

# What I Learned at the Movies

*By Adrian Zytkoskee*

Photo: © 2002 Crest Theatre,  
Sacramento, Calif.

**S**ome people collect sermons. They have a whole library of taped sermons by a favorite preacher. They are moved and inspired as they listen to these sermons—sometimes over and over. They share them with friends and mutually rejoice in the blessing they have received.

I collect movies. Scores of DVDs. Some are laser discs from an earlier technology. A few are on VHS format. I seldom rent movies because if the movie in question is good I will want to see it many times, and if it is not good I will try very hard, with the help of some trusted movie critics, not to see it even once.

My friends all know that I collect movies. They also know that I take good movies seriously and that I enjoy it greatly when family and friends also appreciate these movies.

Why am I telling you this? Am I comparing movies to sermons? I see that I have asked two questions, but the answers are fairly simple. I am telling you about this hobby of mine, which has become an avocation in my retirement, because I have learned so much and I want to share what I have learned with you. I am comparing movies to sermons because, although I have learned much and received many blessings from sermons, I have learned more and received greater blessings from movies.

I will try to make my case but, as I do so, always remember that support for what I am about to say is experiential, not axiomatic.

## Aren't Movies Dangerous?

The most traditional among us will worry that I am standing "on Satan's ground." Others will caution about the dangers of shoveling out a room

full of manure to find the hidden pony. (Interestingly, Ronald Reagan used this graphic anecdote to illustrate optimism.) Finally, and on a bit more sophisticated level, some will caution me about the dangers of buying into and supporting a corrupt culture in which movies are at the center. I take these concerns seriously and, in an effort to engage the argument, I will list a number of more specific reasons why I think movies can be dangerous.

1. They can be a waste of time.
2. When you support movies by renting or purchasing them and/or buying tickets to theaters, you may be supporting people or endeavors you don't believe in.
3. Movies can tell you lies.
4. Movies may feed cynicism.
5. The more sophisticated moviegoer may be tempted to scorn those whose tastes are simpler and more shallow.
6. Some movies may be of inferior quality.
7. Movies can give a distorted and negative picture of God.
8. Sometimes you are ashamed after watching a movie and happy that no one else watched it with you.

Review the list carefully. Then ask yourself this question: Does each item on this list also describe a danger you might encounter at church?

I would like to leave it there, but if this article is to start on an honest basis I must confess another danger for me in movies. My profound respect for good movies does bring out, from time to time, my curmudgeonly side. Some of my friends call it my Andy Rooney phase.

For example, while watching *Terms of Endearment* in a theater, I became so frustrated with the group behind me, whose members were chatting constantly and laughing at all the wrong places, that I could take no more. I stood up, turned around, and said to the startled miscreants, "Why don't you go to a movie you can understand?"

When watching a movie at home with a group of friends, one of whom is distracting the rest with talk, I have also been known to put the movie on pause until the talker realizes that all attention is on him or her and that until he/she stops talking the movie will not resume.

The final example of my unpleasant behavior comes when a TV watcher is asked whether he or she has seen a particular movie, and responds, "I think I saw parts of it." I sometimes say, "Well, I wouldn't know what that

feels like because I have never had the experience of seeing part of a movie, at least not a good one."

## Love Affair with Movies

I was raised a Seventh-day Adventist. The Church of my youth believed that going to movies was wrong. Many members still condemn moviegoing, but since the advent of television the argument is not as clear as it once was. Still, I can remember being taken as a very small boy to see newsreels, which were considered okay.

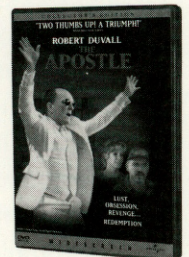
How excited I was as I watched my dad buy admission tickets while I stood to one side finishing my orange sherbet cone, the closest thing we had to ice cream during those wartime days. Then we would go into the cool, dark theater, stumbling to find seats during the continuously running film, and settle in to the portentous voice of the newsreel commentator, who described events in the European and Pacific theaters.

Hearing the word *theater*, I visualized events depicted in it as somehow taking place on a stage. Undoubtedly, the highlight of those early moviegoing days was the time we saw a depiction of the bloody battle for the Pacific island of Tarawa. There, standing in a line of battle-weary Marines, was my maternal uncle, taking his helmet off and showing the hole where a bullet had struck.

Subsequently, my father became an Adventist minister, and, more specifically, the superintendent of schools and youth leader for an Adventist conference in the Midwest. Part of his job was to preview 16mm films for showing in church schools.

One film he brought home was a dramatized version of the persecution of Quakers in seventeenth-century London. As I saw rocks flying through windows and families cowering in fear, I was certain that I watched a realistic depiction of the persecution about to come upon me and my family, since certainly we lived in the time of the end.

At that time, I attended a church school/junior academy, which, in today's parlance, would be called "an inner city school." It was a surprisingly unsheltered environment. I remember hard-core pornography being passed around on the school yard. We smaller boys admired one of the tenth graders because the story of his brother, who was not involved in law enforcement, had been featured on a radio program called *Gangbusters*.





"South Park" creator Matt Stone talks about growing up in Littleton, Colorado, and the effect it had on him, in *Bowling for Columbine*.



Skipping school, hanging out at Taco Bell, talking to Mike about violence, health care, and world politics, in *Bowling for Columbine*.

I also recall a sixth grader who sought and got attention by exposing himself on the playground to members of both sexes.

I tell these things because of a startling irony: None of my fellow students went to movies. Apparently, this was a great sin equaled only by that of eating pork. (Fortunately or unfortunately, as the case may be, my understanding of what constituted pork was cloudy and I enthusiastically ate wieners and bologna with my maternal relatives, never thinking for a moment that I was eating pork.)

Not until I was fourteen and about to become a junior in an Adventist secondary school was my percolating affair with movies consummated. The occasion was a triple feature, no less, and one of the features starred Roy Rogers and Dale Evans. This was dangerous ground.

I did not become a moviegoer in earnest until my freshman year in college. Being a relatively unrestricted "village" student, I went to three or four movies each week. Midway through my college courses, I met and married my wife, who has been with me almost fifty years. Moviegoing then became more enjoyable because I had a dependable companion and, after the movie, could discuss with her what we had seen at a local drive-in, which featured burgers, fries, and shakes at two meals for a dollar.

But this affair with the movies could not last. After all, I had decided to enter the "work," that is, church employ. One day, I came home to the little converted garage in which my wife, new baby daughter, and I lived and announced that I was turning over a new leaf, which excluded moviegoing. My wife cooperated, so I began a monastic period in terms of movie attendance. This enforced abstinence lasted for more than twenty years.

However, as with some religious celibates today, I was not completely faithful to my vows. Without

telling anyone, I went to such scandalous films as *Fiddler on the Roof*, *Mary Poppins*, *China Syndrome*, *All the President's Men*, and *The French Connection*. But I avoided movies in theaters until discovering that theaters with huge wraparound screens called Cinerama were considered safe, probably because they showed mostly travelogues at first. I went openly to a few of these theaters, usually accompanied by fellow teachers or ministers.

Meanwhile, my children were growing up and surreptitiously attending movies. My wife knew because she saw the ticket stubs. (They told us they had gone bowling, an irony because bowling had been forbidden when we were growing up.) We tried hard to limit their moviegoing, but television undermined our best arguments.

One of the common arguments against moviegoing at that time was the supposedly poor environment of theaters. This was a weak argument, at best, because movie theaters had no environment other than being a better place to see films than on TV or in an auditorium. Critics produced quotations about guardian angels being left at the door of theaters, refusing to accompany their charges into such wicked places. But this convinced almost no one and gave rise to a slightly sacrilegious joke that the entrance to a movie theater was the safest place to be because of all the angels congregated there.

I finally decided to break my vows and attend a good movie with the whole family, some of whom were already adults and married. I knew my wife would be happy to make this change, but would be worried about what others, including our children, thought. Soon after, a copy of *Time* magazine arrived at our home, and featured in it was the soon-to-be-released film *Kramer vs. Kramer*. Our family, along with some close friends, went to the movie, laughed and



Arwen (Liv Ullmann) assures Aragorn (Viggo Mortensen) of his destiny as leader of men, in the *The Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers*.



Frodo (Elijah Wood) learns that there may be another way into Mordor, in *The Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers*.

wept, and felt remarkably blessed.

And so I come to the point of my story: to share things I have learned at the movies—mostly during the last twenty-five years

### What I Have Learned at the Movies

Something I have learned to my disappointment is that many Adventists are not very discriminating movie watchers. I can think of at least two reasons. One, currently not as prevalent as it once was, is expressed by the English proverb, “In for a penny, in for a pound.” Or, to provide a scriptural foundation, consider the text that maintains we have broken all commandments if we have broken one. From another perspective, if you picnic with the devil, why worry about which table you choose?

The other reason is similar: the apocalyptic idea that the world is corrupt and evil, and that it will soon be destroyed. What possible good could come out of it? Both of these reasons tend to depict discrimination between good and bad movies as a waste of time.

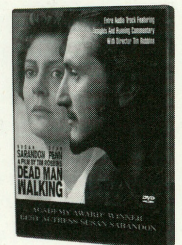
In contrast, I will discuss positive lessons, insights, epiphanies, and so forth that I have learned from watching good movies and taking them seriously. This discussion reflects my discovery that there are good movies and bad movies, which has nothing to do with the official rating system and is not purely subjective. Although tastes may differ, with some people liking some movie genres that I do not, there are still rational, objective criteria for evaluation.

These criteria may be stated in many ways. Here

are mine, organized into categories. These criteria are not designed to be used as one watches a movie, especially the first time.

Rather they should be used afterward. I like to use a one-to-ten scale, considering a movie good if it ranks high on at least two or more criteria and bad if unusually low on two or more.

1. Truth: A truthful movie says something about humans or the human condition that we instinctively know to be true. Fiction and fact are irrelevant here.
2. Honesty: This differs from truth because it deals with internal consistency. A movie should be true to its own premises, exhibit careful attention to detail, and demonstrate internal plausibility.
3. Respect: Moviemakers should respect characters in their films even though those characters might be flawed. A movie should not be contemptuous of its protagonists.
4. Beauty: A good movie is cinematically beautiful. Even more important, in my judgment, it has good writing.
5. Engaging: I don't want to attend a movie that has me looking at my watch every few moments. Some movies engage through suspense, for example, *Jagged Edge*. Others fascinate through a clash of cultures, for instance, *Witness*. Some hold viewers spellbound through a “there but for the grace of God go I” feeling, as in *A Simple Plan*, whereas others captivate through philosophical challenge, for example, *Fanny and Alexander*.





(Ian McKellen) Gandalf returns from his battle with the Balrog as Gandalf the White in *The Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers*.

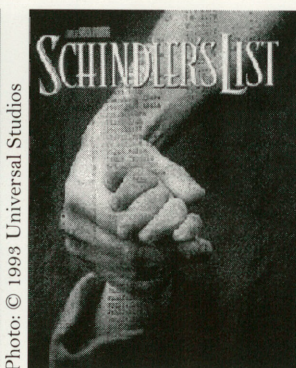


Photo: © 1993 Universal Studios

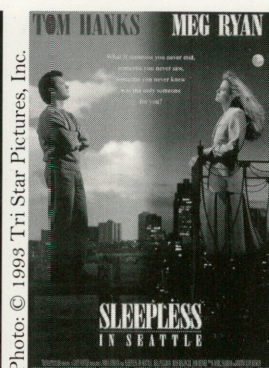


Photo: © 1993 Tri Star Pictures, Inc.

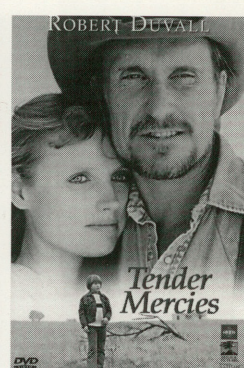


Photo: © Universal Studios

One of my all-time favorites, *African Queen*, taught me that I could choose to see the glass half-empty or half-full. The dark view is to see Katherine Hepburn's character as losing her faith while becoming secular and involved with a questionable character named Charlie, played by Humphrey Bogart. The brighter view is to see her becoming a better and nicer person, and to understand that her influence and love helped Charlie shed his misanthropic, self-centered ways.

*Babette's Feast* helped me fully understand for the first time why Mary Magdalene was commended by Jesus for her extravagant gift, whereas the apparently more deserving Martha received no special commendation.

Spalding Gray, in the fascinating monologue film *Swimming to Cambodia*, graphically posits a cloud of evil that encircles the earth and every so often touches down in places such as Hitler's Germany or the Cambodia of Pol Pot. Three unquestionably great movies that help us see the definition of that terrible cloud while at the same time celebrating the triumphant individual human spirit are *Schindler's List*, *Sophie's Choice*, and *The Killing Fields*.

Christ commends us to love our neighbors as we love ourselves. Doing this takes imagination and the ability to see the world through other people's eyes, particularly the eyes of those who have experienced bigotry and condemnation. *Philadelphia* is a moving example of many such films. On a similar theme, but triumphantly celebrating the unity that can come from diversity, is *Remember the Titans*.

Conventional wisdom assumes that Hollywood is opposed to family values and, consequently, to families themselves. Two of the most entertaining films I have

seen that depict and honor families that are flawed in differing ways but that still represent honor, duty, faithfulness, and love are *Moonstruck* and *Liberty Heights*.

One very popular genre of films is called romantic comedy. The solemn among us will find it a challenge to derive any spiritual lesson from such films. But two of my favorites in this genre effectively portray the tenderness and longing that God has placed in our romantic human relationships, and they do so without resorting to on-screen depiction of sexual resolution for these longings. These movies are *Return to Me* and *Sleepless in Seattle*.

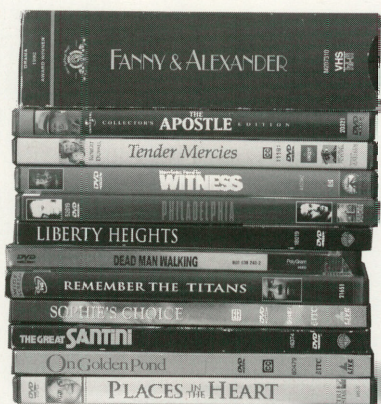
The Bible is a book of many stories. As far as I can tell, God and his ways are better understood through stories than through propositions.

To the surprise of many, not all of the Bible stories are about righteousness and triumph. Some of the Bible characters are significantly flawed. Two films that demonstrate goodness in unlikely vessels are *The Great Santini* and *The Apostle*. It is not a coincidence that one of my favorite actors, Robert Duvall, stars in both.

I learned from *Witness*, a film that is almost perfect, to understand better different cultures and their

approaches to faith. With regard to the word *witness*, many of us have been educated to believe that failure to witness may cause souls to be lost. We call this *evangelism*, which emphasizes personal salvation. However, if we take seriously Jesus' own witness in the Sermon on the Mount we see a very strong ethical and social component.

One current example of a man committed to an ethical message he considers vital is Michael Moore, who has written, directed, and acted in *Bowling for*



*Columbine*, a documentary many believe will be the most watched and significant documentary ever made. Readers for whom this movie resonates can witness for what they believe by taking friends to see this movie. Although they might disagree with Moore's perspective, they must still recognize the movie as a persuasive and artistic presentation. If a credible opposing side exists, let a worthy documentarist come forward and make the movie.

Erik Erikson, the late great developmental psychologist, constructed what became known as the eight stages of life. Each stage involves a conflict that, if satisfactorily resolved, builds toward a successful resolution of the next stage's conflict. The last stage, which is where, to my astonishment, I find myself, involves the conflict of integrity vs. despair.

Two films that help us to look squarely but sympathetically at what it means to grow old with integrity and what it means to be still alive are the popular *On Golden Pond* and *Wasn't That a Time*, a documentary of a folk singing group called the Weavers and their last concert.

I will never forget the surprising and intensely moving communion service at the end of *Places in the Heart*. That scene made the idea of Christ's Kingdom, so misunderstood by his disciples, become real in a small town in Texas suffering through the Great Depression.

I have saved the two best movies for last. A most moving portrayal of simple love, which results in redemption, is found in the film *Tender Mercies*. If you haven't seen this movie get the DVD and watch it. If you think it too slow and somewhat boring, go see the latest James Bond film and enjoy the contrast, but when you tire of the nonstop action return to *Tender Mercies*.

Watch and listen as Mac Sledge, a recovering alcoholic country singer played by Robert Duvall in an Oscar-winning performance makes one of the most poignant movie speeches ever made. While distractedly hoeing in his garden, he speaks of his daughter's death in an automobile accident caused by her drunken husband. "I don't trust happiness," Mac concludes, "I never have and I never will." However, redemption, followed by happiness he has never known, does come to Sledge.

A number of Christian songs depict Jesus as a good friend. Some even suggest that he is our only true friend. I don't know exactly what it means to describe our relationship with the Divine as friendship. But I do know that the only way I can understand, worship, feel the presence of, or experience the Divine in any way is through another human being.

Of all films ever made, *Dead Man Walking* most effectively portrays God's love and unconditional

# Looking for a Good Movie?

## Christian Movie Reviews on the Web

By Lemuel Bach

Many Christians enjoy watching movies, but they worry about which ones are "good" in several senses of the word. The following Web sites may be one way for readers to find the best movies.

### ChristianityToday.com

I found ChristianityToday.com's movie reviews fiendishly difficult to locate. Usually, if I want to read about a movie online I go to MSN.com, click on "entertainment," and then go to "movies" to be quickly linked to pictures and short reviews. But on *Christianity Today's* homepage, the category "entertainment" conspicuously lacks the subcategory "movies."

Using ChristianityToday.com's search engine, the visitor can type in either a movie title or "film forum" and find reviews. Then they can read the most current ones, all of which are written by Jeffrey Overstreet.

Overstreet's reviews are surprisingly well-balanced, probably because he quotes a wide variety of sources, both secular and religious, in favor of and against whatever film he reviews. These sources vary from *Rolling Stone* to *Focus on the Family*.

Overstreet adds his own opinion, which is connected both to his Christian beliefs and to his knowledge of good films. He even recommends age groups appropriate for films under review.

### HollywoodJesus.com

I disliked this page at first, and loudly expressed that opinion to others.

This site tries to cater to a wide audience. The home page says, "Everyone welcome! Hindus, Jews, Christians, Wiccans, Muslims, New Agers, Atheists, Agnostics, Gay, Straight. Come in. Enjoy. Post your views!"

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