Christians and Film: the Struggle for Consistency

By Dr. Peter Fraser

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Introduction

The subject of this little book is our relationship as Christians to one of the most powerful cultural influences in America, the cinema. Film is a detail in the arena of our recreations, one of the those in which a combination of ignorance and lack of training has, I would argue, insulated us in many ways from the tender influences of God’s Spirit. A split that began in colleges and universities between Christianity and “learned subjects” has left most of us with no idea what a Christian approach to a subject like film might be, and, perhaps, very little interest in finding out.

We are part of a culture that falls in love with our entertainments first and then thinks about them later. If we like a particular film, we find a justification for our affection. Consequently, like teenagers, we bond to half-formed ideas and second-rate art and ignore in many cases the “good, true, and beautiful.” To understand through a word picture, think of some poor father trying to convince his son to get to know some genuinely wonderful young girl, while the son resists, his heart set on an unattainable beauty queen. The beauty queen has a better complexion and rounder calves and a cleverer way of expression—qualities that the inexperienced son holds without doubt as ingredients for a happy marriage and family life. The father, knowing better from hard experience, groans in his spirit that his son has turned off his mind to satisfy his deluded heart. We American Christians are, of course, like the son—led by cultural convention and undeveloped taste and judgment to embrace the idols of the crowd. We, by and large, watch the same movies, read stories of the stars in the same popular rags, await the same promotions, applaud the same awards. Like the Father he is, God must groan, at the situation.

I had a student one semester who saw the film Titanic seven times. This was a fine Christian girl by all estimations. So I wondered, what is the attraction of the film for a girl like this? The special effects are impressive. The historical subject has some continuing appeal—there is indeed here an age-old moral lesson in the story of human pride leading to calamity. The visuals are in some scenes beautiful. But I soon ran out of good explanations and started thinking of possible bad ones. (Seven viewings after all.) She wants that self-confidence and brashness that throws the most precious jewel in the world into the sea. She finds Leonardo DiCaprio attractive. She wants an artist to sketch her portrait in the nude... Actually, the only reason why any person, let alone a young Christian girl, would see a film like Titanic seven times is that the world of that film is the world which that person really wants to be a part; the problem, of course, for a follower of Jesus—the world of that film is only marginally, peripherally, a Christian world.

By this, I am not referring to the film’s rating or its quotient of violent and sexual content, as this book will go on to show. I am referring to its messages, both explicit and implicit. But I don’t want to pick on Titanic, for there are far worse popular films.

The problem is less “the films out there” than it is our collective lack of judgment produced by a lack of training. We don’t know how to measure and evaluate film from a Christian point of view. We hardly know what a Christian point of view is toward art, unless we think of counting swear words and body parts, or start looking for the presence of Christian characters.

Paul tells us to do all things to God’s glory—eating, drinking, playing basketball. Unsure of
how to go about doing that, we unwrap the text through little rules like I pray before each meal or I won’t drink beer or smoke cigarettes (cigars being okay). When it comes to movies, we draw little lines in the sand—I won’t ever see Last Tango in Paris because it’s about bad people having illicit sex, but it’s acceptable to see Titanic seven times because its about nice people having illicit sex. The problem in America, I think, can be blamed in part on how we have been trained to think about “religious issues.”

Recently I heard a lecture in which the speaker argued that the loss of faith in so many once-Christian colleges and universities--think Stanford, Harvard or Duke--can be traced to the evolving belief of the last few centuries that religion should be taught separately from academic subjects like science and math and the arts. In plain terms, academic policy in American schools of higher learning has come to determine that in one room we learn about atomic particles or integers, while in another we learn about God.

George Marsden has documented the history of this schism between Christianity and the subjects we study in school, opening his argument in The Outrageous Idea of Christian Scholarship with the observation that “contemporary university culture is hollow at its core.” By this Marsden condemns the situation we have, even in colleges and universities with church affiliations, whereby it is thought an intrusion to discuss Christianity as an intellectual or philosophical worldview bearing on whatever else we learn or do. Marsden is, of course, correct in this—without Christ as the center of discussion, intellectual pursuits do prove hollow.

As Christians we must confess that God declares himself through electrons and prime numbers. Read Psalm 19, “The heavens declare the glory of God.” “Day after day pours forth speech.” We cannot learn the plan of redemption by studying the natural world, how God sent Jesus in grace to rescue sinners, but we can certainly learn about his power, wisdom and kindness. We can observe the corresponding orders between the patterns in the sky and those in the sea and draw conclusions relevant to our daily Christian experiences. We can add wonder to curiosity and praise to wonder.

I live near Lake Michigan and enjoy driving along the shore or sitting with my children on the beach watching sailboats. I enjoy the sights because of their beauty and sublimity, and am compelled to say, whether conscious of the specifics or not, that I learn more about my Lord with each glance. Why else, after all, do poets ponder the sea or the sky or the mountains or an evening storm? The English poet William Wordsworth wrote, “And I have felt/ A presence that disturbs me with the joy/ of elevated thoughts; a sense sublime/ Of something far more deeply interfuscated./ Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns./ And the round ocean and the living air./ And the blue sky, and in the mind of man.” Only a hardened spirit prevents us from recognizing each day the wonders of God’s signature masterpieces all around us.

Science studied apart from Christ misses what is most essential. Likewise to study human history or literature and the arts apart from concepts of depravity and redemption or providence and judgment, those issues most central to our ongoing relationship with God, leaves the study without an essential coherence. How can we observe and examine the fruits of a single human life, let alone large sweeps of human history or major themes and motifs in literature, without those larger principles that most define what makes human beings unique, principles taught so plainly in Scripture?

To talk about this created world and the products of the women and men who people it without constant reference to that magnificent creator, immanent in all His works (see Colossians 1), breeds arrogance and sophistry, not surprisingly the two primary symptoms of the disease suffered by most modern intellectuals. Such a “godless” approach when filtered down to the average person through our schooling and through the media hardens those who lack faith in the delusion that God is not relevant to their lives. The result for the average Christian is a compartmentalization of beliefs.

Many American Christians in this present day are not quite sure how to apply their religious beliefs to the details of their daily lives, having not been taught well how to do so, and thus they compartmentalize religious issues over here and “non-religious activity” over there.
Recently, a close friend asked my help to repair some weak spots in his attic floor by replacing several boards and securing others. He was gone while I did the work, but a young man who roomed in his house helped me as the repairs were nearest his quarters. This fellow, a very fine young man from a Christian home who attends a nearby university, insisted on playing some CDs from his collection while we worked.

Now the necessity for music defied any logic, because our conversation was interesting. He told me a little about his parents and a mission trip to Chile he had recently taken. I told him about my teaching and my family. Yet, that peculiar habit that drives we modern Americans to play music indiscriminately to accompany everything we do from court our loves to buy our groceries to wash our dishes insisted that the CDs play on. And so, we were “entertained” while we worked, the physical exertion of sawing, chiseling, and nailing floor boards, was not enough. The presence of the music at the very least hinted that our companionship was dull in that we needed loud distractions to divert attention from each other. And, as one might anticipate, the words of the songs had little bearing on our experiences at the moment, and, in fact, were at times downright embarrassing. One song said something like, “I want you all night long, baby, any way you want to do it to me.”

Now step back and think about two Christian men whacking nails side by side with those lyrics wafting overhead.

That is a kind of schizophrenia. We accept as normal these glaring gaps between our professed beliefs regarding our God, His world, and our duties in it, on the one hand, and many of the practical details of our lives, on the other. We may be pretty good in “designated Christian” activities like going to church or Bible class or on a retreat or missions trip, but we are often just awful at doing carpentry or washing dishes or driving our cars or loving our husbands or wives or children--or watching movies.

Left with no solid principles that apply to a subject like film, we are left with ineffective rules--like I won’t allow my young kids to see a PG film, but all Disney films are fine.

But, are all Disney films fine? Have Christian parents watched all of The Little Mermaid or Aladdin or Pocahontas and given thought to the messages of these films? One suggests that a sixteen-year-old should be defiant of her father and pursue the person most incompatible with her. One implies that all first dates should end in a kiss. One distorts American history beyond recognition, in an age when students need prompting to name the man who discovered America.

No, all Disney films are not fine. And, conversely, some films with sexual content and violence need those components to make important and truthful statements.

One of the best films of the last two decades is a Canadian production directed by Bruce Beresford, entitled Black Robe. It contains several scenes of graphic violence and three scenes displaying sexual activity; yet, it is one of the most provocative films ever made about the challenges of Christian missionary work. The story is based on a novel drawn from the diary of Noel Chabanel, a martyred 17th-century French Jesuit priest who gave his life to bring Christianity to Indians in Canada.

I showed this film in a course in a Christian college once and received an angry letter from a female student who said I had corrupted the innocence of her mind by having her see a film with sexuality that was not “Biblical.” The irony was that she admitted to having willingly seen two gems of pure viewing, Pretty Woman and Flashdance.

The temptation is to think that the student didn’t like the sexuality in Black Robe because it involved American Indians in a smoky teepee, rather than Julia Roberts in a glittering American hotel room, but upon reflection a better conclusion is that in the minds of many like this girl, Pretty Woman and Flashdance are just “entertaining and fun,” while Black Robe is thoughtful and serious. The rules that apply to the one don’t fit the other. This is compartmentalization of the worst kind--my Christian ethics don’t need to apply when we are in the realm of “entertainment,” but they need to apply when we are in a serious, even religious, context.

This issue reminds me of a conversation I once had with a pastor from a denomination, which need not be named, during which this pastor...
admitted to taking part in all kinds of hazing activities while in seminary, as well as other behaviors which the Apostle Paul would have termed “lawless.” He said that it is hard sometimes to face his fellow students, now seminary professors and pastors, given the way they all collectively “sowed their wild oats” when in school; yet, he commented in a resigned manner that most of his old pals now seem able to block successfully that part of their past from memory. More compartmentalization, more schizophrenia.

Frankly, I am greatly concerned that the American church is already more driven by our culture than our Christianity. Perhaps this little book will help change that at least in this one area. Our goal is to provoke. Both my collaborator on this project, Christian film reviewer Vernon Neal, and I hope to offer believers a way to start thinking about films on a deeper level, and in doing so we want to break through some of the apathy and guarded ignorance that has left a great number of our own friends and acquaintances in the church unwilling to examine their recreational habits seriously.

This book will not answer every question about particular films, and it will certainly not list the films a believer ought to watch and those one ought not. We will, however, offer principles that might stimulate distinctively Christian thought about the movies, and we will suggest some films that might be conducive to discussion with family and friends, some we like and some we do not.

The best that could happen as a result of our efforts is that many readers will be driven back to Scripture for guidance. After all, a book may provide a few tools and a context for discussion, but God alone provides wisdom.

And it is wisdom that we Christians most need.

Toward a Christian Approach to Film

One problem we seem to have in the modern American church is an inability to accept the world as it exists. We prefer tidier stories with cleaner resolutions, and air-brushed images of ourselves rather than the harsh polaroids that catch us as we are, blood of Jesus or no blood of Jesus.

As I begin this chapter, I want very much to offer something safe—five easy-to-read sections on how to choose a video for children, a jeremiad on the depraved art of postmodern Western culture, a list of gentle family classics. After all, it is much easier to encourage people to go see Forrest Gump than it is to explain why Body Heat is one of the better films of recent years. Yet to suggest that Forrest Gump is more worth seeing than Body Heat, in my mind, would be a kind of lie. Forrest Gump may be sweeter and more upbeat, but, all things considered, it isn’t better. It isn’t even more moral. But, indeed, to explain this opinion is not easy, and so the temptation is to be cowardly and point friends to the Disney shelf.

Once I led a seminar on the subject of Christianity and film in a church, trying my hardest to convey in a couple short hours, with film clips, what particular issues Christians should consider when going out to a movie or renting a video. Little did I know at the time that it would take an entire book, this one, to work out those details. After my presentation, which included a generous question and answer session, as I was gathering up my materials for the long ride home, a woman came up to me and asked the inevitable, “So, what are your five favorite films?”

I found I couldn’t tell her, so rather than answering her question, I named instead several very good films that address specifically Christian issues head on—The Mission, Chariots of Fire, On the Waterfront, Diary of a Country Priest, and Tender Mercies. This list was so much easier to defend than the actual list of my personal favorites, which probably would have led to a long and awkward conversation—films like Brief Encounter, To Kill a Mockingbird, Swing Time, Babette’s Feast, and, even, Uncle Buck.

I’m not sure that I can explain the real list even now, and the past few years have expanded it, although I could make a good case for the quality of each of these films. They just don’t all fit a neat discussion of Christianity and the movies.
Yet, the time is at hand for Christians to engage our movie-made culture courageously, and this means we have to struggle with tough issues, and tell the truth. Recall that after the Israelites were rebuked and judged for not eliminating the remnant Canaanites in the Promised Land (a laborious task, no doubt), the judgment of the Lord was to allow the Canaanites to survive and prosper and thus be a thorn continuously poking the side of Israel. In the New Testament, believers are told, similarly, to take every thought captive to Christ, do all things to God’s glory, overcome the world. When we stand back from engaging the world, in this case the world of film, and instead allow ourselves to be treated like village idiots, we can hardly expect God to be pleased.

We need to face some hard disciplines. The good fight of faith in modern American culture demands that if you are a parent, you ought to watch the films your children are watching and talk about them, and not in a condescending way. It is neglect when our overfilled schedules lead us to use the local video store as a babysitting enterprise. Long ago Marie Wynn called television the “plug-in drug” which modern parents give their kids to keep them temporarily docile. The drug has even more potency and worse possible side effects when it plays the elaborately constructed products of Hollywood. Parents must get serious about what their children watch, if indeed they want to train them up in the way they should go.

If you are a teacher, you ought to be using film as a point of contact for those under your charge. More students are familiar with Schindler’s List than are familiar with Macbeth. Some of us still kick against this reality because we love good literature. But why not cross reference Spielberg instead of Shakespeare to drive home a point? Shakespeare can no longer complain. Crowds at the new Globe in London will not dwindle. And our students might respond better after the point of contact has been established.

Pastors should likewise take note. Hudson Taylor, D.L. Moody, David Brainerd, Amy Carmichael, and Martin Luther will not be forgotten if pastors do not refer to one of them this month. The average congregant has not recently put down Charles Hodge’s Systematic Theology or The Memoirs and Remains of Robert Murray McCheyne or Metzger’s The Text of the New Testament or Luther’s commentary on Romans. Yet the chances are that about half the people sitting in pews this Sunday will see It’s a Wonderful Life this Christmas as well as the last five academy award nominees for Best Picture. We certainly should never give up the good fight of educating congregations in the best Christian thought, but we need take care that in attempting to do so we do not start speaking primarily in theological Latin.

When Paul addressed the Athenians gathered at Mars Hill, he did not quote rabbinical teaching. He quoted Greek poets. Likewise he quoted from Greek dramatists, the filmmakers of his day, in his epistles. He became a Jew to the Jews and a Greek to the Greeks, so that “by all means he should save some.”

For too long we Christians have feared the corrosive influence of film and so avoided approaching it thoughtfully. We need to shift to the offensive and intentionally discuss film as a way to illustrate and apply the truth. And we need to appreciate film for its artistry and praise our creator who gives such gifts to men. It may be useful to recall that Jesus never reduced life to simple platitudes and he never chose the safe, sanitized road. He embraced each person uniquely and he got his sandals dirty. If films existed in first century Israel, it just may be that his tastes would have surprised people. His tastes in people seemed to surprise people, after all.

Beyond the pulpit, classroom and home, we should also create new contexts for addressing film. The Christian community ought to promote seminars on film. Christian colleges should not only ensure that film be taught as a literary discipline in their individual programs, but promising students ought to be encouraged to pursue graduate studies in film as a ministry to the church. Congregations should encourage small group get-togethers during which friends might watch and talk about interesting films.

The good news is that the numbers of Christians who have taken a more thoughtful look at film have increased in the past couple decades, evidenced by some of the books on film that have started to appear in Christian bookstores. And, as film classes have grown in popularity on
secular college campuses over the past three decades, despite the stuffiness and political correctness of the academic film community, this growth has spilled over onto Christian colleges, where film classes and discussion groups have become more and more common—a dramatic change from the days when many Christian young people signed the pledge not to watch any movies.

Paradoxically, while we engage in this head-on confrontation with what one scholar, Robert Sklar, has called “our movie-made culture,” we should all follow Job’s lead and make a covenant with ourselves and God to practice the fine art of self discipline. In a consumer society like our own in which “goods” are plentiful and so easily accessible, we need to be discriminating. In I Corinthians 10 Paul reminds us that all things are lawful but not all things edify. Now the average person does not go to a theater to be edified. He goes for cheap entertainment. He sees whatever is playing that looks “pretty good”—translated, that won’t prove dull. Christians, on the other hand, should always have in mind “what is edifying.” Paul tells us in Philippians to think on the good, the true, the noble. But we tend to follow the shepherding of our all-pervasive pop culture and watch movies the way Americans eat—too much and with little thought of the art. We absorb indiscriminately and, consequently, begin to fill out like everyone else.

The opposite should be true. In an age of drunkenness, Christians ought to be models of sobriety. In an age of crudeness, Christians ought to be models of purity. In an age of divorce, Christians ought to be models of faithfulness. And, in an age of movie-gluttony, Christians ought to practice selectivity and restraint. This is an imperfect analogy, but it should convey the point that Christians should not treat films like Easter jellybeans. Images and ideas stay in the system much too long and can produce a wider range of effects.

If there is no coherence to the way we watch film, if the very notion of a Christian approach to film is puzzling, then it may be prudent to pull away from the screen entirely to allow for time to regroup.

There are numerous books on the market that discuss film, and not just chatty books about celebrities. There are available good scholarly books written in plain English that provide histories of narrative film, introductions to film analysis, and discussions of the nature of popular film styles and genres. With the development of the internet, many such resources are also available online (if we can wade through the muck of pornographic and ill-informed sites to access the good ones). We might also do some digging at home or in our local library. Public and educational television upon occasion produces documentaries about film that are usually quite insightful, such as the American Cinema series produced in the early 90s by the Annenberg School. And many colleges, unfortunately more secular than Christian, offer introductory courses in film that are relatively inexpensive to take for credit or audit. In Romans 13 Paul tells us to wake from our slumber for our salvation comes nearer each day. Certainly his admonition fits our present context.

Before launching into some particulars that may provide some help for Christians who want a thoughtful approach to film, let me briefly describe and comment upon the three ways that Christians have tended historically to respond to film. The three often constitute attitudes even more than they do theories, but I will explain them as if they were completely thought out.

The first is the notion that for Christians to use films for the work of Christ, they must make those films. The second is the related idea that the connection between the Christian faith and a particular film has to do with the subject matter of the film. The third is the idea that Christianity addresses film only if a viewer can find Christian symbols and types. The first two approaches indicate typical popular conceptions regarding
the kinds of film that Christians should support. The third is what I consider to be the primary academic fallacy of Christians who approach film as a form of scholarship.

Over the past thirty years an increasing number of films have been produced by evangelical and fundamentalist Christian groups like the Billy Graham Association, Ken Anderson Films and Moody Films. Some of the more successful early endeavors were The Hiding Place (1975), The Cross and the Switchblade (1972), and Jesus of Nazareth (1975). A more recent title that might be more familiar is The Spitfire Grill (1996), a film sponsored by a Catholic organization, The Sacred Heart League, which was then sold to an independent distributor, Castle Rock Films.

These films are generally low-budget productions of moderate to poor artistic quality, limited resources and talent working against the overall aesthetic conception. The films tend to be sermonic, with many ending outright with a gospel message.

In The Spitfire Grill, for example, a young woman, Percy Talbott, recently released from eight years in prison, comes to a small town in Maine for a new start. The town’s name is, significantly, Gilead. She goes to work at the town grill, the Spitfire Grill, owned by a crotchety older woman with a painful past, Hannah Ferguson. Hannah has been trying to sell the grill for years, and Percy suggests she raffle it off, an unusual scheme which, nonetheless, proves successful. The townspeople, especially Hannah’s nephew Nahum, grow suspicious of Percy, but she succeeds eventually in winning over Hannah, Nahum’s wife Shelby, and a mysterious stranger who lurks in the woods, who predictably turns out to be Hannah’s son, unbalanced since returning from the war.

Before the film is over, everyone around Percy is redeemed by her various actions, especially after Percy… I have to stop here since you may see the film yet.

Reviews of The Spitfire Grill were mostly polarized. On one side were the usual critics who pretty well agreed that the film, in the words of Renshaw, “slaps, kicks, pinches, and pleads” for tears. On the other hand were the Christian critics who, in the words of Dale Mason, thought the film “an excellent choice with several refreshing Christian overtones.” The conclusion to draw from this is that Christians who want to see movies about Christianity loved the film, whereas most people who simply wanted to see a good film found it heavy-handed and implausible. That is to say, they thought the film lied. Life isn’t this tidy. Personally, I thought the film would be a great choice for my children, up to a certain age. It may be conceivable that people could behave this way somewhere and that events could unfold in this fashion, but, overall, the film is, indeed, syrupy and preachy.

Nonetheless, for some fundamentalist Christians, films like The Spitfire Grill are a better kind of film. The assumption is that because they have been conceived and produced by Christians, and because they are orthodox and didactic, they honor God. According to the same logic, of course, mainstream films, which are purely commercial enterprises, are profane.

I do not blame Christians who feel this way. At least half of the films my wife and I see prove somewhat offensive either because of the juvenile or salacious content or because of the way they stereotype Christians. The Church needs to influence film production as the Church has done throughout the centuries for other arts. In time, great films will come from the Church. The Spitfire Grill despite its weaknesses, may, indeed, be a step in the right direction, and, unquestionably, many Christian-made films have been used of God—think of the Jesus film. The point here is that films made by Christians or sponsored by Christians may still be poor films; in fact, the majority of them, at the date of this writing, are. Throughout history, Christians have produced much of the world’s great art and provided some of the most insightful criticism of classic and contemporary art. We have a long way to go to meet these past standards in the medium of film.

The tendency to prioritize films made by Christians also creates one rather large problem. Which branches of the Church will be allowed to have the label “Christian?” Will evangelicals, for example, allow Catholics to be included? If so, an enormous number of films will suddenly fall under the label of Christian film, including Francis Ford Coppola’s The Godfather and Apocalypse Now, Brian De Palma’s Carrie and Dressed to
Kill, Alfred Hitchcock’s Psycho, and even Martin Scorsese’s The Last Temptation of Christ. If Catholic productions are excluded, there are new problems. What do you do with manifestly brilliant films by Catholics such as Frank Borzage’s thorough Christianization of the Hemingway story A Farewell to Arms or the French director Robert Bresson’s pious devotional films on Christian topics? To dismiss such films would dismiss indisputable works of genius, landmarks in the evolution of film style, and, more importantly, works that are laced with large Christian intentions. In addition, as soon as we begin to favor one Christian expression over another—Lutheran versus Catholic, Anglican, Presbyterian, Baptist—we open the door for an odd variety of artistic bias.

It is obvious from this that a Christian attempting a serious approach to film must step beyond simply looking for films made by Christians. Yet, the Christian public may always tend to prioritize films with some sort of overt Christian label, if only because it is easier to understand how to respond to them. The second way that Christians tend to approach film is to prioritize those which have Christian subjects—like A Man for All Seasons about Thomas More, Romero about the courageous El Salvadoran archbishop, and Shadowlands about C.S. Lewis. This is one reason for the past success of Biblical spectaculars, historically one of Hollywood’s most successful film genres. Six of the top ten money-making films in the 1950s were Biblical spectaculars, and although the genre has faded in the last few decades, the Biblical film remains a favorite during holiday seasons. The Robe (1953), Ben Hur (1959), and King of Kings (1961) are three of the most frequently seen films of all time. Biblical films and religious epics in general are also frequently remade; the epic, Quo Vadis (1951), for example has been filmed three times, Ben Hur, twice. But it is not only the purely Biblical story that has maintained enormous popularity in America. Films about religious people and religious events have had similar success. The Bells of St. Mary’s (1945), Going My Way (1944), The Song of Bernadette (1943), Boy’s Town (1938), and, more recently, Chariots of Fire (1984) have all become cult films for many American Christians.

The unique success of films about religious subjects must be explained beyond the inherent quality of these films or their inherent piety. Only one or two of these productions, perhaps Ben Hur and Chariots of Fire, are commonly recognized as examples of great filmmaking. Some Biblical epics have been ranked among the worst films ever made—The Bible (1966) and The Greatest Story Ever Told (1965) are two well-acknowledged examples. Similarly, the religious sentiments of the majority of these films are highly suspect. Many of the Jesus films demolish the integrity of the Lord’s words. Almost all of the Biblical films introduce fictional characters and plot devices in an attempt to add continuity and relevance to the Biblical accounts. In King of Kings, Barabbas is given a complete history which is used as a foil to the life of Christ. In The Ten Commandments, an Egyptian maid in Pharaoh’s court, who loves Moses, pleads with him not to defy Pharaoh in a decidedly womanish way. In the non-Biblical religious films, like Chariots of Fire, Christian principles are linked with patriotic and nationalistic sentiments; the success of the Christian tied in with the virtue of the political ideal.

The popularity of these “Christian” films is not a function of quality or religious integrity so much as it is a suggestion of the power of the popular belief that films about religious figures (like films made by Christians) are somehow more worth watching. The mere reference to Christian subjects is considered a good thing, regardless of how this reference is developed.

I vividly recall seeing the original Indiana Jones film with a youth group and a subsequent conversation during which several of my Christian friends argued that it was a good thing to have a film like Raiders of the Lost Ark make people aware of the ark of the covenant and the Jewish faith. Puzzle over this one awhile.

Christians should not have a cheap and uninformed attitude toward a film’s overall message. Because a film company gestures toward a Christian community, we should not all bow down in thanksgiving. What a gross distortion it is to have the secular filmmaking industry throwing offerings toward the Church to help her to deliver her message. A poor film about gospel truth may be more dangerous than a film which espouses the death of God. Christians may watch religious films and gleen
out blessings from them as they are reminded of what the Scriptures actually record, but religious films are not a better kind of film just because they quote religious material.

A recent example of this was the attention given the film The Matrix by many evangelicals who noted overt Christian references throughout the film, like the name of a sanctuary for refugees being “Zion.” What was often overlooked in the discussion was the fact that the film also celebrates “beautiful violence” and magazine cover virtue. (Pretty much the bottom line for Raiders of the Lost Ark, too, although Raiders is a far superior film.) For every one Christian who left the theater mulling over the philosophic and religious hints in the film, ten other viewers left the theater either talking about the special effects or how “hot” Keanu Reaves and Carrie Ann Moss looked.

On to the third way that Christians have tried to apply their faith to film--the majority of scholarly articles about film written by Christians in the academy have applied structural methods to certain films in an attempt to extract Biblical themes and symbols. Structuralism is a method of literary and film criticism in which a text is treated as a closed system of meaning waiting to be decoded. The George Lucas Star Wars series and Stephen Spielberg’s E.T. have been discussed in journals by Christian structuralists as Christian allegories. In Star Wars (1977), Luke Skywalker has been said to resemble either David or Christ preparing for his position as king. The force is the power of the Holy Spirit. Darth Vader is the fallen angel, Lucifer. The battles are for the souls of mankind. In E. T. (1980), the extraterrestrial is Christ, come down to earth to teach mankind a higher law. He hides in a shed, a manger, and is discovered and cared for by children (the disciples), persecuted by adult authorities, killed, and then raised from the dead. His ascension is witnessed by a newly-formed community of believers.

The approach taken with these films is not new. The famous 1952 Western, Fred Zinnemann’s High Noon has received similar treatment as have a host of other films that contain Biblical motifs and symbols. The fact is that a large number of films are saturated with Christian allusions which can be picked out and hung on some logical clothesline. The simplest explanation for this is cultural: the mainstream American public has retained the outer structures of Christianity. Another explanation is that a striking number of important Hollywood filmmakers were brought up in religious families, most often Catholic: Leo McCarey, Fritz Lang, Frank Borzage, John Ford, Alfred Hitchcock, Francis Ford Coppola, Paul Schrader, Martin Scorsese, etc. Christian scholars have no difficulty tracing traditional Christian motifs in Hollywood films, and, I might suggest, the project is a safe one--satisfying to the scholar and harmless to the film industry.

The flaw in this structural approach toward Christianity in film is that if often skirts the more significant questions regarding what an individual film is saying. In other words, the Christian symbols found in films are rarely interpreted in the light of their specific context. It is thought by some writers to be enough to merely point them out. The significant question for the Christian, however, should be, “What does the symbol, the cross, or the motif of light versus dark, mean here?” Instead of asking that, scholars merely praise the appearance of the symbol, as if its meaning is inviolate. This practice would lead to a complete misreading of a film like The Matrix in which Christian symbols abound in a sci-fi story more akin to Frank Herbert’s Dune than to the Bible.

These, then, are the three ways in which Christians have tried to apply issues of faith to film. What characterizes all three is reductivism. Whether you say we should pay attention to films made by Christians, films about Christians, or films heavy in traditional Christians symbols, you are ultimately saying that Christians only care about the superficial characteristics of art. We don’t care about the artfulness of art, nor its honesty. If we can simply slap a label on a film based on its most obvious characteristics, we do not need to take the time to understand the uniqueness of that film and examine its particular strengths and weaknesses. These are the safe methods, however, and so practiced frequently.

Christians need to show more courage and insight. We must tackle both the important issues of film quality and the issue of a film’s overall meaning and significance. We must come up with a critical strategy that has enough meat and bones to stand up beside the politically-charged interpretive strategies that are now current in the
university. After all, if we cannot hold our own against proponents of Marxist, feminist, and “queer” theories, we are in dire straits. So, what should a Christian look for when watching a film?

Our first concern should be cinematic and dramatic excellence. Regardless of the message of the individual film, Christians ought to be the first to recognize and praise a film’s artistry. All beauty reflects God’s beauty, whether it is understood to be from the Creator or not. Shoddiness and mass-produced hack art should offend us on some level, regardless of who produces it or what it is about. To soak in mediocrity is not exactly what one would call “following the high call of Christ.” Paul tells us to think on the excellent, not the contrived. The Scriptures teach that human endeavor should replicate God’s own endeavors and praise him. God pronounced his work “good.”

What this means practically is that we should feel an obligation to learn what “good” filmmaking is. Beyond the suggestions offered above and the others yet to come, one simple way to learn this is by studying classic films. You don’t become a connoisseur of fine food by eating at McDonalds.

In this regard a list of excellent films, like the one generated by the American Film Institute, or notices about films which have received awards—Golden Globe, Academy, Cannes, Sundance Festival—have their place. A useful exercise is to try to learn what people who study film or create film see in the “good” films.

A film has many component parts, such as cinematography, sound, editing, acting, costume and stage design, story. One quality of all great art is its ability to captivate and engage the imaginations and feelings of a large number of people. The poet Emily Dickinson once suggested that a writer knows she has created a good poem when it feels like the top of her head comes off. The experience should be the same for the reader, or viewer in this case. Notice how some people remain seated during the credits of a film. Many of them are trying to catch their breath, so to speak. After Roberto Benigni’s *Life Is Beautiful* played at our local theater, very few people wanted to leave their seats. I recall having a similar powerful response to Martin Scorsese’s *Age of Innocence*. Plato believed that poets were possessed by the muses because of the power inherent in their art. A great film is felt deeply—it has acting that makes your mouth drop; it leaves stirring images. When it ends, be it tragic or comic, you are somewhat sad.

Film weaves together a variety of arts—storytelling, photography, theater, music, sometimes poetry and painting. A great film is, then, a thing to be reckoned with. It is a nearly miraculous human production, a simulation of life played out through multiple artistic media. The appearance of a beautifully-made film, even one which comes from someone far from the church, ought to be celebrated by Christians. A great film carries with it the story of our God who so loved man whom He had created that He shared with him the ability to produce from dust a flower. Art is our own invention of the flower. The creation of an artful film is a wonderful thing.

The second criterion for the interpretation and evaluation of films by the Christian should be integrity. By this I mean the resonance of a film—a film’s ability to capture truths and convey them. This is a slippery category as it sounds like I am creating it out of a bias toward realistic films or didactic films. There is no such bias. Film integrity is as much an evaluative approach to fantasy or animated film as it is to drama. It refers to the filmmaker’s statements about the world, not the language chosen to clothe those statements.

Think of great literature. No reader would claim that Cervantes’ *Don Quixote* records life as lived; yet, all readers respond to the character of the romantic knight who thinks La Mancha is the home of fighting heros and needy damsels. We may have never met a deranged man who wore armor, but we have all met Don Quixote—we meet him when we look in the mirror. The truth of *Don Quixote* is so powerful that the English language has a word “quixotic” to describe that dreamy hero in us all.

Film, as is true of all art forms, should create or reflect a world that rings true, a world fallen and in need of grace, a world in which the only hope for resolution and individual salvation is the gospel. A film can be comic or satirical and still make a direct statement about man and the world. Similarly and more directly to the point, a film
does not need to be overtly Christian or heavily symbolic to have a resonance for the Christian. What it needs is truth. Characters must be representatives of fallen humanity and events must be as they are in experience, marred and groaning as the earth groans for salvation. A director of any faith can make such a film about any subject using any dramatic strategy, for any man who tells the truth will testify to the experience of the whole of suffering, fallen humanity.

My favorite film is a little, British gem made by David Lean in 1945, called *Brief Encounter*. The story is of two married people who meet at a train station and then meet again by chance later in the same day, and then in time fall accidentally in love. The woman, from whose point of view the story is told, suffers much the unfolding of the relationship, because she is already happily married to a good, if a bit dull, man, and they have two children. I cannot reveal too much about the story, since it may spoil it for some, but it may be permissible to mention that the conflict leads to a real choice between a genuine, yet sinful, passion and the moral right—and the choice is presented as difficult.

The artistry of *Brief Encounter* has been widely recognized. It may be the most poetic film ever made. The problem for Christians would be in the subject matter; after all, it is a film about adultery. But, it is a film which presents adultery truthfully; that is, the characters face a situation which is quite plausible and they react to it quite plausibly. Whether or not we approve of the choices they make is another matter altogether. The concern here is for the story’s integrity, proof of which can be found not only in our own experience in this world but in the numerous other great works of literature which present a similar story in a similar way—Tolstoy’s *Anna Karenina*, Flaubert’s *Madame Bovary*, Chekhov’s “The Lady with the Dog,” Chopin’s *The Awakening*, to name a few. That adultery is wrong and that we wished it would never happen and that we hope and pray that we never are tempted in that way is beside the point. The point is that it does happen and to “good” people, made in God’s own image to love and worship Him, who suffer as result.

The issue is how the subject is presented and to what purpose. *Brief Encounter* begs us to feel compassion for human beings in a broken world who want to be happy, but do not have the strength on their own to accomplish that. I have found in my teaching career both in a large state university and at two Christian colleges that it is far more effective for me to discuss the gospel and my personal faith in the context of a work of art like *Brief Encounter* than it is in the context of a work explicitly Christian. Everyone listens and is moved in the former discussion. In the latter, only the choir hears.

Films are made by people, individuals working together, and they need to be evaluated as the collective speech of a group of people, sinful people begging for grace. Is it truth or does it lie? Here is the crucial artistic question. We Christians need to recognize that we alone stand in a place where that question might be answered with confidence.