In other words, if you've not seen a movie treated here, I'm likely going to ruin any surprises. That's unavoidable. Even so, none of my descriptions are

complete enough that they can adequately substitute for viewing the movie itself. And there can be some benefit to reading about a movie before seeing it.

The Calvin College McGregor Summer Research Fellowship program provides opportunities for faculty and students to work together on a research project. Two fine students, Eckhart Chan and Michael Lentz, worked through some of the early chapters with me, offering helpful suggestions; they also did the initial legwork in creating the accompanying eSources. I am appreciative of my colleagues at Calvin College for their ongoing support of my research and specifically for granting me a sabbatical to bring this project to completion.

Finally, my life and work benefit enormously from having a supportive community of family, friends, and colleagues. I'm deeply grateful for each one of you, especially Donna and our children, Michael and Tara.

And with that, let's go to the movies.

Additional materials—including summary points, sidebars, links to movie clips, and other fun stuff—can be found at www.bakeracademic.com/CinematicFaith.

1

Why a Christian Approach?

Hollywood doesn't necessarily want to make Christian movies. It wants to make movies Christians think are Christian.

—Richard Corliss, *Time*

What's your favorite movie?

That's the question I get asked most often when people realize I teach and write about film. Sometimes it's about comparing personal favorites. Occasionally, someone wants to measure my film bona fides against the American Film Institute's 100 Greatest American Movies of All Time. Mostly, it's meant to be a conversation starter. People enjoy talking and even arguing about movies they like or don't like and the reasons why.

I don't have one favorite film actually. There's *Casablanca* (1942), a classic Hollywood melodrama set in World War II, starring Humphrey Bogart and Ingrid Bergman: "We'll always have Paris." *Chinatown* (1974) is a near-perfect neo-film noir that resonates with a Calvinist sense of human depravity—"which is nice," as Carl Spackler (Bill Murray), assistant groundskeeper at Bushwood Country Club, might say. I can't remember being on a golf course without someone reciting dialogue from *Caddyshack* (1980): "This crowd has gone deadly silent." "Oh, it looks good on you though." "It's in the hole! It's in the hole!" The movie is laced with crude and sometimes juvenile humor ("Whoa, did somebody step on a duck?"), but what a hilarious satire of the pretensions of the country-club set.

Bull Durham (1988) upended the conventional sports film not by telling a story about winning the big game but by revealing character in the defining

moment. “Most of us will never get a chance to play or win that big game,” writer and director Ron Shelton said, “but we can all take a big risk that proves to us something about ourselves.”¹ Sometimes there’s a simple, straightforward connection between film and life. *Toy Story 3* unleashed my feelings about becoming an empty nester. The wizarding world of Harry Potter helped me to see, while directing a study abroad program in England, the joy and fascination students had for this incredibly popular film franchise; through the eyes of those younger than myself I came to see the value of these books and movies as part of their childhood and adolescence.

I suppose this is all to say that I am not a hoity-toity film buff. There are movies I appreciate for their aesthetic inventiveness, clever narrative, or insightful cultural commentary. Others might lack artistic excitement, but I still enjoy them for the ride. There might not be much character development, but the story has a certain intrigue and the ending is satisfying—even if entirely predictable. I suspect there are many others who have a similar movie palette. And that reminds me: Once, during an interview for a research grant, a committee member pulled me aside and asked expectantly, “What d’ya *really* think of *Animal House*?” There truly is no accounting for taste.

I have friends who are much more passionate about film than I am. Terry, who has a PhD in foundations of education, loves going to the movies. It doesn’t matter what the critics say. Sometimes he’ll stop by the theater and buy a ticket to the next showing—a habit of more than a quarter of all moviegoers.² Terry has developed a keen understanding of film genres, story formulas, and characterizations. He can talk about even the most mundane film as a reflection of cultural beliefs and values. Being an avid moviegoer serves him well in his roles as a campus minister and college professor; he’s introduced students—myself included—to cinema’s potential as a communicator of life perspectives.

Then there’s Peggy. Based on a movie trailer, a friend suggested that as a Friday night outing a group of us see *The Choice* (2016), an adaptation of a Nicholas Sparks novel. Peggy checked her trusty source and emailed us: “What!?! The Rotten Tomatometer was at a paltry 11%!!!!!!! I RARELY like a film below 80 percent. And I HATE going to bad or mediocre movies.” If that wasn’t enough to dissuade us, she included blurbs from the reviews:

“Really, almost anything in theaters right now would be a better alternative.”
(*Fort Worth Weekly*)

“*The Choice* is the cinematic equivalent of staring at a Hallmark Card for 2 hours.” (*The Hollywood Reporter*)

“The only choice is to make sure a barf bag is nearby.” (*San Francisco Chronicle*)

“Directed by Ross Katz and filmed like an ad for erectile-dysfunction medication, *The Choice* is almost repellingly synthetic.” (*New York Times*)

“I understand it’s a social event,” she wrote, “but I’d rather sit through a Super Bowl game than a bad movie. It really depresses me.” (Did I mention that Peg’s not much of a sports fan?) We ended up seeing the movie Peggy wanted to see from the start: *Eye in the Sky* (2015), a British production starring Helen Mirren and Alan Rickman (in what was his final role).

Peggy has a PhD in linguistics and developmental psychology. She frequents the local art house cinema, prefers Buster Keaton’s deadpan humor to Charlie Chaplin’s sentimentality, and has over 170 films in her Netflix queue. She watches all kinds of movies, but with one condition: they have to be excellent. What the top critics think matters a lot to her.

Peggy and Terry are film aficionados and conscientious Christians with different tastes and motivations—which is to say there is no definitive “Christian” way of talking about film. My hope, however, is to cultivate some common ground by investigating film as a popular art form that plays important roles in our lives and culture.

Understanding Christian Views

Since the birth of motion pictures at the turn of the twentieth century, the church has played a significant role in the development of the American cinema as a legitimate art and institution. Motivated by diverse goals and outlooks, Protestant, Catholic, and evangelical leaders advanced different agendas aiming to influence Hollywood productions and practices. At various times and under specific circumstances, church groups launched initiatives that included boycotts, calls for industry reforms, efforts to increase film literacy, and even veiled attempts at censorship.

How are we to make sense of the varying approaches to film and attitudes about Hollywood as an institution? First, Christian perspectives are rooted in religious traditions that represent different ideas about the relation between faith and culture. The rules of cultural engagement create expectations for the cinema regarding its purpose, potential, and standards for evaluation. Are movies entertainment? Popular art? A voice for morality? A means of persuasion? Accordingly, Christians apply different interpretive frameworks to draw conclusions about a movie’s meaning that reflect moral, religious, and ideological priorities and opinions.

Second, Christian approaches to film attempt in differing ways to merge moral and religious principles with democratic values and market realities. They pivot on two religiously derived principles that exist in some tension: one stresses freedom of expression and individual conscience, while the other has to do with protecting the church and the moral and religious character of American society.

Two different yet complementary visions for the cinema emerge. Those emphasizing the first principle tend to think of the cinema as an arena for cultural conversation. They reserve their praise for searching stories about the human dilemma and complexity of life. If filmmakers were to take advantage of their First Amendment liberties, that calls for criticism but not censorship. Those emphasizing the second view are inclined to favor movies that teach positive lessons and instill right moral and cultural values, especially in youth. If the first tendency runs the risk of allowing for some exploitation, the second can be faulted for its commitment to the status quo, as it tends to favor movies that rely on prevailing stereotypes and that depict a homogenized world in which all issues are plain and simple.

A persistent notion in both camps is that church patronage ought to be enough to persuade profit-minded film producers to make movies that take seriously the concerns of religious moviegoers. Counter to and frustrating this notion, however, is that most people, religious or not, generally think of Hollywood movies as entertaining and show little concern about their potential impact on spectators and society.

The role of religion in public life continues to be a topic of lively debate. The term *Christian* is complicated because it has acquired various meanings with both positive and negative connotations and multiple uses. *Christian* can be used to describe a theology, a person or community of people, a market, or commercial products. Those familiar at all with the Christian tradition will know that it is as theologically rich as it is diverse. Thus, I'm using *Christian* as an umbrella term referring generally to a religious community made up of an array of theological, moral, and cultural outlooks. That said, I make no presumptions about the extent to which my views represent those of other Christians or communities of faith.

The Fifth Quadrant

Hollywood hit a rough stretch in 2005. Movie attendance was down for the third straight year. A film adaptation of British theologian C. S. Lewis's children's book, *The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, finished second in the final box-office tallies. It came in right behind

Revenge of the Sith, the latest installment in the celebrated *Star Wars* series, and ahead of *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*. The year before, *The Passion of the Christ* finished third in box-office grosses behind the *Shrek* and *Spider-Man* sequels, dumbfounding industry analysts and critics alike. An R-rated movie steeped in religious controversy, *The Passion* is not exactly a Friday-night date film—or family fare. Yet this extremely violent depiction of the torture and crucifixion of Jesus of Nazareth, in Aramaic and Latin with English subtitles no less, became an astonishing commercial hit driven by churchgoers.

The surprising commercial success of *The Passion* and *The Chronicles of Narnia* put the church market on the film industry’s radar in a big way. Film studios, a writer in *USA Today* observed, were hoping “to convert those with little faith in Hollywood fare into permanent moviegoers.” Hollywood studios routinely divide their audience into four quadrants: male, female, under 25 years old, and over 25. Their mission now? To make churchgoers the fifth quadrant.³

Time film critic Richard Corliss reported that film studios were making a concerted effort to pitch their releases to church folks, “a vast, untapped market,” as one Christian promotion executive put it. Those Corliss called “cinevangelists” were finding hitherto-unnoticed theological truths in movies like *Spider-Man* (“We keep looking for radioactive spiders, but really it’s God who changes us”). With some bewilderment at how “Christians are increasingly borrowing from movies to drive home theological lessons,” Corliss made a curious observation about the emerging church-marketing trend: “Hollywood doesn’t necessarily want to make Christian movies. It wants to make movies Christians think are Christian.”⁴

Oddly enough, as Hollywood studios began developing strategies to go after religious moviegoers, a leading marketing firm discovered that most Americans identifying themselves as religious watched pretty much what everyone else did. An executive observed, “Tastes don’t differ at all,” except that the more conservative churchgoers were more “likely to see movies rated R for violence.” Surveys showed that “most people, even the very religious, are very happy with their movies.”⁵ That was in 2005; not much has changed since then. More recent surveys show that, for the most part, practicing Christians see the same movies at the same rate as everyone else.⁶

Overall, it appears that most filmgoers—church folks included—find movies enjoyable enough to buy a ticket, but also largely innocuous and, with occasional exceptions, requiring little thoughtful analysis it seems. According to Barna researchers, “For all the concern about the degradation of cultural values and Hollywood’s lack of a moral compass,” most people believe that

movies have no real influence on their beliefs and values.⁷ Survey results provide evidence for what scholars call the “third-person effect”: everyone thinks he or she is personally immune from what might adversely affect others.⁸

Now, movie attendance is one thing, but the more important concern here is *how* Christians think about movies they watch at theaters, on DVD, or via streaming services. Does having a faith perspective matter? Can it provide a distinct way of thinking about Hollywood releases? And why is investigating these questions a worthwhile endeavor?

A Framework of Expectations

After inquiring about my favorite films, people will often ask me if thinking too deeply about a movie ruins the enjoyment of watching it. I suggest that, to the contrary, developing good critical skills and practices can enhance our experience and make movie watching (and making) more interesting and rewarding—especially as we become better at it.

Critical approaches are theories or ways of thinking about film. They consist of assumptions and principles that explain the nature of film and its functions and effects. Furthermore, critical approaches offer tools for analyzing and assessing the quality and importance of films. There are many ways to examine movies and interpret their meanings, including by focusing on things like the production process, film aesthetics, representation (e.g., race, gender, and disability), the spectator’s experience, how a film reflects reality, and more. A good approach should be practical, provide reliable insights, and sharpen our judgments. It will open possibilities for film criticism and production. Film criticism, which some practitioners argue is an art form itself, suggests new avenues for interpretation and different ways of thinking about the issues of life that the film addresses. The best film analysis enhances our experience by sending viewers back to the film with fresh ways of looking at it.

The critical approach presented in this book is anchored in the movie itself and its unique capabilities as an audiovisual medium. Moviegoers usually spend most of their time talking about what the film is about, its *content*, which is understandable. Most, however, are not well versed in talking about a film’s *form*—the means by which it conveys content. Even professional film reviewers tend to rely on “a heavy dose of plot synopsis,” *New York Times* critic Manohla Dargis concedes. “They pay very little if any attention to the specifics of the medium, to how a film makes meaning with images—with framing, editing, *mise en scène*, with the way an actor moves his body in front of the camera.”⁹ The upshot is to attribute a movie’s impact almost wholly to the effect of the story, as if acting, editing, cinematography, production

design, and so forth have little influence on the creation of a film's meaning or a viewer's response.

This book does not propose to replace an emphasis on content with an emphasis on form but rather to treat film as both an aesthetic object and an experience—one that can be exciting, pleasurable, boring, disagreeable, or mind blowing. In other words, a spectator's response cannot be reduced simply to the cinematic techniques and patterns a filmmaker employs to tell a story. Nor can the creation of meaning be so reduced either. Rather, as we'll see, meaning emerges from the interplay of film form and the viewer's interpretive stance. I will suggest that both production and reception demonstrate a close relationship between film and perspective.

We typically don't watch a narrative film purely out of aesthetic interest or with what is known as *disinterested contemplation*. Even so, the extent to which one is cognizant of a film's aesthetics can enrich the viewer's understanding and appreciation. The sound and editing in *Dunkirk* (2017) are amazing, but it is not the entire cinematic experience. Christopher Nolan's World War II drama is a "a tour de force of cinematic craft and technique," Manohla Dargis declares, but just as important, the story "is insistently humanizing despite its monumentality." The filmmaker "cinematically" shrinks the distance between past and present with "visual sweep and emotional intimacy, with images of warfare and huddled, frightened survivors that together with Hans Zimmer's score reverberate through your body," so that by the film's end "you are reminded that the fight against fascism continues."¹⁰ Ultimately, *Dunkirk* is an impressive collision of art, politics, morality, and historical memory.

The foregrounding of matters of form and moviemaking draws attention to *how* films represent beliefs and *how* they create meaning. My approach aims to balance interpretive concerns with the ways and means that convey content and perspective. The main concern is with the essential relationship between *form* (the patterns and techniques used to tell stories), *content* (the film's subject), *style* (the filmmaker's distinctive use of patterns and techniques), and *perspective* (the film or filmmaker's point of view). Film scholars and critics may practice this sort of analysis, but most people interested in relating the worlds of religion and film are more familiar with religion than with the methods by which film communicates. Even so, whether mindful or not, while watching a movie we experience these elements—form, content, style, and perspective—as being of a piece. Much more on this will come. For now, it is enough to make the point that appreciating what makes movies artistically interesting and effective can make us better viewers and more creative storytellers.

The approach advanced in this book is just as interested in film aesthetics as in the many benefits the cinema offers as both popular art and culture.

Together these create a *framework of expectations*, an umbrella term that covers several key concepts that form the basis of this study. A framework of expectations describes the bundle of expectations or assumptions that we have about the cinema in general and that inform the way we think and talk about specific movies or kinds of movies. The concept is relevant to both creating cinematic art and interpreting its meaning. Let me explain.

In one sense, a framework of expectations refers to the ideals, beliefs, and assumptions a person holds about the nature of the cinema itself; we expect movies to foster cultural conversation, impart moral values, or simply provide entertainment. When watching a film and discussing it afterward, viewers activate their own *outlook* or *perspective*, which, as we'll see, is their vantage point in life that harbors assumptions (or expectations) used to understand and think critically about movies. But there's more. Viewers tend to prefer some types of movies over others (comedy, fantasy, or historical fiction) and often measure the quality of a film based on prior experiences that are based on these familiar genres. However formulaic, over and over we anticipate the feats of heroism in action-adventure films or the satisfaction of lovers reuniting in romantic comedies. We gauge these movies in part on how inventive and pleasing they are based on expectations acquired from previous viewings. Other factors might be considered as well: a penchant for certain topics or themes, a desire to be entertained by feel-good movies or challenged by those that probe contemporary issues, the graphic nature of the film's subject, a favorite actor or director, the opinion of critics, and more.

In short, a framework of expectations embraces a variety of factors sometimes loosely rolled together—from aesthetic principles, standards, and tastes, to moral, cultural, ideological, or religious concerns—that viewers apply in moving combinations that make sense to them. As this suggests, we approach the cinema with some flexibility. I can fall for a good melodrama as much as anyone else, which may surprise you when you read chapter 6. Then again, I'm not much for horror films even though writer/director Scott Derrickson (*The Exorcism of Emily Rose*, *Deliver Us From Evil*, *Doctor Strange*), a Christian, maintains that horror is “the genre that is most friendly to the subject matter of faith and belief in religion.”¹¹

Movies are at once imaginative creations and cultural and commercial products. This line of analysis accounts for typical moviegoing habits (and moviemaker tendencies) without shying away from or becoming heavy handed about the significance of religious outlooks in appreciating and thinking critically about the cinema. Moreover, a framework of expectations does not belong solely to individuals but can be shared by like-minded people and held in common in some measure by members of a culture or subculture. Film-

makers and audiences alike share a familiarity with the cinema along with common ideals, values, and assumptions about life and the world; this is the basis of cultural communication.

Imaginative Mapping of Reality

In my view, film is a popular art form that is as entertaining as it is valuable in helping people navigate within and by way of their culture.¹² Movies shape our mental geography, our point of view, our symbolic conceptions that give meaning and purpose to life. One way to analyze narrative films, then, is to think of them as *imaginative maps of reality*—a key concept. A map is not the reality it depicts but a representation of a geographical space. Made to scale, it provides a directional orientation (north/south, east/west) and shows highways, byways, cities, towns, and distances that help a traveler navigate from one destination to another.

By way of analogy, we can think about movies as mapping a cultural space. While every film has a spatial and temporal setting, its fictional universe consists of a set of ideals and assumptions that underlie story and character. Herein lies the film's soul: the depth, the substance, the crux of movie meaning. Charting this value system gives us a compass of sorts, or reference points that help us find our bearings in the world of the film.

Approaching movies in this way serves three purposes. First, it draws attention to a film's constructed character: moviemakers as imaginative mapmakers. A movie is a symbolic re-presentation of reality that integrates filmic techniques and concepts to dramatize a view of life. A second aim follows: to blend the outward audiovisual world of the film—characters, setting, actions, and dialogue—with the film's *cultural landscape* (another key concept) that consists of widely accepted ideals, beliefs, values, attitudes, and assumptions. Movies, as you'll see, communicate in a roundabout way—not by *telling* but by *showing*. Viewers discover cultural meanings that find expression in characterizations and story lines, in symbols, images, patterns of cinematography, design, editing, and so forth.

Finally, using this approach highlights the significant role that cinema plays as a cultural conversation partner. Movies can both affirm dominant beliefs and allow us to explore unfamiliar territory. Experience, however, teaches that some maps are better than others, and so are some movies in their way of envisioning the world and navigating the complexities of life. Still, by offering a viewpoint, a film sets up a possibility that we can accept or criticize, or perhaps affirm some aspects and question others. Film viewing, to put it another way, lends itself to thinking about the stuff of life.