Reframing
Theology and Film
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New Focus
for an Emerging Discipline

Robert K. Johnston, editor
Method is not a set of rules to be followed meticulously by a dolt. It is a framework for collaborative creativity.

Bernard Lonergan, *Method in Theology*

The surface meaning lies open before us and charms beginners. Yet the depth is amazing, my God, the depth is amazing. To concentrate on it is to experience awe.

Augustine, *Confessions*
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Introduction: Reframing the Discussion

ROBERT K. JOHNSTON

Theology and film as a field of inquiry is still in its infancy, less than three decades old—at least in its contemporary expression. Although there was theological reflection on film as early as Herbert Jump’s 1910 pamphlet “The Religious Possibilities of the Motion Picture,” and although in the late 1960s and early 1970s a few books were published that sought to establish a conversation between film and the church (e.g., Robert Konzelman’s Marquee Ministry: The Movie Theater as Church and Community Forum [1971], William Jones’s Sunday Night at the Movies [1967], Neil Hurley’s Theology through Film [1970], and James Wall’s Church and Cinema [1971]), there was no sustained interest in the topic prior to the 1980s. At the time, the unavailability of most movies after their initial screening was perhaps reason enough for film to be largely ignored as an ongoing conversation partner for theology. But caution and even skepticism by some in the church no doubt also played a role.

We can perhaps date the new era for theology and film studies as beginning in 1979. In that year George Atkinson revolutionized how one saw Hollywood movies by opening the first video rental store, making the ongoing viewing and re-viewing of movies a possibility. Although studios had for a few years been selling feature-length films on videocassette, their steep price meant that few bothered to buy them. Atkinson, however, saw a business opportunity, and with fifty films that he had purchased—The Sound of Music and Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid were two of them—he began renting films to eager customers. Technological and marketing advances followed at an escalating pace: the DVD with its extra features, Netflix, and the advent of movie downloads are three of the more significant.
The results have been staggering. Customers in the United States alone spent $45.7 billion on movies in 2005 and averaged seeing forty-five films. We in the West are a movie culture, and religious bodies and their theologians have necessarily taken note. As I argued in *Reel Spirituality*, movies function as a primary source of power and meaning for people throughout the world. Along with the church, the synagogue, the mosque, and the temple, they often provide people stories through which they can understand their lives. . . . There are, of course, places of worship that are vibrant and meaningful. But people both within the church and outside it recognize that movies are also providing primary stories around which we shape our lives. . . . Presenting aspects of their daily lives both intimate and profound [real and imagined], movies exercise our moral and religious imagination.1

Film has become our Western culture’s major storytelling and myth-producing medium. As such it has begun to invite the best (and worst!) of our theological reflection.

As those in the field of theology and film began their work, they were spurred on by “readings” of a significant number of film “texts” (the terms perhaps betray an overly dependent use of literary models in these early stages of theology and film analysis, as Joseph Kickasola helpfully points out2). These movies might give expression to theological themes found in their own faith tradition or sacred texts, or perhaps even more radically, might be the occasion for an experience with the divine itself. As movies give expression to questions of meaning or portray possible answers, they have been perceived as being of interest to those in biblical and/or theological studies, as well as in religious studies more broadly.

The fact that theology and film studies is still in a developmental phase must also be seen in relation to other realities within the academy, particularly with regard to film itself. We forget that the granting of the first PhD in film studies is a recent event: it was probably the University of Southern California that, in the early 1960s, offered the first doctorate. According to the National Research Council, film studies itself is still considered an emerging discipline, with one observer labeling it a discipline of “ambiguous provenance” (i.e., study in cinema takes place in departments of modern language, theater, and communication, as well as in programs in comparative literature and cinema and media studies).3

When a focus on theology is added to the emerging field of film studies, making for an interdisciplinary study, matters become further complicated.
in the academy. Interdisciplinary study in theology and any of the arts has consistently struggled to find its place. The Divinity School of the University of Chicago pioneered an area of study in religion and literature in the 1950s, seeking to explore the reciprocal relations between the two. A few other institutions have followed its lead. Yet programs in theology/religion and the arts still remain at the margins of academic life in most institutions today. Thus, it is hardly a surprise that the field of theology and film remains within the academy of “ambiguous provenance,” class offerings being found in a variety of departments—English, communication, religious studies, American studies, foreign language, and occasionally, film studies itself. There is no home base in the academy at present, even though the number of colleges and universities that include such studies somewhere in their curriculum continues to grow.

Despite its recent beginnings and disparate academic locations, the study of theology and film is attracting widespread interest. Books and Web sites are proliferating. Terry Lindvall’s recent bibliography on religion/theology and film (2004–5) stretched to almost eighty pages, and at present there are fifty Christian Web sites and a dozen blogs that review films and offer resources for study and reflection. David Ford has now included a chapter titled “Theology and Film” (written by Jolyon Mitchell) in his recently published third edition of The Modern Theologians, and sessions on the topic at the annual meetings of both the American Academy of Religion and the Society of Biblical Literature are regularly held. Despite its present limitations, few still question the importance of the discipline.

Yet problems remain. Have those in the field simply (and mistakenly) taken literature’s understanding of narrative and applied it to film, reading the “text” of a film as we might a novel? Is the discipline of theology and film at present unduly influenced by popular culture, failing to take note of the excellence of less commercially viable movies and/or world cinema? Why have other cognate disciplines too often been ignored in the discussion? What about history, sociology, and philosophy, not to mention film studies itself? What is the theological value in focusing our reflection on the viewer of a film, and what happens affectively to the viewer as meaning is constructed? What place does “normative” analysis hold in the public arena? Is theology’s normativity an impediment to film viewing and analysis? How might theologians escape the tendency to reduce film to an illustration of truth independently arrived at? And how might our interdisciplinary conversation be deepened by using the resources of theology and its rich tradition? Questions are easily multiplied, as one would expect of any new enterprise.
It is this situation of burgeoning interest in a significant new field, combined with the recognition of present limitations and inadequacies as to how the discipline is being practiced, that was the catalyst for bringing together over a three-year period a dozen leading scholars in the field, representative church leaders, and practicing filmmakers. The goal of the consultation was to discuss how the discipline of theology and film might be reframed for the next decade so that scholarship might better move forward. How should those in the field respond to pressing questions regarding scope, method, filmography, and theological underpinnings? Sponsored by the generosity of the Henry Luce Foundation, the consultation met twice (2004 and 2005) to assess current scholarship and address how the field might be strengthened, corrected, or changed.

An initial result of this deliberation was a major revision of my basic textbook for the field, *Reel Spirituality: Theology and Film in Dialogue* (2006). I am in debt to the careful criticism and positive suggestions of this group, as they both critiqued the first edition and provided helpful perspective regarding the change and development required to move the discipline to its next level of maturity.

A second result was the resolve to explore in greater depth particular means by which the discipline of theology and film might gain maturity as it moves forward in its endeavors. The third year of the consultation thus turned to a focus on particular problematic aspects of the discipline that were felt to be in need of strengthening, and essays were commissioned. This book is the result of these deliberations, a collection of essays by scholars presently working in the field. But even here, it is important to note the impact of practitioners, of those filmmakers and church leaders who helped shape the dialogue as they shared in the earlier consultations. If the book reflects a particular bias, it is the filmmaker’s commitment to let the film’s narrative itself and our experience with it shape the conversation. Despite criticism from some quarters that such a narratological approach to film is naive and perhaps arbitrary, to talk about a film’s meaning apart from the cinematic experience itself (its image, word, music) is to miss the heart of the enterprise.

Readers will note that the chapters of this book have been grouped together to make six larger sections. Each represents an aspect within theology and film studies in need of correction or strengthening in our view. In particular, the Luce consultation identified six needs: (1) to move beyond a literary paradigm; (2) to broaden the film selection, particularly to include world cinema; (3) to extend the interdisciplinary conversation...
beyond the disciplines of film studies and theology; (4) to take into account the role of the viewer in meaning formation; (5) to reaffirm normative criticism; and (6) to bring insights from the wider theological tradition into the theology and film conversation. Here then is a self-reflective critique by those working in the field. What follows is what we believe necessary to successfully reframe the discipline.

Section 1: Moving Beyond a “Literary” Paradigm

Some have criticized the discipline of theology and film for its heavy concentration on narrative. But this is to misunderstand the nature of the problem, as filmmakers Craig Detweiler and Barry Taylor argue in their essays that follow. It is not story per se but the reduction of film interpretation to literary techniques that is the problem. After all, the vast majority of commercial film is narrative in structure, rooted in storytelling. But how that story is to be understood needs redefinition and expansion in many of the present descriptions of movies by theology and film critics. For movies are both “pictured” and “heard,” not just described. Thus, there needs to be an expansion of method to include the visual and the aural, if theology and film is to escape its literary captivity.

Detweiler, a screenwriter, seeks to correct the abstract nature of much film theory by turning to film practice—to how movies are made and seen. His interest, in particular, is how the use of images helps viewers better understand the power and meaning of a film story. His goal, like Taylor’s, is to understand the film as “text” in more than its literary sense: “film is sight, sound, and story; images, music, and dialogue.” But rather than concentrate on music, Detweiler argues in particular for “a more visual approach to theology and film” criticism. He believes that the visual elements of film (lighting, cinematography, set design) must be reconnected to one’s larger interpretive practices if both film theory and “film and theology” are to achieve renewed relevance.

In a parallel essay, Taylor recognizes that “the ‘text’ of any given film comprises at least three intersecting issues: image, story, and sound, all working together both to create context and to give meaning to the tale being told.” Making use of film music theory, Taylor (a film composer) argues that music enhances narrative, projects emotion, provides pace and shape to the story, and literally colors the movie, aiding in the meaning-making process. It is the communication link between screen and audi-
ience. Moreover, with the introduction of pop music into cinema, another opportunity for connection with the story is achieved, the viewer’s own previous experience with the music now acting as an independent source of identity construction and connection.

Section 2: Broadening Our Film Selection

A second critique of the current practices of theology and film has to do with the small and repetitive number of mainstream movies that are typically used by those working in the field. (Brent Plate labels this “the Hollywoodcentrism that resides within religion and film circles.”8) Writing about *The Shawshank Redemption, Star Wars, The Da Vinci Code,* and *The Matrix,* while appropriate, is tiresomely overdone. Immediately following the release of *The Passion of the Christ,* five books of essays by scholars working in the field came out.9 None sold well. But the concentration on popular movies by theology and film scholars only mirrors the viewing patterns of those in the West. It is unfortunately true that in 2005, the most successful film from outside the United States made a modest $17.1 million in the United States—the 116th biggest release—and only ten foreign language films even broke the $1 million mark. Even for Netflix, only 5.5 percent of the movies shipped in 2005 were world cinema.10 Thus, the discipline of theology and film is presently dominated by the patterns of popular culture more generally.

It is this reality that both Gaye Williams Ortiz and Sara Anson Vaux challenge.11 In their essays, they argue that the discipline of theology and film is not using the best films for our conversation and suggest that world cinema and other thematically rich films need greater inclusion in its filmography. Although world cinema is undervalued popularly, academically, and religiously, Ortiz argues that this was not always so, nor should this pattern be maintained. World cinema has the ability to broaden our dialogue, to help Americans in particular escape our provincialism and cultural isolation. It can allow for an openness and receptivity toward the other. Using the insights of Miroslav Volf, Ortiz calls on those working in the field of religion/theology and film to overcome the racist tendencies inherent in such exclusion, and to embrace otherness.

Vaux’s essay similarly argues for the inclusion of world cinema, but her reasons are distinct from those of Ortiz. Her point is aesthetic as well as ethical. What is it, she asks, that is “worth our emotional, professional,
and recreational time”? Those working in the field should “recommend a broad sampling of movies that reward repeated viewings and close analysis, yet challenge the culture.” “In our field,” she writes, “we should promote not only a wide range of movies but also better movies, movies that possess high quality as art as well as entertainment, and movies that make us better people.”

Section 3: Extending Our Conversation Partners

Theology need not and in fact should not be the sole conversation partner with film, though this has too often been the case in the initial decades of theology and film criticism. Rooted in the human story, film invites a dialogue with other areas of the arts and social sciences, as film studies has long recognized. Think, for example, of the widespread use of psychoanalytic and Marxist approaches to film by film scholars. Such an appropriation of social scientific categories, however, has too often been absent from theology and film dialogue, at least until recently. But perhaps things are changing.

Gordon Lynch, in his chapter, suggests that there is beginning to be “a deepening awareness among some theologians” of the value of interdisciplinary engagement with media and popular culture. As an illustration of the value of such scholarship, he focuses on how “theological readings of film can be usefully informed by debates concerning contemporary cultural values and beliefs in the context of the sociological study of religion.” In support of his thesis, Lynch persuasively demonstrates how the subjective turn in spirituality and religion in the West provides a framework for a theological analysis of Hollywood cinema. He argues that, like the novel in the eighteenth century, film functions today as both a cultural tool for nurturing personal emotional and aesthetic experiences and a cultural text that celebrates the turn to the self.

Terry Lindvall’s chapter asserts that church history holds the promise for providing a rich cross-fertilization with studies in film history. Unfortunately, this has happened too rarely: modern film histories typically neglect the religious dimensions in film, and vice versa. Nevertheless, writes Lindvall, “the historical interpretation of films invites, or rather demands, a religious lens that helps bring the narratives and the symbols into focus.” Only as a film is put into both its larger religious and historical contexts can its meaning be more fully understood by the theology and film student.
Section 4: Engaging the Experience of the Viewer

Much of theology and film criticism in its initial stage has been devoted to thematic criticism. Movies have been chosen for critical reflection because they provide perspective on Scripture, or because they teach Christian truth. And though such content-oriented perspectives, when sensitively done, have their place both in theology and in film studies, they are also misleading because they largely overlook the experience of film watching itself. As Clive Marsh reminds us, we “need to attend to what films actually do, rather than what religion scholars and theologians would like to think that they do.” As the study of theology and film continues, it must take the viewer’s experience much more seriously if it is to be true both to film as a medium of communication/communion, and to theology, which is also concerned with first-order experience.

Receptor-oriented criticism is a wide-ranging field, but in this volume, three of the participants in the Luce consultation take up aspects of this crucial perspective. Clive Marsh follows up on his important initial probing in the field by reporting on a study of moviegoers in the United Kingdom in 2004. While these individuals said that they went to the cinema “for fun,” often “meaning making” was taking place. This meaning making was not necessarily explicitly theological or even fully coherent; it worked first by affective means. But an exchange of views was taking place, with the boundary between entertainment and education proving to be fluid. Rebecca Ver Straten-McSparran, in her chapter, further unpacks the viewer’s experience by turning to the insights of Michael Polanyi, particularly his recognition of a “tacit” dimension to our knowing, one rooted in intuition and imagination. Understood in this way, movie viewing requires “faith and belief and personal commitment.” As such, it has the potential to shape viewers’ lives—to transform our thinking and action. This is the experience, she observes, of many who see the movie Crash.

Lastly, Catherine Barsotti provides an important initial ethnographic study in viewer-oriented criticism by asking how US Latinas view movies in which they themselves are reputedly being portrayed (e.g., Bread and Roses, 2000; Spanglish, 2004; and Quinceañera, 2006). She asks, How do these films “act as windows, however tinted, to reflect on the ‘reel’ portrayed and the ‘real’ experienced by a group of [Protestant] Latina women”? Can such movies “help us see what we sometimes can’t say,” and in the process allow us to “speak and understand our own stories”?

Section 5: Reconsidering the Normative

Initial efforts in theology and film criticism have often either erred on the side of didacticism, reducing the movie under consideration to mere illustration, or have remained too cautious, taking readers to the door of theological conversation, but failing to walk through that door for fear of becoming dogmatic. But the subject of film and its experience for the viewer is ultimately too important not to be completed from a theological perspective, as three of the essayists in our consultation affirm.

Using the model of interreligious dialogue, theologian John Lyden argues that popular film is sufficiently religion-like to merit theological engagement. Rather than ignore popular culture, theologians should engage it in open, yet evaluative, conversation, just as they might converse with those who are from other religious traditions. Recognizing the power of movies to influence and express our values and beliefs, as well as to provide our myths, morals, and rituals, theology and film critics will through such engagement with film find help in clarifying their own theological perspective.

Mitch Avila, a philosopher who regularly teaches in the area of film, finds help in empirically informed theories of film emotion for normative, critical film analysis (does it generate, promote, or otherwise foster morally praiseworthy behaviors, beliefs, and attitudes?). By prefocusing our attention on certain features, movies activate emotional responses “while at the same time interpreting what the emotions mean and validating some coping mechanisms over others.” If this is true, argues Avila, then film can either draw our attention to the wrong aspects of a situation, or it can “help us cope with negative emotions and relive (and revive) endangered ones.” That is, film invites, even demands, our normative attention.

Christopher Deacy makes a complementary point by looking at how film enables us “to (re-)examine, critique, and challenge the efficacy of the work of a number of prominent twentieth-century theologians.” Deacy finds film capable of facilitating quite sophisticated theological inquiry. In the movie Christmas with the Kranks, for example, Deacy discovers a living expression of Bonhoeffer’s “world come of age.” The movie does not just illustrate; it also contributes to serious theological discussion of how we might need a “religionless Christianity” today. Similarly, Big Fish, though not an explicitly theological film, can function as a corrective to Bultmann’s overly zealous demythologizing. By helping us deal firsthand with life, such movies critique and challenge various theological paradigms, helping the church facilitate and fine-tune its theological conversation.
Section 6: Making Better Use of Our Theological Traditions

The consultation of theology and film scholars, filmmakers, and church leaders identified the need in future theology and film scholarship to make better use of their own theological traditions. Recognizing that film, like any work of art, demands first to be evaluated aesthetically, theology and film critics have often underappreciated the role their own theological tradition plays, or might play, in their critical work.

On the negative side, Sister Rose Pacatte describes well the twin influences of Puritan and Jansenist theology on the creation of the ratings system that continues to influence how Christians judge movies today. Too focused on sin to be seriously receptive to the arts, their theological legacy has caused both Protestants and Catholics to focus on a film’s content rather than its context, on its data rather than its meaning. The church’s present focus on content analysis—on a film’s representation of sexuality, violence, and language—results “in the loss of the soul (i.e., the context of the story)” and blunts “our ability to engage in parables—stories and storytelling—the very way Jesus communicated meaningfully with the people of his times.”

Gerard Loughlin, on the other hand, finds in the Orthodox understanding of the iconic a key to how film “can attain to the power of religious parable,” how it might be understood as a spiritual medium, “the occasion of hierophany.” In particular, he turns to the Russian filmmaker Andrei Tarkovsky in order to explore the possibility of a truly spiritual cinema, “a way into the light that resides in the dark; a glimpse of the invisible in the visible, in the depths of the seen.” Loughlin provides a sensitive “reading of the Tarkovskian image, an exercise in cinematic theology.” Through his film images, Tarkovsky seeks not a symbol of the truth, but something more immediate, “something that does not point away from itself, but into which we are led.” Though they are just themselves, paradoxically his images disclose more than just themselves. There is, or can be, in film an immanent transcendence.

Finally, as a contributor as well as the book’s editor, I explore the potential of using medieval Christianity’s fourfold method of biblical interpretation as a hermeneutical key for understanding how a film viewer might “see different levels of reality in one image or one situation.” Here might be a fruitful description of the process by which a film expresses theological truth—a movie has not only a literal but also a spiritual meaning. As Dante realized, the allegorical method of the monastics described “the very logic of the imagination.” It is not just the informative but also the transforma-
tive that matters. Meaning is rooted in the particular, the givenness of the story. But it is not enough to know merely what a movie “says.” One must also know what it means allegorically, ethically, and spiritually.

Notes

5. In particular, the presence of several leading filmmakers should be noted. Norman Stone (director, *Shadowlands, Man Dancin’*) and Brad King (producer, *Teknolust*) joined essayists Barry Taylor (a film music director and composer, e.g., *The Third Miracle*) and Craig Detweiler (a screenwriter, e.g., *Extreme Days*) in arguing that our discussion must be rooted concretely in the cinematic experience. Hollywood publicist and screenwriter Jonathan Bock, who markets studio movies to faith-based organizations; film educator and screenwriter Barbara Nicolosi, who runs a screenwriting workshop for faith-based writers; and Sally Morganthaler, a nationally known church consultant in worship and the arts, also participated in the multiyear discussion. Together with producer Ralph Winter (the *X-Men* and *Fantastic Four* series), who served as a consultant to the dialogue, these filmmakers and church leaders helped keep the discussion concrete and focused on the movies themselves.
7. Note the reflections on music’s important role in cinema, in chap. 4 by Sara Vaux.
11. Note chap. 7 by Clive Marsh.


17. For a discussion of the ratings system, readers should also note chap. 11 by Mitch Avila.

18. Cf. Flannery O’Connor, “The Nature and Aim of Fiction,” in *Mystery and Manners*, ed. Sally and Robert Fitzgerald (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1969), 72–73: “The medieval commentators on Scripture found three kinds of meaning in the literal level of the sacred text. One they called the allegorical, in which one fact pointed to another. One they called the tropological, or moral, which had to do with what should be done. And one they called the anagogical, which had to do with the divine life and our participation in it. Although this was a method applied to biblical exegesis, it was also an attitude toward all of creation, and a way of reading nature which included most possibilities, and I think it is this enlarged view of the human scene that the fiction writer has to cultivate if he [or she] is ever going to write stories that have any chance of becoming a permanent part of our literature.”
Section 1

Moving beyond a “Literary” Paradigm
I asked several of my collaborators in this book to run through a mental Rolodex of scenes that stand out and stand up—on their own, as purely visual pleasures. This book began as a community project. Filmmakers and theologians, gathered around a love for God and a love for film, came together for two sessions of dialogue. We talked about our passions, shared our research, and tested our theories. When it came time to consider the visual power of film, I conducted an informal survey. “What cinematic images continue to haunt you, guide you, inspire you? What are the most beautiful moments you’ve seen in screen history?” Our most haunting images ranged from the angels circling the lovers’ heads in F. W. Murnau’s *Sunrise* (1927) to the “green section” of Zhang Yimou’s epic Chinese action film, *Hero* (2004).¹ When I look through a list of the most popular films of all time (compiled by the fan-driven Internet Movie Database [IMDb]),² particular visual images also leap to mind:
Grasping a snow globe in *Citizen Kane*.
The rain pounds, puddles form, swords fly in *The Seven Samurai*.
Riding a nuclear warhead in *Dr. Strangelove*.
Benjamin and Elaine in the back of the bus in *The Graduate*.
Coconuts as horse hooves in *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*.
The boulder rolling toward Indiana Jones in *Raiders of the Lost Ark*.
The Band-Aid on the back of Marcellus’s neck in *Pulp Fiction*.
The lure of a gold ring in *The Return of the King*.
The eyes on the Pale Man’s hands in *Pan’s Labyrinth*.

Some of the more memorable images are built upon hours of anticipation. They pay off story points planted by adept filmmakers. The memory of an entire film may be reduced to a single frame or an evocative frozen image. We relish the eerie spectacle of the *Titanic* sinking. We admire Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid heading toward certain death, guns blazing. We may even want to ride with Thelma and Louise in their convertible, as they soar off the plateau. Some of the more memorable images haunt us. I’d like to forget the Russian roulette in *The Deer Hunter*, the eating of a live squid in *Oldboy*, and the victim literally kicked to the curb in *American History X*. Yet we play the most inspiring scenes over and over in our heads. I never want to forget Christian’s romantic serenade of Satine atop an elephant in *Moulin Rouge* or Bjork’s transcendent affirmation, “I’ve Seen It All,” amid her dire circumstances in *Dancer in the Dark*.

Why are certain scenes imprinted so concretely on our psyche? We remember every gesture and nuance. Recollection of the scene can cause us to laugh, cry, or wince at a moment’s notice, even years after first experiencing it. Many have connected the psychic power of film to the principles of Freud or his disciple, Jacques Lacan. In some critical circles, film studies and psychoanalysis are nearly synonymous. The key questions remain, What gives images such power? And is that power to be feared? We have all witnessed the adverse effects when demagogues figure out how to harness it. Perhaps that is why admonitions against “graven images” remain atop the Ten Commandments. The abuse of images has led to repeated controversies within religious communities. Images are distrusted because of their ability to distract, deceive, or overwhelm. Yet why has God given us eyes to see and not just ears to hear? Can we not redeem our eyesight, especially in an image-driven era?
This chapter has one goal: to unpack the power of moving images. I will draw from two disciplines, both of which have relied primarily upon words. I aspire to rescue film theory from a literary paradigm. Then I want to explore film theory’s potential to enhance the nascent discipline of theology and film. I recognize that such a tenuous arrangement could go bad. As in a love triangle in a gritty detective story, someone is bound to feel jilted. By the conclusion, somebody, maybe even everybody, could end up shot. Yet I take the risk of merging film theory with theology to free both disciplines from their bookish and elitist tendencies, which threaten to marginalize them. I admire Pauline Kael’s groundbreaking ability to find a little art in apparent cinematic trash and to point out the trash often lurking amidst acclaimed art. She echoes Jesus’s upside-down approach to storytelling. He found goodness amidst the masses and generated anger amongst the elites. So why can’t film theory reflect the populist roots of the medium it analyzes? A more visual approach to theology and film could help the emerging church forge a more integrated Christian practice, rooted in sight and sound, smells and bells, word and spirit.

A few things I don’t want to do. I do not want to unspool the history of film theory. Others have done each well. They draw upon far more expertise in each of those complicated subjects than I possess. When it comes to film theory, I recognize that I will be turning back the clock, concentrating on earlier theorists who are currently out of vogue. But just because the discipline has moved on doesn’t mean it has arrived. Likewise, in theology, despite my desire to move toward a visual faith, I must consider people of faith’s ongoing anxiety regarding images. We will never get to a mature understanding of “reel spirituality” without wading through the murky waters of church history. Yet I do not want to get bogged down in the muck of old skirmishes. Like Andy Dufresne in The Shawshank Redemption, I want to emerge on the far side of the prison of the past with my arms uplifted and my eyes open.

**Theology’s Fear of Images**

Postmodern pilgrims must navigate a world where style trumps substance and images overwhelm words. Protestants, rooted in the valuable tradition of sola scriptura, are being challenged by our image-driven era.
Some may consider filmmaking an advanced form of idolatry. The more practical will purchase state-of-the-art sound systems and projectors for their sanctuaries. Iconoclastic attacks and uncritical embrace both have their blind spots. So how do we grasp the power of images without bowing down to the altar of IMAX?

My word-based faith may need to adopt a more sacramental approach to seeing and believing. Signs and symbols enhance Catholic and Orthodox worship. Candles, colors, and vestments (costumes) play important parts in Lutheran and Episcopalian liturgy. Sacramental churches are teaching sermon-centered Protestants how to worship with their eyes wide open. In the Orthodox Church, icons serve as “windows to heaven,” collapsing the time-space continuum, simultaneously dignifying the material world and transporting the icon viewer to a transcendent realm. Some may resist the postmodern recovery of a more visual faith. It calls up ancient controversies regarding icons. While most of the debate rages over prohibitions against graven images, much of the anxiety regarding images involves sexuality, how depictions of the body affect our body.

In his book *On Seeing*, pathologist F. Gonzalez-Crussi chronicles our ongoing fascination with the human form. Gonzalez-Crussi marvels at the ability of an image to provoke sexual arousal. He finds “that a distinguishing characteristic of human beings, one that identifies them as fundamentally different from animals, is (apart from the capacity to laugh, and to know that they must die) the ability to make love with ghosts.” While many claim to fear the reduction of God to an image, perhaps we actually dread the power of an image to alter our physiology. How can something as inanimate as a photograph or a movie star on a flat screen create such a stir?

The idol that today’s iconoclasts may need to smash is the fear of images. In *A Grief Observed*, C. S. Lewis wrestles with his tendency to turn God into an idol. He writes, “Images of the Holy easily become holy images—sacrosanct. My idea of God is not a divine idea. It has to be shattered time after time. He shatters it Himself. He is the great iconoclast. Could we not almost say that this shattering is one of the marks of His presence? The Incarnation is the supreme example; it leaves all previous ideas of the Messiah in ruins. . . . The same thing happens in our private prayers. All reality is iconoclastic.” God can be counted on to smash whatever we’ve made too sacred. Perhaps our fear of images will come tumbling down amid our efforts to forge a postmodern faith.
We also must resist the temptation to drag each other down. In some of the most contentious eras in church history, the controversy centered on the place of imagery in worship. Yet we cannot overestimate the importance of an integrated theology of images for our electronic era. Maybe a healthy view of icons can deepen one’s faith and art. As enhanced definition sharpens our televisions, surely enhanced vision can expand my appreciation of film and my understanding of God. The rich visual storytelling of Catholic filmmakers like Hitchcock, Scorsese, and Coppola suggests that a profound visual aesthetic resides within our broad Christian tradition. The haunting films of Russian Orthodox filmmaker Andrei Tarkovsky invite us to look through our material world. Calvin College graduate Paul Schrader makes movies stained by sin but ripe for redemption. Protestant, Catholic, and Orthodox Christians all follow a rabbi who challenged us to have “eyes to see and ears to hear.” In the beginning was the Word, but Jesus was also the image of the invisible God. I long to see clearly. I need to develop a theology of beauty that complements (and counterbalances) my understanding of sin. Simply because our eyes may cause us to sin does not mean we must cut them out of our experience of worship (or filmgoing).

Film Theory’s Blind Spots

Protestants have polished word-based religious expressions, but words have also ruled academia. The printing press fueled the rise of universities as so-called universal education exploded over the past five hundred years. Theology took root in the reading and writing of books. Film theory arose with the same educational assumptions and practices. Arguments are made and responded to in writing. Film scholar Noel Carroll recalls his entry into the Cinema Studies Department at New York University in 1970: “The NYU program was one of the first of its kind in the United States—an academic department of film history and theory, without a practical filmmaking wing.” While the PhD program was still being accredited, “one felt the pressure to demonstrate that film studies was a full-fledged academic discipline . . . Consequently, if one were in the business of inventing a new discipline, one straight-forward strategy was to imitate a going concern like literary studies.” Perhaps film theory, focused upon moving images, can enhance a word-bound theology. But only when both fields have been released from a literary paradigm will they be free to truly communicate with an image-saturated society.