**MOVIE THEOLOGY**

WORKSHOP

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CHINESE MISSIONS CONFERENCE

San Diego, CA

Glen G. Scorgie

Professor of Theology, Bethel Seminary San Diego

[www.glenscorgie.com](http://www.glenscorgie.com)

g-scorgie@bethel.edu

OVERVIEW

Movies today powerfully reflect and shape beliefs, attitudes and values on a global scale. By cultivating the art of watching and listening perceptively, Christians can better understand what people today are thinking and feeling. Contemporary movies also provide important evangelistic “points of contact”—non-threatening opportunities for stimulating conversations on matters of faith.

INTRODUCTION

Film is now “the language of mankind” (Elia Kazan)

The main idea of this workshop is that conversations about movies can create very effective, non-threatening evangelistic opportunities just about anywhere in the world.

Movies today are a multi-billion dollar industry worldwide. And their popularity and influence only continues to grow. There are numerous movie production centers around the world, including “Bollywood” in India, and the Hong Kong industry. But America’s Hollywood continues to be the largest and most influential on the planet.

WHY MOVIES ARE *APPEALING*

1. Everyone Loves a Story

2. The Appeal of the Beautiful

3. An Opportunity to Escape

4. A Welcome “Break” from Thinking (*A*-muse-ment)

5. The Paradox of Losing and Finding Ourselves

WHY MOVIES ARE *POWERFUL*

1. The Medium Is Perfectly Matched to the “Post-Gutenberg Galaxy”

2. The Movie Industry Attracts Gifted Artists and Geniuses

3. The Reality of Common Grace

4. Movies are a Full-Engagement Medium

5. Education Disguised as Entertainment

6. Movies “Screen the Sacred” (They Address Matters of Ultimate Concern)

WHY MOVIES CAN BE GREAT EVANGELISTIC “POINTS OF CONTACT”

1. Watching and Discussing Movies is a “Normal” Activity

2. People Like to Talk about What They Already Know

3. Movies Touch on Many Issues Central to Life and Faith

4. God Is Already Present at the Movies

BEING SELECTIVE IN YOUR MOVIE VIEWING:

Life Is Short—You Can’t Watch Everything and Still Have a Life

1. Dismiss the Trivial

2. Avoid the Tempting or Corrupting

3. Prioritize the Influential and Significant

WATCHING AND LISTENING WITH DISCERNMENT:

Learning the Art of Discerning Film Criticism

Theologian Robert Johnston has said this: “If theologians, both amateur and professional, are to avoid reading into movies what is not there, they must learn something of the craft of viewing and reflecting; they must develop their critical skills.”

Christians who have had some training in film criticism are at an advantage here. But all of us can, with a bit of effort, learn the basic skills of interpreting what is going on in movies. The one book I can recommend among all others in this field is Robert K. Johnston, *Reel Spirituality: Theology and Film in Dialogue*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2006).

When it comes to getting background information about movies online, the single most significant website is the *Internet Movie Database*: [www.imdb.com](http://www.imdb.com)

One of the first things we discover is that there are a number of different ways we can approach a movie, and each of them is valid and potentially useful. Here are just a few examples:

1. Auteur Criticism

2. Viewer-Response Criticism

3. Thematic Criticism

A CASE STUDY: THE QUEST FOR ATONEMENT

One of the challenges we face as those who bear witness to the Gospel of Christ is helping people to make sense of the cross—the death of Christ as an atonement for the sins of the world. It is not easy for people to make the story of the brutal death of a Palestinian rabbi two thousand years ago very meaningful to them in their world of internet, airports and Fantasy Football. In fact, some people are now saying that the centrality of an instrument of execution to Christianity proves that it is still a primitive, bloody and violent religion. Inasmuch as it is a religion in which God sent his own son to be a human sacrifice means that Christianity is a toxic religion that celebrates divine child abuse. If God were really kind and loving, he would just flat out forgive people for their mistakes and sins without demanding bloody compensation for the offenses committed.

Movies contain themes that help us respond to these sorts of reactions by show that deep down in human consciousness is an awareness that guilt cannot be shrugged off, and that we intuitively recognize that real payment, real compensation must somehow be made to restore the moral symmetry of the universe. Let me offer you some examples of some helpful “points of contact” embedded in a selection of recent movies.

1. *Atonement* (dir. Joel Wright, 2007)

2. *The Kite Runner* (dir. Marc Forster, 2007)

3. *Gran Torino* (dir. Clint Eastwood, 2008)

CONCLUSION

These movies assure us that the message of the cross is not obsolete or irrelevant. Movies like this can be very meaningful points of contact for conversations about the Gospel.

Take notes on movies you watch. Build a personal database.

Start a movie group.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

Barsotti, Catherine, & Robert Johnston. *Finding God in the Movies: 33 Films of Reel Faith*. Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004.

Detweiler, Craig. *Into the Dark: Seeing the Sacred in the Top Films of the 21st Century*. Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008.

Detweiler, Craig, & Barry Taylor. *A Matrix of Meanings: Finding God in Pop Culture*. Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003.

Johnston, Robert K. *Reel Spirituality: Theology and Film in Dialogue*, rev ed*.* Grand Rapids: Baker, 2006.

Johnston, Robert K., ed. *Reframing Theology and Film: New Focus for an Emerging Discipline*. Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007.

Marsh, Clive. *Theology Goes to the Movies: An Introduction to Critical Christian Thinking*. London & New York: Routledge, 2007.

Romanowski, William D. *Eyes Wide Open: Looking for God in Popular Culture.* Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2001.

Vaux, Sara Anson. *Finding Meaning at the Movies*. Nashville: Abingdon, 1999.