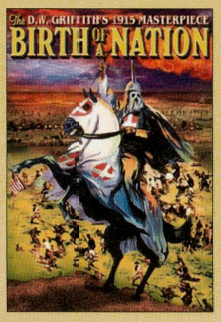
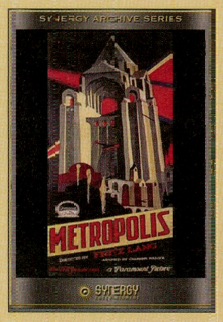
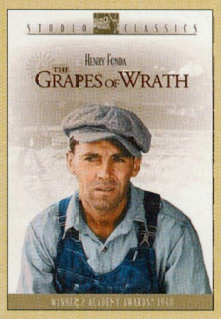
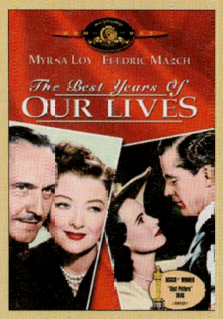
DISCUSSED | think, Christian symbolism, evil, homework, community

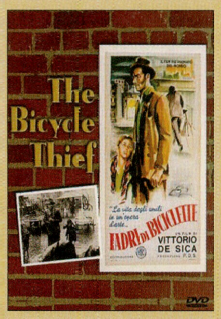
Winona Winkler Wendth's Selections

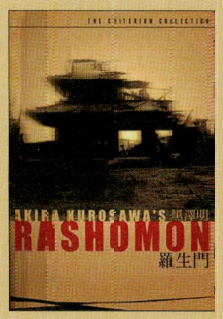


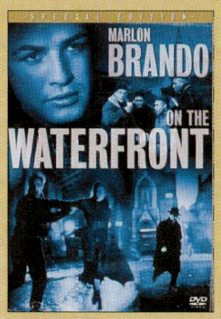


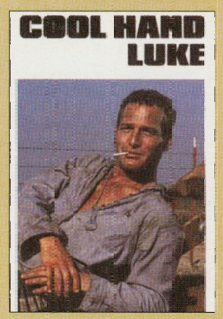


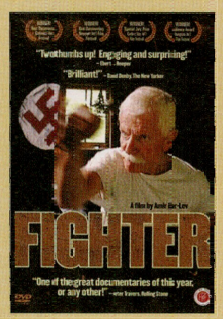












Top Ten Movies *Every Adventist Should See* | BY WINONA WINKLER WENDTH

Cinema is by nature democratic and privileges the Common Man—you will find few films, good or bad, that validate political power, and those that consider people in positions of power focus on their humanness, weaknesses, or fatal flaws. So you will find many statements of courage against authority in this list, although not every one is driven by this theme. In all cases, these films require us to think hard about what we accept as "normal" and just, to look beneath appearances and actions for character and motives.

This list covers the eighty-five years between World War I and the turn of the current century, although you'll find an emphasis on life and times around World War II, an extended crisis from which the United States did not start to recover until the social upheavals of the 1960s. Both of those times were profoundly affective to baby boomers and their parents, the people who shaped the sociology of our church for sixty of those eight-five years.

I chose these films because they present challenges to the way we think—to our received norms over time—and because they investigate and dignify the human struggle. Many of these films use overt or subtle Christian symbolism and imagery to demonstrate the nobility that comes from resisting Evil, the power of peacemaking, and the redemptive qualities of love.

You will not find many of these works on a critical or popular list of "One Hundred Best" films. But these are the ones I believe deserve our attention because we are interested in the nexus of spiritual and human truths—if, in fact, they can be separated.

Together, these films also provide a useful survey of filmmaking techniques employed by some of our best directors. As is the case with other art forms, film has a rich history and its own tradition. As a body of work, it is also highly self-referential—you will recognize words and images that are now not only deeply embedded in our shared culture but also alluded to repeatedly in our current cinema.

You should do your homework: read what others have had to say about the films you watch; be prepared going in. Good collections of

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empathy in this story of nineteenth-century doctors at a low-budget clinic. Directed by Akira Kurosawa.

The Cameraman (1928, United States)
There's a world of interesting silent films, and this Buster Keaton vehicle is one of my favorites, with excellent comedy, a nice romance, and an engaging partnership between a monkey and the hero. Directed by Edward Sedgwick. ■

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WENDTH ON FILM

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essays about film are Robert Ebert's *Alone in the Dark*, and his *Book of Film*; Jim Shepard's *Writers at the Movies*; Manny Farber's *Negative Space*; and Philip Lopate's *Totally Tenderly, Tragically*. My "go-to" books are James Monaco's *How to Read a Film* and Leo Baudry's *Film Theory and Criticism*.

You should watch a film on as large a screen as possible; you will miss the subtleties of cinematic details if you don't. Cinematographers worked hard to deliver them, so pay attention. Watch a film in the company of as many other people as possible; be prepared to talk to each other on the way out. Unlike books, films are made to be experienced communally, and we do their creative artists a disfavor by not respecting this.

Which brings us back to the democratic nature of this medium: movies make community, if only for a couple hours. But for those two hours, we know that the person next to us—neighbor or stranger—is witness to what we see, even though she or he may leave our temporary company with a slightly different "take" on what we shared. But that's true outside the screening room, as well.

The Birth of a Nation (1915, United States)
At a low point in the normative racism and genderism of the United States, this film was acclaimed by thousands of people, including President Woodrow Wilson, many of whom paid the equivalent of forty dollars or more per ticket to see it. *Birth of a Nation* celebrates the work of the Ku Klux Klan. That said, director D. W. Griffith was a great innovator and laid the groundwork for classic U.S. films by developing the sequential chase scene and the close-up. The fact that this film met with broad-based affirmation is a sobering insight into U.S. sensibilities at a time when Ellen White was still alive. Directed by D. W. Griffith.

Metropolis (1927, Germany)
This silent film challenges the notion that labor is by nature dignified; it is an indictment of economic and political processes that appeal to a false understanding of religion in order to develop and maintain power. This is a love story, a fanciful creation of a future society from the perspective of the 1920s, and a clever inversion of the Golem legend. It also exemplifies the technical advantages European filmmaking had over picture making in the United States. One advantage of international silent films is that we can focus on the picture without unusual distraction from subtitles. Directed by Fritz Lang.

Grapes of Wrath (1941, United States)
This 1941 translation of Steinbeck's novel is a masterfully directed and stunningly beautiful cinematic work filmed by Gregg Toland. Henry Fonda's delivery of the words, "Wherever there's a fight so hungry people can eat, I'll be there," is still breathtaking. The film is replete with quotable, deeply religious language as it addresses the potential loss of the human spirit: " I wouldn't pray just for a old man that's dead, 'cause he's all right. If I was to pray, I'd pray for folks that's alive and don't know which way to turn." Directed by John Ford.

The Best Years of Our Lives (1946, United States)
This 1946 film about life in America in the psycho-sociological wake of World War II is one of director William Wyler's best pieces. This, too, owes much of its success to cinematographer Gregg Toland, whose use of deep focus to pull us into the circumstances of the characters—men who return home trying to make sense of their lives and their relationships. Their roles of authority in the army invert in society at home, veterans return without limbs or without adequate ways to earn a living, or without the hope of the "normal" domestic life they had counted on. The temporary disorder in American society affected all aspects of life during the following decade, and the roots of this are beautifully presented in this work. The felt need for Americans to hunker down and suppress this conflict and disappointment and to establish a compensatorily tight order is why, one generation later, we all went to see *Easy Rider* and *Cool Hand Luke*. This is a long film, but you'll never notice; the performances are exemplary.

The Bicycle Thief (1949, Italy)
This 1949 neo-realist film explores the malleability of the

social contract in situations in extremis, specifically, Italy in the aftermath of World War II. Long takes—long scenes filmed by a stable camera that show action from the actors, rather than from the film editors and cutters—create and support the tension we feel as the main character's economic life becomes more and more desperate. Having lost his own bicycle, a father tries to support his family and finally steals another in order to earn a living. This portrayal of all large social systems from the Italian bureaucracy to the Catholic Church is brave. *The Bicycle Thief* regularly appears on critics' "Ten Best" lists and should be screened in ethics classes on both the secondary and college level. Directed by Vittorio DeSica.

Rashômon (1950, Japan)
This history-making masterpiece awakened Americans to the quiet and elegant beauty of Japanese films; this is also the film that awakened the Japanese to their role in international filmmaking. *Rashômon* is based on a story by Ryunosuke Akutagawa, one of Japan's best-known writers. Life is a multivocal narrative, and no unchallengeable history is possible, Akutagawa says through six different tellings of a single event. Today, psychologists refer to "The *Rashômon* Effect," the circumstance in which witnesses to a single happening have irresolvably different stories. This film does hold out the belief that goodness, although possibly not always recognizable, is still possible and still prevails. Directed by Akira Kurosawa.

On the Waterfront (1953, United States)
This film about life among dockworkers puts family loyalty and right-doing in contest. Marlon Brando finally does what's right and discovers that his personal sacrifice empowers his fellow workers, who finally stand up to the power and authority of corrupt union leaders. Brando "could have been a contender," but had given up his hopes to please his corrupt gambler brother. Christian imagery underlies this film and shows redemption though personal risk and courageous selflessness, with a little help from the church. Based on a series of articles in the *New York Sun*, *On the Waterfront* compounds history, religion, love, spirituality, family ethics, politics, and economics. Leonard Bernstein's soundtrack is terrific. Directed by Elia Kazan.

Cool Hand Luke (1967, United States)
"Callin' it your job don't make it right, Boss." Stuart Rosenberg's 1967 film presents that decade's call to question absolute authority with an imaginative use of the Christian narrative and a remarkable performance by Paul Newman as a man who submits to punishment with quiet dignity, yet prevails morally. A tough film, hard to watch, this puts our habitual ideas of goodness and justice under pressure. Director Stuart Rosenberg gives us one of the most powerful mother-son relationships on screen, contained in two scenes, which together take only a few moments. The film does not fail to communicate.

Babette's Feast (1988, Denmark)
"When we ask for bread, God will not give us stone." Set in a nineteenth-century religious community, this film suggests that shared participation in what is richly beautiful can build community, hope, faith, and trust. Based on a short story by Karen Blixen, the film transforms the original text beautifully and smartly—"It's better than the book." Babette comes unannounced to right a chilly and bitter community that has long since forgotten what genuine joy can be, and the film considers the relationship between the numinous and the human, the nature of community, the divided self, the discovery of meaning, the joys or sorrows that come from self-sacrifice, and the downward psychological spiral of delayed gratification. An all-time wonderful "food movie," this film, too, is supported by Christian symbolism of redemption. "Mercy imposes no conditions." Directed by Gabriel Axel.

Fighter (2000, United States)
Jan Weiner and writer-director Arnost Lustig are Czech holocaust prison camp escapees who return to their native county to revisit and recollect and make sense of their experiences. This is a study in the function and value of memory—if no one remembers who you are or what you did, how are your experiences able to help you locate truth or find meaning? The film asks us to consider at what point one puts ethics aside in order to survive, and what constitutes heroism. This is a "buddy" movie of the most intricate and complex sort—these men disagree about almost everything—and it even posits that the ways in which we respond to crisis after the fact may be a matter of physiology. Directed by Bar-Lev.

Winona Winkler Wendth is a freelance writer who is studying creative nonfiction in Bennington College's MFA program. She has studied, taught, and lectured on film on various campuses.