

Cinematography—Why Bother? *A list or two to consider* |

BY ZDRAVKO PLANTAK

Shame, guilt, and an Adventist vision of potential eternal damnation were the feelings I experienced the first time I stepped into a movie theater in my hometown of Varazdin, Croatia. I was a teenager who had sneaked out from my Adventist boarding academy with a few friends to go see a movie. The feelings of sin were only softened by the movie we watched: *Ben Hur*. If we felt guilty and self-conscious before and during the film's performance, sheer fear and guilt for our criminal like behavior were elevated to the highest level as we left the theater.

There we saw our preceptor waiting on the other side of the street with his "evil eye" and a pad and pencil in his hands, writing down the names of those bad Adventist youth who dared to rebel and go to the *vjece bezboznicko* (the assembly of the godless) to mix with the sinners. We knew we would have to bear the consequences. Never mind that it was a film with Christian connotations showing in the midst of the atheist state of communist Yugoslavia. We all received the "last warning before the expulsion," a strange punishment for seeing Judah Ben Hur struggle for his kindness, get condemned to the galleys, and come back redeemed. The irony of life!

So, I naturally hated that part of Adventism, which I envisioned as being transliterated from its original American setting. Little did I know that, like many other things in our faith, we shared a suspicion of cinema with a part of the larger Christian culture. When I started studying film in the context of theology, it was liberating (and disturbing

at the same time) to see this and many other similarities in religious culture that we share with other Christian brothers and sisters. From the earliest days of cinematography, Christians and filmmakers have had periods of mutual involvement and cooperation. In the first decade of filmmaking, from 1895 to 1905, some Christians, far from being in conflict with the industry, creatively used and even shaped the creation of cinematography.

Many of the early movies had religious themes. For instance, dramatized passion plays "took on a cinematic lease of life following the advent of motion pictures" at the end of the nineteenth century.¹ One Christian publishing house in Paris financed one of the first films that dealt with the life of Jesus. In New York City, the first American attempt to record a life of Christ was filmed on the roof terrace of the Grand Central Palace Hotel. Another film, *The Mystery of the Passion Play of Oberammergau* (1898), lasted nineteen minutes. "One itinerant evangelist even purchased [it] and traveled the country using it at revival meetings."²

This became a pattern, and a number of other preachers used films in evangelistic tent meetings combining preaching with showing films. For example, Herbert Booth, son of Salvation Army founder, William Booth, used specially recorded scenes of Christ's life and death as a part of his multimedia production titled *Soldiers of the Cross*, which shared the gospel message at the beginning of the twentieth century in Australia.

Many movies, although not all, continued to exhibit religious life with dignity and reverence, and, as a result, churches were even

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used as movie theaters. But after these first two decades of the "seventh art," things changed. Excesses in sex and violence surfaced, as did the cult of the stars, exotic "dream palaces" to house screenings, and lack of regulations and censorship in production.

In 1933, the Vatican's Apostolic Delegate in the United States called for the "purification of the cinema, which has become the deadly menace to morals." The censorship process that started in those days has continued and somewhat developed into the present rating system. However, the relationship between Christians and cinematography has stayed ambiguous and mixed.

My study also led me to appreciate in particular several theologians who have contributed significantly to the theology-film conversation, namely Paul Tillich and H. Richard Niebuhr, and three contemporary theologians who have summed up that relationship best in the last few years: John May, Rob Johnston, and Jolyon Mitchell.

Paul Tillich was known as the "theologian of culture"—he even invented the term. As a chaplain in World War II, he not only prayed with the dying and for the dead, but he also dug the graves and buried the dead. He experienced the despair and alienation that any war brings to its participants.

During those years in the trenches, Tillich discovered that art could restore his faith. Thumbing through the reproductions of great paintings in art books that he managed to buy at field bookstores under "candle and lantern light to distract his mind during lulls in the bombardments on the front," he learned to appreciate what art can do to lift the spirit and bring him closer to the transcendent divine.³

After the war, he went to the Berlin Museum and was so impressed by Sandro Botticelli's *Madona with Singing Angels*, a painting that had already comforted him earlier on the front, that he wrote years later about this epiphany at the museum in an essay "One Moment of Beauty"

Gazing up at it, I felt a state approaching ecstasy. In the beauty of the painting there was Beauty itself. It shone through the colors of the paint as the light of day shines through the stained glass windows of a medieval church.

As I stood there, bathed in the beauty its

painter had envisioned so long ago, something of the divine source of all things came through to me. I turned away shaken.

That moment has affected my whole life, given me the keys for the interpretation of human existence, brought vital joy and spiritual truth. I compare it with what is usually called revelation in the language of religion.⁴

As Clive Marsh has rightly suggested, Tillich "sought to 'read' Western culture in order to identify its key concerns, in relation to which he could then present Christian responses appropriate for the present. His was a 'theology of correlation,'" writes Marsh, "which brought together contemporary cultural concerns and Christian theology so that Christian theology could be allowed to address actual questions."⁵

Such a method of correlations was naturally suited to a dialogical place of arts. Therefore, Tillich built into his theological process reflections upon the arts.⁶ Tillich enabled other Christian thinkers to look carefully at the other expressions of art and culture, such as films, for theological dialogue and insight or transcendent experience and encounter with the Ultimate Being.

H. Richard Niebuhr also significantly influenced the twentieth-century theology of culture in his seminal book *Christ and Culture*.⁷ Niebuhr offered five different ways that describe how Christ, and by proxy a Christian, can relate to culture.⁸ Briefly, due to the familiarity of his concepts, we see Christ in opposition to culture (Christ against Culture), in fundamental agreement with the culture (Christ of Culture) and in one of three possible dialogical or dialectical relationships with the culture (Christ above Culture, Christ and Culture in Paradox, and Christ the Transformer of Culture).

These were useful categories in the mid-twentieth century and they still bear significance to the twenty-first century study on film and faith. The following three theologians have used Tillich's passion for theology of culture and Niebuhr's interest in the relationship between the two in adopting his categories and modifying them to fit the relationship between theology and film for the twenty-first century. Let me briefly outline these and then use one simple format to look

for clues where we might now want to position ourselves and why.

John May suggests that there is a visible shift or progression in the theological consideration of film. It begins with discrimination and a focus on morality and moral discernment. Then it moves to critiquing the visibility of how religious figures or themes are represented. Next it attempts dialogue—a theological conversation with particular films. In the fourth level of critique, it examines the humanism of the film and looks at how it can promote human progress and flourishing. At the highest level, there is consideration of aesthetics, which ultimately explores how the transcendent may be manifested at the cinema.⁹

1. Discrimination
2. Visibility
3. Dialogue
4. Humanism
5. Aesthetics

Robert Johnston has a somewhat similar list regarding the theological response to film:

1. Avoidance
2. Caution
3. Dialogue
4. Appropriation
5. Divine Encounter

Even though these approaches developed chronologically over the last three-quarters of the twentieth century, Johnston suggests that they are still applied horizontally by different churches and theologians today. The question is, To which do we as a community now belong? We, too, have moved over time from the avoidance stance of my academy days. Where should we be now?

Jolyon Mitchell's is the most simplified proposal regarding the theological responses to cinematography. Mitchell classified this relationship between faith and film into only three groups: corruption, exploration, and illumination. Films are either shunned as corruption, embraced as exploration, or allowed to make a contribution to our overall thinking about God and God's world as illumination.¹⁰

Perhaps exploration describes where our community now finds itself. Although film can, on one hand, be perceived as negative, especially as interpreted in terms of "surface" layer ethics or "thin" ethics, it also has a potential to "explore profound theological questions and moral dilemmas," or what I would term "thick" in-depth moral ideas. The vast majority of contemporary films do not corrupt, but rather "provoke the world to ask new questions." Through storytelling, films often explore with great visual and emotional effect the dimensions, historical realities, or present imaginative possibilities that push viewers into greater self-examination and motivate them to greater virtues.

Film can be, as Bryan Stone, has rightly suggested, "an important dialogue partner for Christians who are interested in thinking seriously about their faith." He continues: "[T]he cinema is regularly and quite amazingly a source of revelation about ourselves and our world—about the 'signs of the times.' The cinema reveals what we value as human beings," he writes, "our hopes and our fears. It asks our deepest questions, expresses our mightiest rage, and reflects our most basic dreams."¹¹

In this middle approach to film as "exploration," Mitchell is close to Johnston's idea of dialogue, in which theology needs to inform film viewing and, simultaneously, film viewing should inform theology. It is "insufficient and perhaps dishonest," suggests Johnson, "to make a point or illustrate a theological truth" by using film. This process needs to be a genuine dialogue so that "the viewers let the movie work its 'charm' on them, enlighten them, disturb them. Only then can it have a chance to deepen their understanding of reality (and perhaps even reality itself)."¹²

Robert Jewett, for example, calls his approach in *Saint Paul and the Movies* "dialogue in a prophetic mode" in order that the films he chooses for correlation with biblical passages "become a full partner in conversation with Paul the apostle" even though the Pauline word is allowed to stand as *primus inter pares*, the first among equals.¹³

Like Johnson, Jewett does not want films to be audiovisual aids for the already informed, which seems to be a regular feature of some of Adventist worship experiences (and many other Christian contemporary worships), but desires to take a film on its own terms,

allow it to speak in its artistic and ethical integrity, and then become a conversation partner in a dialogical mode.

This dialogue between faith and film, Johnson concludes, can take many different forms. "It can note the explicit theological themes of given films or dialogue with the motifs embedded both in movies and in the Bible," claims Johnson. "It can bring film and biblical text into conversation or it can compare and contrast the Christ of the Gospels with the metaphorical use of a Christ-figure to advance the meaning of a given movie." But, ultimately, the purpose is "to bring film and theology into two-way conversation, letting both sides be full partners in the dialogue."¹⁴

To Mitchell's final category of illumination, Johnston's two final categories give better nuance and point to two distinct aspects of illumination: namely "appropriation" and "divine encounter." He writes: "Movies can tease out of their viewers greater possibilities for being human and present alternative selves not otherwise available. ... [T]he goal in relating theology and film is not, first of all, to render moral judgment, ... but to achieve greater insight."¹⁵

William Jones has reiterated a similar idea in his book, *Sunday Night at the Movies*.

Christians of our generation are becoming increasingly aware that the contemporary arts are pleading the same question the church is committed to holding before society: the question of essential meaning of human experience.

To a student of film and faith, it is becoming more and more obvious that a substantial number of theologians and theological film critics are joining this club that sees in the best of movies an opportunity for wonderment, a sacramental capacity and moments of transcendental encounter with the divine....¹⁶

Movie watchers often exercise transcendental faculties of insight, criticism, and wonderment that come remarkably close to what religion has traditionally termed faith, prophecy, and reverence. Catholic theologian Neil Hurley concludes, "A wedding of the two is overdue, although, happily, the matchmakers are growing in number."¹⁷

This brings me to my main premise, which is perhaps best illustrated with a story from a recent trip that

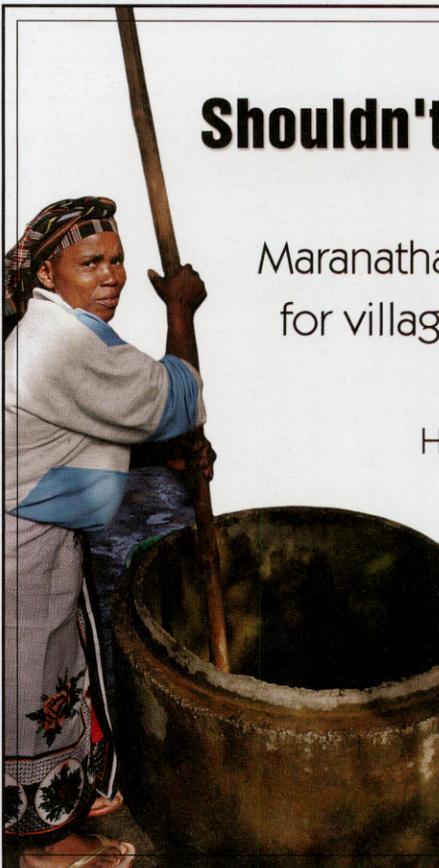
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my family took to Venice. I spotted a sign on a bridge over one of the famous canals that read "More Ethics and Less Aesthetics." Immersed as we were in the high culture and Renaissance art of Italy, I thought it was clever and ironic. But when I thought more about this sign, it began to bug me deeply.

As an ethicist, I think that this is utterly upside down! I believe that the more aesthetics we allow into our lives the more ethically we grow. We need more beauty in the world. There is plenty of ugliness. There is also a deficiency of beautiful life or what Greeks called good (virtuous) life.

Finally, then, here is my list of reasons why we would be foolish not to take seriously the most effective and influential cultural texts of today:

1. Film helps us see life more clearly. It teaches us about ourselves and about human potential as well as human limits. It creates vision—it enables prophetic imagination. Film images are an important source of knowledge; they visually present us with choices as we encounter others choosing rightly or wrongly. As Daniel Frampton describes matters: "Film reveals real-

ity, exactly by [often] showing a distorted mirror of it.... Cinema allows us to re-see reality, expanding our perceptions, and showing us a new reality."¹⁸ In a poetic effect, it thoughtfully "opens (our) eyes to what we forget we can experience every day."¹⁹

2. Film brings to the front issues that we have often attempted to brush under the carpet and explores their implication to our daily living. Often these issues intersect with theological themes of justice, fairness, forgiveness, reconciliation, redemption, love, responsibility, relationships between individuals and in the communities, and many ethical issues of our time.

Films such as *Amistad*, *Schindler's List*, *Life is Beautiful*, *Cry Freedom*, *Amazing Grace*, or *Saving Private Ryan*, and many other mainstream Hollywood films as well as independent or foreign films enable us to aspire to get involved and continue working with God on bettering the world that he desires for his creation.

3. Film is a new way of thinking. In *Filmosophy*, Daniel Frampton argues powerfully and persuasively that we live in an age that must take cinematography

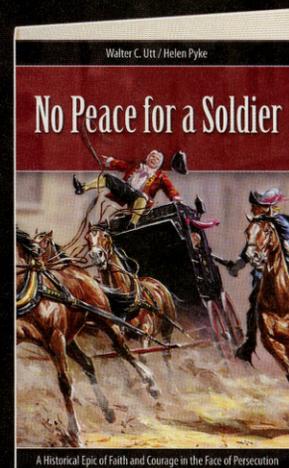
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seriously because film is the future form of thinking not totally dissimilar to a poetic thinking. Through such thinking, we are uniquely able to show how we think with our imagination. "Filmosophy," Frampton says, "is a study of film as thinking.... Film-thinking resembles no one single kind of human thought, but perhaps the functional spine of human thinking—film-thinking seems to be a combination of idea, feeling and emotion."²⁰

Furthermore, as a meditative art form, film-thinking "can show the complexity of things through simple images. Beyond logic, meditative human thought is sensitive not just to the world, but to memory, and the foreseeing the future possibilities."²¹

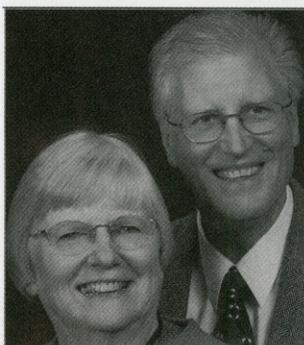
I am indebted to Johnston who helps round out this list of reasons why a Christian should enter into dialogue with film:

4. God's common grace is present throughout human culture.
5. Theology should be concerned with the Spirit's presence and work in the world.
6. God is active within the wider culture and speaks to us through all of life.
7. Imagination as well as word can help us to encounter God.
8. Theology's narrative shape makes it particularly open to interaction with other stories.
9. The nature of constructive theology is a dialogue

between God's story (Bible, Christian tradition, and a particular worshipping community) and our stories (the surrounding culture and life experiences).²²

In his book *Faith and Film*, Bryan Stone states matters well:

Linking Christian faith and theology with the arts is not something entirely new, of course. Christians have enjoyed a rich history of leaning heavily on the arts in order to carry out the tasks of bearing witness to the Christian faith. Just think of the impressive cathedrals of the Middle Ages that attempted to express Christian truth through their stained glass, handsome murals, ornate ceilings, and shadows, even the smell of incense—all of these have served as media for the communication of the gospel. But the role of the aesthetic has become diminished in the face of a rationalistic religion that reduced faith to dogma and truth to propositions. It would be no exaggeration to say that in recent centuries the printed word of theology has predominated over imagination, drama, myth, pictures, and storytelling. And yet few, if any, of our most fundamental Christian convictions can be reduced to words on a printed page. There remains in human beings a deep hunger for images, sound, pictures, music, and myth. Film offers us a creative language—an imaginative language of movement and sound—that can bridge the gap between the rational and the aesthetic, the sacred and the secular,



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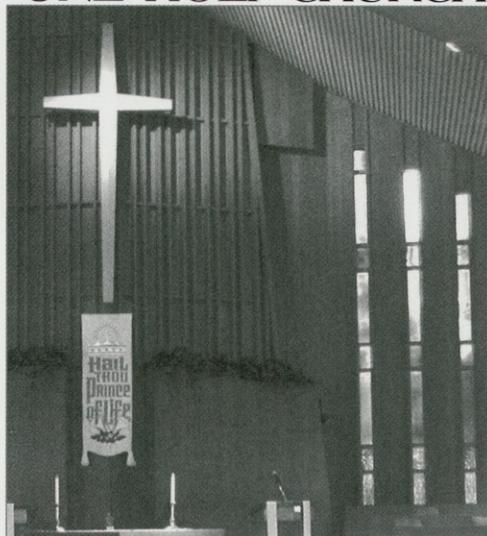
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the church and the world, and thereby throw open fresh new windows on a very old gospel.²³

As you might have guessed, I have found reading on this topic as provocative as watching films. Old books and new have brought profound insights.

Back in 1923, Ricciotto Canudo wrote that he saw a future where "films will reach us with the supreme clarity of ideas and visual emotions, [being] the synthesis of all the arts and the profound impulse underlying them... a lucid and vast expression of our internal life."²⁴

I believe that Canudo was truly prophetic in his vision and, therefore, I suggest that we, as Seventh-day Adventist Christians, should take cinematography seriously.

Notes and References

1. Joylon Mitchell, "Theology and Film," in *The Modern Theologians: An Introduction to Theology Since 1918*, edited by David F. Ford (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell Publishers 2005), 736.

2. Ibid. 737.

3. Kelton Cobb, *The Blackwell Guide to Theology and Popular Culture* (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 2005), 91.

4. Paul Tillich, "One Moment of Beauty," in *On Art and Architecture*, edited by John Dillenberger and Jane Dillenberger (New York: Crossroads, 1987), 235. The essay was written in 1955.

5. Clive Marsh, "Film and Theology of Culture," in *Explorations in Theology and Film*, edited by Clive Marsh and Gaye Ortiz (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 1997), 30.

6. Marsh rightly criticizes Tillich about being too high-brow and only interested in high culture and high art. For an excellent related discussion beyond the scope of this paper, see Cobb, *Blackwell Guide*, 90–100, and Marsh, "Film and Theology," 26–34.

7. H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York: Harper, 1951).

8. For more elaborate discussion, see Jenkins, "Culture," in *A New Dictionary of Christian Theology*, edited by A. Richardson and J. Bowden (London: SCM, 1983), 137–141.

9. John R. May, "Religion and Film: Recent Contributions to the Continuing Dialogue," *Critical Review of Books in Religion* 9 (1996):105–21. See a brief summary of May's five categories in Mitchell, "Theology and Film," 738.

10. Mitchell, "Theology and Film," 739. As Mitchell put it: "Some critics have shunned the cinema as a medium that can corrupt morally, socially and doctrinally, while others have embraced it as a catalyst for theological exploration, or even as an art form with transcendent potential."

11. Bryan P. Stone, *Faith and Film: Theological Themes at the Cinema* (St. Louis: Chalice, 2000), 4.

12. See further and more elaborate discussion of his method of a dialogue in a prophetic mode in Robert Jewett, *Saint Paul and the Movies: The Apostle's Dialogue with American Culture* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox, 1993), 1–16.

13. Ibid.

14. Robert K. Johnston, *Reel Spirituality: Theology and Film in Dialogue* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Academic, 2000), 53–54.

15. Ibid., 54.

16. G. William Jones, *Sunday Night at the Movies* (Richmond: John Knox, 1967), 40.

17. Neil Hurley, *Theology Through Film* (New York: Harper and Row, 1970), p. x.

18. Ibid., 3.

19. Ibid., 124.

20. Ibid., 6–7.

21. Ibid., 192.

22. Johnston, *Reel Spirituality*, compares each of these in more details on pages 65–86.

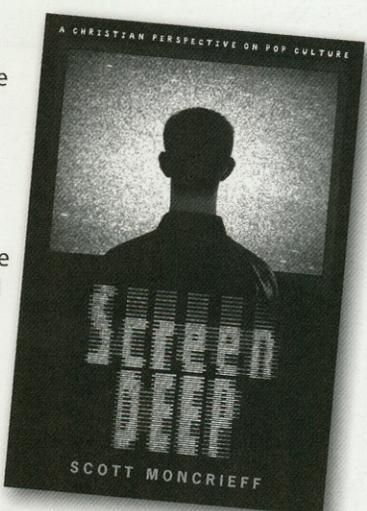
23. Bryan P. Stone, *Faith and Film: Theological themes at the Cinema* (St. Louis: Chalice, 2000), 4–5.

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