

# Easier Said Than Done: On Reversing the Hermeneutical Flow in the Theology and Film Dialogue

William Romanowski and  
Jennifer L. Vander Heide

*This essay examines one means of theological film interpretation called “reversing the hermeneutical flow” by focusing specifically on the appropriation of this method by certain evangelical theologians. The viability of this approach rests on the assumption that a viewer can, and indeed should suspend “theologizing,” that is, judgment based on pre-existing beliefs and values, during the viewing experience. Drawing on research in cognitive film studies and philosophical hermeneutics, we argue that this is a flawed assumption about the phenomenological experience of film viewing, specifically, its presuppositional nature. This study highlights two key issues in the theology-film dialogue—the role of arts in the meaning-making process and the role of perspective in the film-viewing experience. Keywords: Religion, theology, film, popular culture, hermeneutics, Protestant.*

U ntil the late 1960s Protestant and Catholic involvement with the film industry was mostly characterized by censorial designs and ecclesiastical pressure. A series of Supreme Court rulings in the decades after World War II, however, undermined the practice of prior censorship, and by direct implication, church control over movie content. Censorship and boycotts were now seen by many as violations of constitutional rights; the film industry abandoned its Production Code and adopted a movie rating system in 1968. Even so, among some Protestant groups much of what constituted “Christian” or theological film criticism continued to rely

upon early twentieth-century assumptions about the cinema, namely that movies were entertainment and not art, and that film producers should be responsive to church officials as society's moral guardians.

This contextual background is important for understanding the theological discourse about film that has its most direct roots in the period around 1970. Certain theologians reacted against church censorship of film and the simplistic delineation of movies as either "Christian" or "secular" based on unsophisticated moral, theological or ideological evaluations. Protestant fundamentalists and conservative evangelicals, for example, protested films they disapproved of, most famously *The Last Temptation of Christ* (1988). Others just ignored film (and popular culture) based on elitist attitudes about the superiority of the traditional high arts. Theological interest in film was also a response to the reality that the role of the church had been affected by the mass-media-oriented society where popular artworks were entertaining life questions; theological debate was increasingly happening outside the church. The editors of *Explorations in Theology in Film* (1997) conclude: "Be that as it may, if Christian theology is not now to become a discussion between fewer and fewer people... then the central question is not *whether* Christian theology converses with film, but *how*" (Marsh and Ortiz 4).<sup>1</sup> The "how," indeed, is a big question and the focus of this essay.

Mindful of their postmodern context, theologians have settled on *dialogue* as both an apologetic and model for theological appropriation of film. For real dialogue to exist, however, film could not be used simply to *illustrate* theology, as "fodder for a good sermon," as Clive Marsh puts it ("Film and Theologies of Culture" 31-32). The counter idea was for film to somehow *contribute* to theology. Wide acknowledgment of postmodern assumptions about the social construction of reality and the leveling of competing knowledge claims presents a particularly vexing dilemma for theological openness to the cinema. The key issue here is how to make film a full partner in dialogue with theology that makes claims to absolute truth, without succumbing to what Robert K. Johnston calls "theological imperialism" (*Reel Spirituality* 49). In

other words, how are Christians and other people of faith to enter into dialogue with film minding their theological convictions while also respecting the filmmaker's artistic expression?

In this essay we offer a critical look at the recent conversation in the theology and film dialogue by examining one method of theological film interpretation—"reversing the hermeneutical flow"—as it has been employed by evangelical theologians Robert K. Johnston (*Reel Spirituality* and *Useless Beauty*) and Craig Detweiler and Barry Taylor (*A Matrix of Meanings: Find God in Popular Culture*). New Testament scholar Larry Kreitzer introduced this method in the 1990s. In stressing the influence of literary approaches and the importance of a contemporary cultural context in biblical interpretation, Kreitzer wishes to "reverse the flow of influence within the hermeneutical process and examine select NT passages or themes in the light of some of the enduring expressions of our own culture, namely great literary works and their film adaptations" (*The New Testament* 19).<sup>2</sup> In other words, Kreitzer's idea of hermeneutical reversal starts with the influence the Bible has had on Western culture; he investigates the creative interaction of Scripture, literature and cinema by examining works that are clearly grounded in "biblical passages or ideas" hoping to let film speak to theology (*The Old Testament* 13). In short, Kreitzer combs literature and filmic adaptations for biblical themes and images, proposing that these artworks can in turn contribute to understanding the biblical texts on which they are based.

The theologians under consideration here appropriate Kreitzer's method for analysis of film and popular culture, albeit with different motivations and purposes. Kreitzer's hermeneutic serves as a key assumption that conveniently provides them with a theoretical apparatus for their work in film (and popular art) criticism. For that reason they offer little by way of explanation and no critical assessment of reversing the hermeneutical flow, but nevertheless employ it—somewhat metaphorically at times—as both a justification and means for theological examination of film, popular art and culture.<sup>3</sup>

Robert Johnston situates his work in the context of others who have pursued theological "dialogue" or "conversation"

with film (Robert Jewett, Bernard Brandon Scott and David Rhoads), but his reliance on Kreitzer's model is most significant in distinguishing his particular approach. Johnston employs the hermeneutical reversal as a tactic to redress theological film criticism based on "judgments of 'truth' already understood" (*Useless Beauty* 12). His five theological approaches to film actually represent degrees of variation within two groups determined by the direction of the hermeneutical flow—from theological perspective to film and vice versa. Johnston dismisses those critics in the first category, which includes *avoidance* and *caution*, who work from theological perspective to film. He stands with those theologians who reverse the hermeneutical direction (i.e., from film to theology) hoping to produce a "two-way conversation" (*dialogue*), acquire theological insight (*appropriation*), or supremely, find "an experience with transcendence" (*divine encounter*) through film (*Reel Spirituality* 42, 75). In his books on film, Johnston also treats Hollywood films that are not necessarily based on biblical texts or themes, at least not by authorial intent.

Craig Detweiler and Barry Taylor, coauthors of *A Matrix of Meaning*, broaden application of Kreitzer's model still further to look at movies, music, television and others aspects of popular culture, all of which they find "abounding with the search for transcendence" (22). Drawing on one strain in popular culture studies, they emphasize the *compatibility* of theology and film over a *critique* of film as art, theology or culture, which is the old hermeneutical flow. A tenet of their "Top 10 theology" is that it "separates the reflective from the reactionary," as they put it, "the cultural anthropologists from the culture critics" (315). Detweiler and Taylor synthesize Kreitzer's approach with that of popular culture scholars who reject elitist definitions and standards that exalt traditional high art and disparage popular art and culture. Popular culture scholars use popular artifacts to *understand* rather than to *evaluate* the mindset of a people, to *describe* their culture rather than to *judge* it. In the academy where traditional literary methods of analysis were used to denigrate popular artworks, this approach legitimated the study

of popular culture (and often neglected groups, e.g., women and ethnic minorities) by employing accepted methodologies for analysis of popular culture that were grounded in the interpretive strategies of cultural anthropology.<sup>4</sup> For theologians, this particular approach counters elitist assumptions about the inferiority of popular culture, meets the conditions of postmodernism, and supports the principle of dialogue over theological imposition—but at the expense of critical appraisal, at least as the theologians under consideration here employ it. In other words, to facilitate dialogue Detweiler and Taylor want to resist making evaluative judgments in favor of interpreting films to glean insights into popular culture, which they perceive “as a vibrant and vital arena of spiritual expression” (9).<sup>5</sup>

The critique that follows draws upon the written accounts of these advocates of reversal, who produce a consistent, though not extensive explanation of this method for theological film interpretation. These religious film critics reverse the hermeneutical flow in order to engage film as artistic expression, that is, to take a film on its own terms. That indeed is a sensible attitude toward the cinema for it values the filmmaker’s freedom of expression and popular art as an arena for cultural discourse. We further agree that people of faith should not dismiss a film simply because it does not accord with their own moral, ideological, or theological agenda. In the following analysis we separate these assumptions from the interpretive practice “reversal” in its effort to resolve problems and direct theological dialogue with film. This approach highlights two key issues in the theology-film dialogue—the role of arts in the meaning-making process and the role of perspective in the film-viewing experience.

This analysis will explore the second of these suggestions—specifically the account of the film-viewing phenomenon and its potential as a method for dialogue. Drawing on research in cognitive film studies and philosophical hermeneutics, two different traditions that have both identified the significance of predispositions in the interpretative experience, we argue that this model harbors flawed assumptions about the phenomenological experience of film viewing, specifically, its presup-

positional nature. This method contends that a viewer *can*, and indeed *should* suspend “theologizing,” that is, judgment based on pre-existing beliefs and values (which might also include moral and ideological positions), during the viewing experience, and that this is even necessary in order to take a film on its own terms. While their primary purposes are to redress dismissive attitudes Christians exhibit toward film and to justify theological appropriation of film, these writers unfortunately offer no real guidance as to *how* a viewer temporarily suspends pre-existing beliefs and values while watching a film and then activates them afterwards. Indeed, the failure to provide guidance on how this might happen casts doubt on the viability of the enterprise. Failure to portray accurately the film-viewing experience undermines the plausibility of “reversal” as an explanatory model. Theologians writing about film are self-reflective and in constant debate themselves; we hope this essay might contribute to the ongoing discussion about methods and results.

### **As An Interpretive Method**

As these theologians have put it into practice, reversing the hermeneutical flow centers on suspending theological judgment until *after* viewing the film. The idea is for viewers to take a film on its own terms *first* and then only *afterwards* engage it theologically. “To give movie viewing this epistemological priority in the dialogue between film and theology—to judge it advisable to first look at a movie on its own terms and let the images themselves suggest meaning and direction—is not to make theology of secondary importance,” Johnston explains. “Religious faith is primary. In fact, I argue that the nature of both movie going and religious faith demands that film viewing be completed from a theological perspective. But such theologizing should follow, not precede, the aesthetic experience” (Johnston, *Reel Spirituality* 49-50). Similarly, Detweiler and Taylor explain, “Most Christian attempts to engage pop culture have begun with the Bible, placing it as the standard against which pop culture must be judged.” In contrast, Detweiler and Talyor read the “Bible *through* the grid of pop culture, what scholars call revers-

ing the hermeneutical flow. We construct our theology through a pop cultural matrix, allowing pop culture to speak for itself *before* we apply biblical interpretation” (10).<sup>6</sup>

The first questions to ask focus on the basis of “biblical interpretation” in this hermeneutical scheme. Are theologians/Christian viewers employing post-facto a preconceived theology that existed prior to the experience with the artifact? Are they now applying their reading of Scripture and theology constructed through the “pop cultural matrix” after having viewed the film? Or are they perhaps referring to some kind of resulting theological synthesis that emerges as a new basis for interpretation? It is not entirely clear. According to these descriptions, reversing the hermeneutical flow requires a viewer to subjugate theological perspective (we also assume moral or ideological posture as well) at least temporarily and, then, in an act of circuitry, let the film inform theology, which in turn then informs the viewer’s interpretation of the film (and the culture it represents) and, presumably, back again to theology.<sup>7</sup> In short, these theorists of film viewing never adequately address the key hermeneutical issue involved in this method, and we are left wondering why such a complicated hermeneutical scheme is necessary for Christians to view a film on its own terms.

Consider for a moment that a young woman watches *Pretty Woman* (1990). To reverse the hermeneutical flow, she is supposed to read the “Bible *through* the gird of pop culture” and construct a “theology through a pop cultural matrix,” in this case, *Pretty Woman*. Only after viewing the film does she actualize her own beliefs in order to theologize about the film. But if she has read the Bible through this film, should not the film *contribute* to her understanding of redemption, a theme in the film, for example? Or to her understanding of being a woman created in the image of God? Or her understanding of marriage and the woman’s role in it? If she is reading the Bible and constructing a theology *through* the film, on what basis does she carry out her “biblical interpretation” or “theologizing” afterwards? In other words, what is to prevent her from accepting the proposition embedded in the narrative that developing

an expertise at sex and fine tuning her fashion and consumer sense would make her marketable and better able to secure that perfect mate, an “obscene” amount of money, and a completely fulfilled life? If readers find this example to be rather an overly simplistic appropriation, the point is that there is nothing explicitly stated in the approaches of Johnston or Detweiler and Taylor that would forbid it.

Giving “epistemological priority” to film viewing while also maintaining that this does not render “theology of secondary importance,” as Johnston proposes, presents an unsettling paradox. Johnston summarizes Kreitzer’s argument as “a need to ‘reverse the hermeneutical flow’ between Bible and culture, letting film and novel inform and instruct Scripture” (*Reel Spirituality* 164). Here the hermeneutical direction is from cultural text to Scripture. However, commenting on Robert Jewett’s approach in *Saint Paul Goes to the Movies* (“dialogue in a prophetic mode”), Johnston contends, “Given his choice to start with the biblical text and given his commitment (one I also share) to have Scripture function authoritatively, as first among equals, Jewett is always in danger of imposing a theological perspective on the films he considers” (*Reel Spirituality* 52). According to Johnston then, to avoid theological imposition a viewer has to begin with the filmic text and not Scripture, even though Scripture is to “function authoritatively.” How does this happen experientially? To what extent can (or should) a Christian viewer separate “theologizing” from the actual “aesthetic experience”? In other words, how intellectually, imaginatively, or religiously viable is this understanding of the film-viewing phenomenon?

### **On the Hermeneutical Situation**

Theologians are fully aware of the role of preexisting beliefs and knowledge in the film-viewing process. John C. Lyden, for example, rightly dismisses conceptions of moviegoers as “passive receptacles.” He observes that filmgoers “are often highly critical and spend much time discussing films before, during, and after the viewing. People are involved in the film especially while viewing it, whether they are screaming in a horror movie,

laughing in a comedy, or applauding the hero at a key moment” (*Film as Religion* 46). Likewise, Marsh and Ortiz acknowledge that “baggage—in the way of attitudes, beliefs and values—is being brought to a film. Baggage is brought by all interpreters to any work of art in order to undertake interpretation at all. It has to be” (2). And Johnston even writes, “It is true that all viewers watch movies ‘presuppositionally,’ that is, with a hidden or stated agenda that is theirs by virtue of their humanity” (*Reel Spirituality* 73).<sup>8</sup> In contrast to these epistemic cautions, proponents of this reversal hermeneutic assume that a film has a message viewers can only understand properly if they somehow do not let their own cultural, religious or ideological assumptions get in the way of interpretation. Such a proposal to suspend judgment while viewing a film appeals for some kind of momentary objectivity (a modernist notion) that will automatically free the filmgoer of any particular bias in film viewing. Unfortunately, subordinating preexisting beliefs in order to understand and appreciate a filmmaker’s message does not accord with the observably presuppositional nature of the film-viewing phenomenon and established understandings of film viewers as active agents, co-creators in the meanings of films.

What is at issue here is the proposal—crucial in reversing the hermeneutical flow—that temporary suspension of preexisting beliefs during film viewing is both a phenomenological possibility and necessity for viewers to be able to understand a film properly. Our contention is this: In their proposition that viewers can suspend their pre-existing beliefs during the film-viewing process, theologians wanting to reverse the hermeneutical flow underestimate the extent to which actualizing pre-existing beliefs is necessary in the comprehension of film narratives. Paradoxically, in fashioning a two-directional hermeneutical scheme they exaggerate the degree to which viewers are conscious of their own beliefs (theology) and are active in affirming them in their encounter with film (culture).

In his work on philosophical hermeneutics and historical understanding, Hans-Georg Gadamer argues that “a hermeneutical situation is determined by the prejudices that we bring with

us" (306). Gadamer uses the term *prejudice* to describe "a judgment that is rendered before all the elements that determine a situation have been finally examined" (270). Prejudices, then, are "pre-judgments" that are not necessarily negative (like prejudices based on racist stereotypes, for example) but form the basis for conscious judgment. As Gadamer puts it, "The recognition that all understanding inevitably involves some prejudice gives the hermeneutical problem its thrust" (270).<sup>9</sup> As expected much of the theological discourse about film centers on the place and self-conscious awareness of bias in film criticism. In an exchange in the *Journal of Religion and Film*, for example, John C. Lyden agrees with Clive Marsh that theologians need to be upfront about "the ideological and theological biases that affect our interpretation" (Lyden, *Film as Religion* 34-35). Lyden may have proponents of reversing the hermeneutical flow in mind when he contends that we cannot "avoid this question by claiming to bracket value judgments while one examines popular culture, as one's values will still affect how one views the phenomenon, implicitly or otherwise" ("To Commend or To Critique").<sup>10</sup> What are the implications of this view of the hermeneutical situation for the interpretive dialogue between theology and film under consideration here?

### **Film Viewing and Preexisting Beliefs**

What reversalists propose runs exactly counter to the understanding of the film-viewing experience by cognitive film theorists. In a study of mass art, Noël Carroll argues persuasively that viewers come to the filmic text with pre-existing beliefs and emotions that are a condition for comprehending a film narrative *during* the actual viewing. "Most narratives rely on the activation of moral beliefs on the part of the audience," he explains, "and the relevance of what goes on in the story to those moral beliefs is indispensable to the audience for grasping the point of the narrative." That narratives are "selective and therefore incomplete" requires audience members to bring to the filmic text "what is not explicit in it." Artist and audience, then, share to a large extent "a common background of beliefs about the world and

about human nature, as well as a relatively common emotional stock,” he explains (322, 323).<sup>11</sup> This is especially the situation with mass artworks that “depend—as a condition of their very intelligibility—upon our antecedent possession of knowledge of various moral precepts, and of concepts of vice and virtue, and so on” (Carroll 325). Suspense, for example, is generated in part by a viewer’s concern for a certain resolution based on a system of beliefs. What a viewer finds humorous is based on a perspective situated in historically and culturally specific contexts. Identification with characters is complex and depends on a variety of factors. How a viewer responds emotionally or whether a viewer is sympathetic with a character involves rendering a judgment about the character based on the viewer’s already existing beliefs, values and attitudes about class, nationality, age, ethnicity and gender.<sup>12</sup> And studies in audience reception theory show the centrality of gender, sexual orientation, race and ethnicity, and other identity factors (theological orientation can also be included) in shaping film viewing and interpretation.

Carroll further proposes that while narratives play off already existing moral beliefs and emotions “in *exercising* these pre-existing moral powers in response to texts, the texts may become opportunities for enhancing our already existing moral understanding” (340). He calls this *clarification*. Typically viewers do not “acquire new propositional knowledge from artworks,” he explains. Instead, artworks “can deepen our moral understanding by, among other things, encouraging us to apply our moral knowledge and emotions to specific cases. For in being prompted to apply and engage our antecedent moral powers, we may come to augment them” (Carroll 326).<sup>13</sup> Carroll goes so far as to assert that the pertinent direction “is not *from the text to the world* by way of newly acquired and interesting moral propositions,” but rather “*from the world to the text*” (340). We find this assertion somewhat exaggerated, but understand that Carroll focuses on mass artworks intended to communicate with large, undifferentiated and relatively untutored audiences. In order to maximize potential audience, most Hollywood films affirm already existing beliefs and values in order to be *popular*.

Scholars even argue that the popularity of a cultural product is scaled to the extent to which it affirms the dominant beliefs and attitudes. “The greater the popularity of the cultural element—in an era and/or over time—the more reflective of the zeitgeist this element is likely to be,” Jack Nachbar and Kevin Lause propose. “The formula assumes that audiences *choose* a specific cultural element over other alternatives because they find it attractive in its reassuring reflection of their beliefs, values and desires” (5).<sup>14</sup> This theory suggests a significant relation between a viewer’s life perspective and the degree to which she likes or dislikes certain popular artworks. To a large extent then, a film’s merit actually rides on its ability to affirm the viewer’s preexisting beliefs and values. And given the high stakes economics of the film industry, it is potentially more profitable for Hollywood studios to represent dominant values than to challenge them.<sup>15</sup>

By demonstrating the significance of pre-existing beliefs and knowledge for the film-viewing experience—and even comprehension of a film—these studies undermine the assertion that viewers must, or even can, suspend preconceived beliefs in order to properly understand a film. Viewers can perhaps have visceral reactions while watching a film with more thoughtful responses coming later. But audience response is still predicated on shared beliefs and assumptions that viewers bring to their viewing of the film. How can it be otherwise?

### **Reversing the Hermeneutical Flow in Practice**

While critics speak of suspending judgment in the effort to reverse the hermeneutical flow, their work frequently shows that they fail to practice their own advice. Indeed, demonstrations of reversing the hermeneutical flow consistently show preexisting beliefs in operation. Johnston’s selection of films for treatment of themes in the Book of Ecclesiastes in *Useless Beauty* had to begin with preconceived knowledge of Ecclesiastes. Otherwise, how would he know these films shed light on, or could be illuminated by Ecclesiastes without prior knowledge of and an interpretive understanding of Ecclesiastes? As a reviewer for *Publisher’s Weekly* rightly observes, “Although the title promotes

Ecclesiastes through the lens of film, it is really a treatment of film through the lens of Ecclesiastes, as Johnston intersperses key biblical passages in italics next to his rendition of film plots and characters showing us the dynamic analogies” (75). It follows that a film may enrich a viewer’s understanding of the Book of Ecclesiastes, but only if (or when) the viewer knows something of Ecclesiastes to begin with.

Reversing the hermeneutical flow is supposed to facilitate a “two-way conversation,” a reciprocal process, rather than a unidirectional one (Johnston, *Useless Beauty* 12). As these theologians put it into practice, however, film is employed mostly as a means of reflecting upon preconceived theology. For example, Detweiler and Taylor explain, “Putting pop culture first has heightened our understanding of overlooked and underappreciated biblical texts” (10). To illustrate, they write:

We appreciate Job’s suffering even more after watching Mel Gibson’s struggle in *Signs*. Proverbs’ recurring emphasis on the danger of shortcuts, the snares of temptation, and the rewards of honesty finds expression in sitcoms such as *The Simpsons*. The Song of Solomon’s obsession with love, with the celebration of the physical, dominates the radio dial. The weariness expressed in Ecclesiastes flows through the precincts of *NYPD Blue* and the suburbs of *American Beauty*. Lamentations deals with grief, which Eric Clapton captured so eloquently in “Tears in Heaven.”(11)

Perhaps these illustrations highlighting something of significance in Scripture can be considered as *contributing* to theology, but how is this any different than a popular artwork simply *illustrating* theology? And to what extent does this constitute reversing the hermeneutical flow? Finding similarities between biblical and popular cultural texts illustrates common themes, but this only supports David Jasper’s assertion: “Any intertextuality with the Bible serves to underline more the universal nature of the biblical texts rather than develop our understanding of them in a modern context” (239). What do we gain from such

an approach as this aside from asserting the relevance of theology to contemporary culture? However ambitious in intent, the resulting analyses are best understood as preconceived theological themes applied to a film, which in turn serve to confirm or illustrate the original theological theme.

Perhaps that is all we can expect from this interpretive method. However, if the purpose of this hermeneutical reversal is to “throw us back to our ideas and practices, and rethink them in the light of the impact of the medium,” as David John Graham asserts (38), might we not expect something more from this kind of theological dialogue? The novel and theatrical productions of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852), for example, reportedly changed people’s beliefs and attitudes on the institution of slavery (Nye 155). Something similar in terms of historical perspective happened with Oliver Stone’s *JFK* (1992); viewing the film reportedly had “an extraordinary effect on the public’s consciousness” convincing people that there was a conspiracy to assassinate President Kennedy (Ruskin 487).<sup>16</sup> Or suppose a Christian opposing homosexual behavior concludes after seeing *Brokeback Mountain* (2005) that homosexual love and emotional desires are genuinely human and accordingly revises his own beliefs and attitudes. That would seem to constitute a reversal of the hermeneutical flow.

These kinds of experiences are relatively few, however, since as we have seen, films typically affirm rather than introduce new beliefs. Nevertheless, narrative films by their nature engage our emotions and beliefs and provoke judgments. As cultural texts, movies can provide encounters that thwart, provoke, challenge or make us question our expectations. As Gadamer shows, we can and do, however, sometimes become aware of some of our prejudices through such encounters; the effect is to objectify our prejudices in the face of the new situation by making us conscious of our pre-judgments. For example, an encounter with a person with a disability may be the first occasion for someone to recognize his own ideals, beliefs and expectations about disability. Before this, he may have been unaware that he even had such anticipatory commitments. Filmic texts can provide a similar encounter and with the same effect, and this seems to

be what theologians intended with reversing the hermeneutical flow—“letting film and novel inform and instruct Scripture.” Although the aim was for film to inform theology, proponents of this method are not persuasive in explaining how this might occur. As we have seen, their analyses demonstrate only that film can be a means of reflecting upon a preconceived theology.

### **On Encountering Different Perspectives**

The dialogical relation of theology and film centers on a tension between film as cultural representation and the authority of Scripture, or more specifically, Christian beliefs about normativity based on a particular reading of Scripture. Reversing the hermeneutical flow then is structured on the premise of two distinct paradigms—Scripture/theology and film/culture—interacting with one another. The key issue hinges on calibrating the level of authority granted to each. As theologians see it, giving precedence to Scripture/theology too often results in a tendency to treat film as illustrative and at worst to disparage films not in accord with theological doctrines. Conversely, however, making film/culture a source of theology poses a threat to scriptural or theological authority and risks cultural accommodation.<sup>17</sup>

This two-directional scheme oversimplifies the hermeneutical process by creating a kind of oppositional relation between theological perspective and the filmic text. An immediate difficulty, then, is determining the extent to which a religious film critic can criticize a film based on a particular perspective without being guilty of “theological imperialism.” Conrad E. Ostwalt, for example, writes convincingly that Hollywood films have secularized the apocalyptic tradition in literature by investing humans with complete control over time and the destiny of humankind (“Hollywood and Armageddon” 55-63). Robert Jewett and John Shelton Lawrence are equally persuasive in showing that popular American narratives, like those in traditional Western movies and comic book superheroes, adhere to a distinctively American monomyth, which they describe as an American appropriation (and secularization) of Judeo-Christian redemption dramas. These writers advance a theological critique

of film carried out in a way that violates the tenets of reversing the hermeneutical flow since they read popular artworks through the interpretive lens of Scripture/theology.

Conversely, by treating culture as a source of theology without providing an adequate means for critical judgment, reversing the hermeneutical flow runs the risk of cultural accommodation. We think of John Eldredge's *Wild at Heart: Discovering the Secret of a Man's Soul*, for example. Critics rightly observe that Eldredge's notion of the "masculine design" is drawn from contemporary Hollywood depictions of masculinity, which then inform his reading of Scripture (Mulder and Smith). In her treatment of sermons on the Parable of the Prodigal Son, Marsha Witten demonstrates that Protestant preachers made substantial accommodation of basic Protestant doctrine to dominant trends of American culture. And in an essay on the "peculiarly American approach to empire," Robert Bellah draws on Jewett's analysis of superheroes to show that the American propensity to divide the world into good and evil, though informed early on by Protestant attitudes, is "now secularized and pervasive in our popular culture, disseminated by movies, television and video games" (21). Though not their direct purpose, these three illustrations show that cultural accommodation is just as real a danger with reversing the hermeneutical flow as theological imposition in encounters with film and popular culture. Indeed, one reviewer thinks that the dialogue in Johnston's *Useless Beauty* "often collapses into monologue: filmmakers talk, Christians listen" (Byassee 44).

As we have seen, in its operation reversing the hermeneutical flow means finding compatibility between theology and film. Whether an overreaction to Christian condemnation of film or too much of a concession to postmodernism, these theologians too easily equate criticism with theological imperialism. Consequently, this method does not provide a satisfactory explanation for how Christian viewers are to deal with films representing standpoints that differ or even conflict with their own.

We find Gadamer's representation of understanding as a fusion of horizons more helpful in thinking about the way encountering a text might affect a viewer's perspective. Briefly,

Gadamer stresses the importance of transposing oneself into the horizon from which a text speaks, the *horizon* being “the range of vision that includes everything that can be seen from a particular vantage point” (302). He considers this a “legitimate hermeneutical requirement” for understanding the other horizon (303). But transposing oneself into the other’s horizon does not satisfactorily describe the hermeneutical situation because there are not really two different horizons, the one of the person seeking to understand and that of which he seeks to place himself in. Transposing oneself into the other horizon does not amount to “just disregarding ourselves,” he writes, but rather “into this other situation we must bring, precisely, ourselves” (305). Consequently, Gadamer argues that understanding is a *fusion of horizons* that takes place dialogically, between text and interpreter, for example, and results in a *new thing*. “To reach an understanding in a dialogue is not merely a matter of putting oneself forward and successfully asserting one’s own point of view, but being transformed into a communion in which we do not remain what we were,” he observes (379). It is a matter of putting things together in a new way that changes perceptions, not in the sense of acquiring the other’s perspective, but the creation of something new. Understanding here does not necessarily mean agreement, but rather “an integration of differing perspectives in a deeper understanding of the matters in question,” as Georgia Warnke puts it (qtd. in Walhof 165).

By Gadamer’s account viewers take a risk encountering texts that thwart or provoke into awareness prejudices because the results of such an encounter are unpredictable and do not leave the viewer unchanged. “The mere attempt to be understood and to understand, then, already serves to put our prejudices at risk,” political theorist Darren Walhof finds. This is what is meant by “open-mindedness. It is not that we suspend belief or doubt our views as a precondition to dialogue. Instead we engage with another as partner and fellow knower and fellow speaker, and with the event of understanding comes a change of perspective” (Walhof 167). Gadamer’s approach to the hermeneutical situation as a fusion of horizons suggests how it might be possible

for viewer's to engage creatively with film in such a way that the film might inform, even perhaps alter the viewer's perspective by calling out pre-existing beliefs and assumptions.

In short, proponents of reversing the hermeneutical flow do not sufficiently explain how viewers might negotiate prejudices in a filmic encounter to bring about a new way of seeing things. At most they describe only experiences with films that highlight preexisting beliefs or knowledge and not *how* a filmic text might affect theology—their main proposition. As we have shown, assimilating the other perspective and then theologizing over it is not a satisfactory account; simply postponing theological critique until after the viewing differs only in attitude from the theological imposition they seek to avoid.

These shortcomings reveal a sizeable blind spot in this theo-critical method for film analysis with theologians avoiding a crucial question: How are theologians to take a film on its own terms considering, as David Jasper notes, that most films “would never be conceived of in themselves as theological or even religious” (237). That being the case, how is a theological approach to be applied while still guarding the integrity of the film? To what extent does the artist's intention create boundaries for possible interpretations? Certainly a critic imposes a theological framework when he expects or insists that the filmmaker work with certain theological categories. But is it not also a theological imposition when a critic strains interpretation of the film to accommodate preconceived theological categories? Given that theologians conceive of movies as “modern-day parables, giving us fresh eyes to see and ears to hear,” it is not at all unlikely that such theological approaches might end up of fostering a kind of clericalism with theologians qua film critics unearthing mysteries of movies that may be lost even to the filmmakers themselves (Johnston qtd. in “The Gospel Goes to Sundance”).<sup>18</sup> Furthermore, given their theological context it is understandable that the quintessential moment, at least for Johnston, is not film as art, ethics, cultural engagement, or even theology, but as an experience with the transcendent, “divine encounters,” by which he means moments when a film-viewing experience becomes

“the occasion for God to speak to the viewer” (*Reel Spirituality* 43, 29).<sup>19</sup> Considering that the vast majority of film viewings do not result in an experience of genuine transcendence, on what basis are Christians to think about and value these other mundane cinematic moments? Christians can also benefit from the cinema as a means of personal self-reflection, entertainment, cultural insight or social critique, as examples. These limitations raise questions about the viability of this method as a direction for a full-fledged Christian film criticism.

### Conclusion

This analysis highlights a difficult and complex issue that deserves further consideration than space allows here: How are Christians (and other people of faith) to engage in the practice of film criticism with some measure of faith and still respect the integrity of the film and its narrative content? Further, how does perspective, whether moral, ideological or theological, figure into engagement with film as art, that is, as an experience qualified foremost by the aesthetic?

Analysis of film as art begins with the filmic text and the viewer’s encounter with it. It depends on both the openness and viewing skills of the viewer and the artistry and wisdom of the filmmaker. As film scholar Stephen Prince explains, “Meaning is not ‘in’ the film but is formed by the interaction of the film’s audiovisual and narrative design with the viewer’s own horizon of perceptual and social experience—the viewer’s interpretive contribution” (243). In the popular cinema, as we have seen, movies commonly affirm most viewers’ preconceived values. Under these circumstances, regular experiences with mainstream movies hardly require viewers to reflect much upon their belief system; the cumulative effect is probably to reify their values and assumptions.

As Roland Barthes and other scholars show, myth and ideology have a *naturalizing* effect, making historical and socially constructed representations of reality appear to be natural or universal. To counter this effect, or to unmask movies as vehicles for ideology, these critics advocate increasing the viewer’s

awareness of the myths and ideologies that inform narratives and characterizations. Likewise, Christian viewers can benefit from an awareness of the dominant perspectives in the cinema; arguably, the greater the awareness of one's perspective, as opposed to the denial of perspective, the better a viewer can intelligently encounter the world of a film. Discourse on movies can provoke reflection on Christian perspectives that are affirmed, challenged, or brought into conflict with the worlds represented by films and in that regard serve both to heighten a viewer's awareness of his own perspective—its merits and limitations—and film viewing as a hermeneutical situation. Indeed, as we have shown, understanding takes place within and by means of one's life perspective; Carroll, for example, makes no distinction between understanding the artwork and deepening or enlarging one's moral understanding, but views them as "part and parcel of the same process" (331). No single hermeneutical scheme itself will necessarily change Christian attitudes about the cinema. Increased self-awareness of prejudices or perspective should combine with a measure of openness—with film criticism embracing the tension between conviction and humility.

---

William D. Romanowski (Ph.D. Bowling Green State University, 1990) is Professor of Communication Arts and Sciences at Calvin College, Grand Rapids, Michigan <romw@calvin.edu>. He is the author of *Pop Culture Wars: Religion and the Role of Entertainment in American Life*, the award-winning *Eyes Wide Open: Looking for God in Popular Culture*, which just came out in a revised and expanded edition (2007), and has also written numerous book chapters, journal essays, and popular articles. He teaches film studies and is currently working on a history of Protestant negotiation with the American film industry based on original historical sources.

Jennifer L. Vander Heide (B.A., Calvin College, 2006) is spending a year in Budapest, Hungary teaching high school. She has been accepted and will begin graduate studies in film at the University of Wisconsin-Madison in the fall of 2007. This essay is the product of collaborative research funded by the McGregor Summer Research Fellowship Program at Calvin College. Earlier versions of this essay were presented at the Michigan Academy of Science, Arts & Letters and the American Culture Association. The authors wish to thank Roy Anker, Rodney Clapp, Carl Plantinga, Chris Smit, Darren Walhof and Scott Young for their careful reading and suggestions.

## Endnotes

1 For summaries of the literature on religious/theological film studies see Nolan, “The Books of the Films” and May.

2 Kreitzer’s three other books centered on this methodology are: *The Old Testament in Fiction and Film: On Reversing the Hermeneutical Flow*; *Pauline Images in Fiction and Film: On Reversing the Hermeneutical Flow*; and *Gospel Images in Fiction and Film: On Reversing the Hermeneutical Flow*.

3 Kreitzer’s own rendering of his hermeneutical approach appears to be under-theorized given that he relies on textbook efforts to summarize the ideas of hermeneutical theory rather than primary source material. See *The New Testament in Fiction and Film*, 14.

4 Nachbar and Lause propose studying popular cultural artifacts “not as ends in themselves but as means of unlocking their meaning in the culture as a whole” (7). Also, religious studies scholar Bruce David Forbes explains, “Analysts of popular culture use the word ‘culture’ in a wider sense without making judgments of value, quality, or taste, so that comic books and Faulkner novels, tuxedos and torn jeans, radio talk shows and university lectures...are all parts of ‘culture’” (2).

5 This proves difficult however. The co-authors exhibit pre-existing evaluative standards, for example, by observing, “When films such as *The Omega Code* and *Left Behind* combine special effects and Scripture to explain the future, God becomes cheesy, the wholly Other boiled down to a hidden code” (159).

6 The reference to Kreitzer is clear in this quoted passage and accompanying citation (even if it is obscured by omission of Kreitzer in the Bibliography and an errant page reference in the Index). In short, Detweiler and Taylor want “to create a theology *out of* popular culture rather than a theology *for* popular culture” (16). Rodney Clapp gives a contrasting argument: “We may and should look for ‘parallels and analogies’ to God and God’s way in human culture—popular culture and crowds included. But we must take care to make the lead and controlling factor in any analogy God’s God-initiated revelation in Jesus Christ, not the invention of religion or popular culture” (33).

7 Along the same lines, a critic of Kreitzer observed: “Which way is the flow going, or does it not matter? Are we constantly allowed to re-interpret, a hermeneutical circle between scripture, fiction, film, and back to scripture, or are there constants?” (Gray 114). For other reviews of Kreitzer see Mabee and Nolan, “Rev. of *The New Testament in Fiction and Film*.”

8 He adds, “But it is only the viewers whose presuppositions enable and encourage them freely to engage the center of power and meaning of a movie on its own ground who are able to be critically free and freely critical” (*Reel Spirituality*, 73). By affirming the force of presuppositions

in film viewing—here in the form of attitude—this statement would seem to undermine the notion that viewers can suspend preexisting beliefs and values during the viewing process.

9 That prejudices form the basis for conscious judgment implies that they are not conscious objects or propositions and are not necessarily known through mere reflection.

10 See also Marsh, “Religion, Theology and Film in a Postmodern Age” and Lyden, “Continuing the Conversation.”

11 Although Carroll was writing about morality there is no reason why we cannot find common ground here with theology in terms of the nature and dynamics of film viewing.

12 See Smith 160-169.

13 This view is compatible with that of James W. Carey who proposed a “ritual” view of communication as “a symbolic process whereby reality is produced, maintained, repaired, and transformed.” He conceived of communication as a participatory ritual that had less to do with knowledge acquisition than “the representation of shared beliefs.” James W. Carey, *Communication as Culture: Essays on Media and Society* (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1989) 23, 18.

14 The “Top 10 theology” of Detweiler and Taylor borrows directly from the Nachbar-Lause formula in suggesting “that the popularity of a song, movie, or show corresponds with its ability to connect with viewer’s core hopes, feeling, and desires, and it does not automatically dismiss those desires as base, sexual, or sinful” (296).

15 Writing about ideology, film scholar Stephen Prince explained that to reduce box-office risk and appeal to huge heterogeneous audiences, major studios put in “a little of this and a little of that into a film. The resulting ideological mix creates a sufficiently ambiguous product calculated to attract as many members of the target audience as possible while offending few. Ideological conglomeration enables Hollywood films to appeal to a multitude of different viewers” (422).

16 For survey results see Carter and Rosenbaum.

17 This is a real tension. The need for a deliberate and conscious articulation of one’s perspective is particularly acute for Christians who belong to a tradition in which the authority of Scripture factors large in judgments about normativity and who are admonished not to “conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind” (Rom. 12:2). H. Richard Niehbuhr’s well-known typology outlines various Christian approaches to the relation of faith and culture.

18 Martin and Oswalt noted that allegorical interpretations, for example, can “imply that the religious meaning of the film is available only to those who know the religious texts and traditions.” The point of a theological approach, they maintained, was to demonstrate

“how films function theologically; that is, encourage viewers to ask ultimate questions” (15).

19 And such an experience does not seem to require theological judgment in his thinking. He explains that theological perspective factors more for viewers engaged in dialogue and appropriation than “those who would explore divine encounters” (Johnston, *Reel Spirituality* 42-3).

### Works Cited

- Barthes, Roland. *Mythologies*. Trans. Annette Lavers. New York: Hill and Wang, 1972.
- Bellah, Robert N. “Righteous Empire.” *Christian Century* 8 March 2003: 20-25.
- Byassee, Jason. “Jedi or Jesuit?” *Books&Culture* May/June 2005: 44.
- Carroll, Noël. *Philosophy of Mass Art*. New York: Oxford, 1998.
- Carter, Bill. “Dan Rather Returns to the Assassination.” *New York Times* 4 Feb. 1992: B1, B3.
- Clapp, Rodney. “God Is Not ‘A Stranger on the Bus.’” *God Is Not...Religious, Nice, “One of Us,” An American, A Capitalist*. Ed. D. Brent Laytham. Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2004.
- Detweiler, Craig and Barry Taylor. *A Matrix of Meanings: Finding God in Pop Culture*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003.
- Forbes, Bruce David. “Introduction: Finding Religion in Unexpected Places.” *Religion and American Popular Culture*. Eds. Bruce David Forbes and Jeffrey H. Mahan. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000.
- Gadamer, Hans-Georg. *Truth and Method*. Eds. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. New York: Crossroad, 1991.
- Graham, David John. “The Uses of Film in Theology.” *Explorations in Theology and Film*. Eds. Clive Marsh and Gaye Ortiz. Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1997.
- Gray, Tony. Rev of *Pauline Images in Fiction and Film*, by Larry J. Kreitzer. *Themelios* 25:3 (June 2000): 113-114.
- Jasper, David. “On Systematizing the Unsystematic.” *Explorations in Theology and Film*. Eds. Clive Marsh and Gaye Ortiz. Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1997.
- Jewett, Robert. *Saint Paul at the Movies: The Apostle’s Dialogue with American Culture*. Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993.
- Jewett, Robert and John Shelton Lawrence. *The Myth of the American Superhero*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002.

- Johnston, Robert K. *Reel Spirituality: Theology and Film in Dialogue*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2000.
- Johnston, Robert K. *Useless Beauty: Ecclesiastes Through the Lens of Contemporary Film*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004.
- Kreitzer, Larry J. *The New Testament in Fiction and Film: On Reversing the Hermeneutical Flow*. Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1993.
- Kreitzer, Larry J. *The Old Testament in Fiction and Film: On Reversing the Hermeneutical Flow*. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1994.
- Kreitzer, Larry J. *Pauline Images in Fiction and Film: On Reversing the Hermeneutical Flow*. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999.
- Kreitzer, Larry J. *Gospel Images in Fiction and Film: On Reversing the Hermeneutical Flow*. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002.
- Lyden, John. "Continuing the Conversation: A Response to Clive Marsh." Reader Discussion. *Journal of Religion and Film*. 1 March 2006 <<http://www.unomaha.edu/jrf/disctop3.htm>>.
- Lyden, John. "To Commend or To Critique?: The Question of Religion and Film Studies." *Journal of Religion and Film* 1:2 (October 1997). 24 Feb. 2006 <<http://www.unomaha.edu/jrf/tocommend.htm>>.
- Lyden, John C. *Film as Religion: Myths, Morals, and Rituals*. New York: New York University Press, 2003.
- Mabee, Charles. Rev. of *The Old Testament in Fiction and Film*, by Larry J. Kreitzer. *Interpretation* 51:1 (January 1997): 88.
- Martin, Joel W. and Conrad E. Ostwalt, Jr., eds. *Screening the Sacred: Religion, Myth, and Ideology in Popular American Film* Boulder: Westview, 1995.
- Marsh, Clive and Gaye Ortiz eds. Introduction. *Explorations in Theology and Film*. Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1997.
- Marsh, Clive. "Film and Theologies of Culture." *Explorations in Theology and Film*. Ed. Clive Marsh and Gaye Ortiz. Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1997.
- Marsh, Clive. "Religion, Theology and Film in a Postmodern Age: A Response to John Lyden." *Journal of Religion and Film* 2:1 (April 1998): 23 pars. 1 March 2006 <<http://www.unomaha.edu/jrf/marshrel.htm>>.
- May, John R. "Religion and Film: Recent Contributions to the Continuing Dialogue." *Critical Review of Books in Religion* 9 (1996):105-21.
- Mulder, Mark and James K. A. Smith. "Are Men Really Wild at Heart?" *Perspectives* October 2004: 18-22.
- Nachbar, Jack and Kevin Lause. "Getting to Know Us: An Introduction to the Study of Popular Culture." Introduction. *Popular Culture: An Introductory Text*. Bowling Green, Ohio: Bowling Green University Popular Press, 1992. 1-35.

- Niebuhr, H. Richard. *Christ and Culture*. New York: Harper and Row, 1951.
- Nolan, Steve. "The Books of the Films: Trends in Religious Film-Analysis." *Literature & Theology* 12:1 (March 1998): 1-15.
- Nolan, Steve. Rev. of *The New Testament in Fiction and Film*, by Larry J. Kreitzer. *Scottish Bulletin of Evangelical Theology* 15 (Spring 1997): 76-77.
- Nye, Russel. *The Unembarrassed Muse: The Popular Arts in America*. New York: Dial Press, 1970.
- Ostwalt, Conrad E., Jr. "Conclusion: Religion, Film, and Cultural Analysis." *Screening the Sacred: Religion, Myth, and Ideology in Popular American Film*. Eds. Joel W. Martin and Conrad E. Ostwalt, Jr. Boulder: Westview, 1995. 152-159.
- Ostwalt, Conrad E., Jr. "Hollywood and Armageddon: Apocalyptic Themes in Recent Cinematic Presentation." *Screening the Sacred: Religion, Myth, and Ideology in Popular American Film*. Eds. Joel W. Martin and Conrad E. Ostwalt, Jr. Boulder: Westview, 1995.
- Prince, Stephen. *Movies and Meaning: An Introduction to Film*. 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. Boston: Pearson, 2004.
- Rev. of *Useless Beauty: Ecclesiastes Through the Lens of Contemporary Film*, by Robert K. Johnston. *Publisher's Weekly* 11 Oct. 2004: 75.
- Rhoads, David. "Reflection on the Value of Performing for Interpretation." NOBS: Network of Biblical Storytellers, Inc. 2004. <[http://www.nobsseminar.org/pdf\\_docs/RhoadsDavid04.pdf#search=%22%22David%20Rhoads%22%20%22film%22%22](http://www.nobsseminar.org/pdf_docs/RhoadsDavid04.pdf#search=%22%22David%20Rhoads%22%20%22film%22%22)>.
- Rosenbaum, Ron. "Taking a Darker View" *Time* 13 January 1992: 54-56.
- Ruskin, Marcus. "JFK and the Culture of Violence." *American Historical Review* 97:2 (April 1992): 487-499.
- Scott, Bernard Brandon. *Hollywood Dreams and Biblical Stories*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Press, 1994.
- Smith, Murray. "Engaging Characters." *The Philosophy of Film*. Eds. Thomas E. Wartenberg and Angela Curran. London: Blackwell, 2005.
- "The Gospel Goes to Sundance." *Christianity Today Movies*. 10 Feb. 2005. Christianity Today.com. 1 March 2006 <<http://www.christianitytoday.com/movies/news/gospelgoestosundance.html>>.
- Walhof, Darren R. "Bring the Deliberative Back In: Gadamer on Conversation and Understanding." *Contemporary Political Theory* 4 (2005): 154-174.
- Witten, Marsha. *All Is Forgiven: The Secular Message in American Protestantism*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993.