

# Shalom!

A JOURNAL FOR THE PRACTICE OF RECONCILIATION

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## Movies

**If novels were the “devil’s guidebooks to hell,”** according to the early Brethren in Christ who eschewed what they considered worldly forms of entertainment, what would they have said about movies? My hunch from my own personal experience is that they would have condemned them as well. So here we are, more than two centuries later, doing an edition of *Shalom!* on a topic that would have been unthinkable in a previous time—unthinkable both theologically and technologically.

By the time I was growing up in a Brethren in Christ home in the 1950s and 60s, novels were not a problem. My parents, especially my mother, read novels, and they helped feed my addiction to several series of children’s books (Bobbsey Twins, The Secret Seven, The Sugar Creek Gang, etc.) which led to a lifelong enjoyment of fiction. However, we never went to the movies. In fact, I’m not sure my parents ever in their lives went to a movie in a theater—with the possible exception of a Billy Graham movie or something similar.

As a child, the only “commercial” movie I specifically remember seeing was *The Wizard of Oz*. I was in boarding school in Choma, Northern Rhodesia (now Zambia), and one Saturday we all trekked to the town community center for an afternoon showing of the movie. Back in the United States as a teenager, my first experience at a real movie theater was when my pastor and his family took me along to see *The Sound of Music* (my pastor’s daughter was—and still is—my best friend). That movie broke the barrier and from then on I’ve not had a problem going to movies or watching them on television or DVD.

While I enjoy watching movies, I wouldn’t consider myself a “movie buff,” as some writers

for this edition probably would. I’m also not like my son who can’t imagine why anyone would read a book when they could watch the movie. There are very few movies I’ve seen based on books I’ve read that I think are better than—or even as good as—the book. Perhaps that opinion has more to do with my greater understanding of and appreciation for the craft of fiction-writing than movie-making than reality.

There are probably many directions this edition of *Shalom!* on movies could have gone. What ended up happening is sort of serendipitous, given all the movies named as favorites by various contributors. I’m looking forward to watching some of the movies that make various contributors’ lists of their favorite movies. Some I’ve seen, but some I’ve deliberately avoided because I apparently incorrectly assumed they weren’t worth watching. I belong to two books clubs, and I’ve been saying for years that one of the great things about books clubs is that I end up reading and loving high quality books I never would have chosen on my own. Many of those books, while not overtly Christian, convey really important truths about the human condition. I think the same is true of movies, and I hope that this edition expands your thinking about the possibilities of movies beyond mere entertainment.

**Harriet S. Bicksler, editor**

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# The Pleasure of Media

By Fred Miller

When I was growing up, my dad was a supervisor at RCA. That meant we were one of the first families around to get a color television set. We were so excited—even though the only programming available in color was the evening news! But soon, *cartoons* would follow!

Some people I know have little interest in TV. I'm not one of them. Add cable television and a remote control, and I can be entertained quite easily for hours at a time if I have nothing more important to do—and if I don't keep a sense of the kingdom of God about me.

Much of today's generation can't imagine life without TV. (Even in Mexico I saw people living in city shacks, but TVs glowed through their windows!) It relaxes us, informs us and stimulates us in ways previously unknown. If we throw in computers, video games, and music to the mix, our culture is immersed in entertainment pleasure.

Cathy and I have usually been one of the last among our friends to add the latest home entertainment device to our home, but one by one they usually come. And soon they'll all be integrated through a home computer so any song, any movie, any program, any information, can be accessed at any time! (And no, that's *not* heaven!)

It seems to me most inventions that bring good also bring the potential for harm as well. Something may be gained, but something is usually lost as well. Radios brought music and news, but they also brought sexual lyrics and arrogant, crass talk shows. Computers brought the ease of word processing and internet research tools, but they also brought violent games and ready access to pornography. Media can either be a tool of God or Satan.

One of the real strengths of media is its ability to convey the human drama. Whether it's a news report on a natural disaster, or a movie that stirs our hearts to the possibility of love, or a sitcom that humorously exposes our own self-centeredness, media brings life to the surface. In *The Sacred Romance*, authors John Eldredge and Brent Curtis put it this way: "Art, poetry, beauty, mystery, ecstasy: These are what rouse the heart. Indeed, they are the language that must be spoken if one wishes to communicate with the heart. It is why Jesus so often taught and related to people by telling stories and asking questions. His desire was not just to engage their intellects but to capture their hearts."

Television, film and the internet have joined with the older forms of literature, theater and music to express the human heart. And behind it all is the whispering of God, for people write out of their souls, and their souls speak about spiritual longings.

For example:

- **Dramas** look at the challenges that face the human heart, and can serve as glimpses of our need for personal and interpersonal wholeness that only God can provide in Christ and his church.
- **Adventures** involve achieving a goal

against formidable odds, and mirror our soul's longing to victoriously battle against sin and evil, culminating in our future reward and victory in heaven. (This is why I enjoy films like the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy—because its harsh physical battles symbolize the harsh spiritual battles I fight for righteousness and peace.)

- **Mysteries** discover something that is unknown or uncertain, and are glimpses of our soul's longing to know eternal truth and the satisfaction of understanding what was previously unknown about God, ourselves and his creation.
- **Romances** are experiences of human love, and can serve as glimpses into our longing for perfect human love, and ultimately the satisfaction of God's love.
- **Comedies** confront our human weaknesses and pain through exaggeration or contrast, and are glimpses of our soul's longing to feel significant, to experience acceptance in light of our weaknesses, and to find happiness in the midst of pain.
- **Fantasies** stir our longings for joy and wonder and a "happy ever after" meaning to life, which can serve as glimpses of the kingdom of God that he offers substantially here on earth and in fullness in the new heaven and earth to come, where he himself is the center.

Some films, like *Les Misérables* and *The Mission*, proclaim divine truth clearly and explicitly. God is front and center. Others, like *The Sound of Music* and *The Lord of the Rings* proclaim divine truth clearly but implicitly. God isn't mentioned, but some deeper reality is there. Other films proclaim divine truth more subtly and perhaps only partially, like a painful portrayal of life without God, or perhaps a hope is stirred that becomes an object lesson on spiritual truth. *Dr. Zhivago*, *Field of Dreams*, and the *Star Wars* series are examples of these.

As much as I love learning and being entertained, I can appreciate those who

conclude that TV and film are not worth the cost. "Kill your TV" they advise. Or, "Television is a Destroyer. . . the very little good that can be extracted from TV does not make up for the overwhelming harm it has wrought." Who can argue that seeing repeated sensual and sexual encounters outside of marriage, the use of violence to stop the bad guys, and godless solutions to life, can possibly have a negative effect on one's spirit? Who can argue that hours of kingdom time can be wasted in front of a TV or a computer terminal—time that could better be used for solitude with God, Scripture or spiritual reading, relationship building, serving someone, thinking, enjoying nature, creating, repairing or learning?

Douglas LeBlanc observes: "Certainly few of us will go to our deathbeds wishing we had watched more television. Nevertheless, some of us may wish we had spent more time thinking critically about the TV we *did* watch..." Yes, visual media can be a powerful reminder to us of spiritual realities, driving us to deeper devotion, praise, courage and love. But if we watch TV mindlessly without

"taking every thought obedient to Christ," TV can be a form of idolatry and escapism, where our shallow relationship with God (and people) is compensated by entering into the false realities of the screen.

So what is our role in "exposing the deeds of darkness" depicted on our screens? I admire those who seek to redeem the media by writing and producing quality stories with godly values, but most of us are left with two realistic choices as disciples of Jesus: flee it or discern it.

If we choose "discerning it," I would encourage applying the six "Biblical Criteria" (see pg. 10). For example, if you watch movies or TV programs with a spouse, family or friends, why not discuss them together using the lens of Jesus? (Are we concerned this would "spoil" the entertainment value?) And if we can't "Come, Become and Love" in this setting for God's glory, perhaps we've bowed at the idol of earthly pleasures.

Recently I had to excuse myself from a program where a character depicted evil too intensely for me to watch. I've also had to guard my exposure to certain kinds of sexu-

ality. Yes, I can critique the bad and rejoice in the truth, but some battles may be too intense even for that. So fleeing must be an option, even if others around me don't join me.

Of course, TV and film can provide a wonderful shared experience with family and friends. But it can also be a substitute for conversation. (Let's face it: It's often easier to watch three hours of TV in an evening than it is to sensitively inquire into your spouse's or kids' hearts, or to humbly share about the state of your own soul.)

As we raised our children Cathy and I would often unplug the TV for periods of time. One year it went in a closet the whole summer. It's amazing what creative and relational things kids can find to do after a few minutes of being "bored" without TV! I often take "fasts" from TV or my car radio, reminding my soul that life with God is satisfying without needing all the details about the latest news, or needing to experience another sports event, or needing to use the TV as a form of relaxation.

*Fred Miller is senior pastor of the Cumberland Valley Brethren in Christ Church, Dillsburg, Pa.*

## My Top Seven Redemptive Movies

by Kimberly Tucker

**Most films have at least a "glimmer"** of redemption in them. My favorites are those that portray redemption strongly. My Top Seven List is not prioritized and does reflect my genre preference—relational and/or biographical drama. One disclaimer: these films are for adult audiences; although I believe many of these movies are appropriate for youth, that is always a parental decision.

Clint Eastwood directed and starred in **Gran Torino** (2008). Eastwood plays a disgruntled Korean War veteran and widower who can't get along with either his adult children or his neighbors. Living alone in his demographically changing Michigan neighborhood, Eastwood's character—Walt—holds onto his prejudices and his prize possession which is a 1972 Gran Torino until he is drawn into his Hmong neighbor's family. Walt is transformed. Be prepared for a powerful ending.

A favorite of mine for many years, **Places in the Heart** (1984), starring Sally Field

as Edna, Danny Glover as Moze/Moses, and John Malkovich as Mr. Will, takes place in 1935 during the Great Depression. Edna is a Texas widow who tries to keep her farm with the help of a blind man and an African-American man. Three oppressed minorities accept each other and work together to overcome what seem like impossible obstacles. The end is a representation of communion of the living and the dead. Who could ask for more?

Although some Christian reviews of **Lars and the Real Girl** (2007) described it as "twisted," I found it extremely touching and compassionate. This film is about Lars, a socially inept young man, who develops a romantic relationship with an anatomically correct doll (Bianca) he orders online. It's discovered that Lars was severely wounded in his past and refuses any kind of intimacy, including touch. As the story unravels, the entire town and church gently

love and accept Lars. He begins to heal and become a responsible man.

If any of you know me, you might find it surprising that **Cinderella Man** (2005), a film inspired by the life story of heavyweight boxing champion James J. Braddock, makes My Top Seven List. I consider boxing as one of the most violent and debilitating sports. Admittedly, I had to close my eyes during most of the boxing scenes. Braddock is a light heavyweight contender who had to give up boxing after breaking his hand, but because of the Great Depression (I'm beginning to think that I have a special place in my heart for Depression Era stories!) he is having difficulty finding work and supporting his family. He is forced to return to the ring. On June 13, 1935, in one of the biggest upsets in boxing history, Braddock defeats the seemingly invincible Baer (a vicious man who reportedly has killed at least two men in the ring)

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# Eyes to See, Ears to Hear . . . and a Soul to Ponder

by Devin C. Manzullo-Thomas

**Most people watch movies in the same way:** as a diversion, pure entertainment—a feast for the eyes and the ears, with nothing to offer the mind, let alone the soul. But in their book *Finding God in the Movies*, Fuller Theological Seminary professors Catherine M. Barsotti and Robert K. Johnston challenge such notions. Watching movies, they argue, can be spiritually enriching experience. While it can't (and shouldn't) replace the traditional forms of spiritual formation—Bible-reading, prayer, worship, service, fellowship with members of the community of faith—movie watching can help Christians see God in a new and different way. Like a clever parable, a well-made film can deepen our previously held understandings or offer a new perspective on an oft-heard theme.

Barsotti and Johnston call Christians to a different way of viewing movies—a way that encourages them to link their faith to their films, to grow closer to God by encountering Him on the silver screen. “God is present in the movies for those who have eyes to see and ears to hear,” they write. “Theology is being portrayed in and will be retained from the movies we see each week at the cineplex.”<sup>1</sup>

To flesh out this assertion, the authors examine 33 movies containing themes of (to name just a few) faith, doubt, forgiveness, reconciliation, community, friendship, and vocation. Alongside each film they discuss, the authors include relevant Scripture passages and thought-provoking questions—resulting in a helpful study guide for Sunday school classes, small groups, or individuals attempting to renew their spiritual outlook by “link[ing] their experience of a story on the screen with their experience of Christ in their churches.”<sup>2</sup>

As a life-long film lover and devoted Christian, I resonate with the approach suggested by Barsotti and Johnston. During my days as a student at Messiah College, I put their proposition into practice by helping to organize Popanonymus, a quirkily titled weekly pop culture discussion group. Every Monday night, our group gathered to watch films—anything from *Persepolis*, the 2009

animated feature about a girl growing up 1980s Iran, to *Network*, the Oscar-winning 1976 satire about the exploitative power of the mass media—and to bring our faith to bear on the questions such films raised. The result was enlightening, relationship-building, and spiritually formational.<sup>3</sup>

Drawing on these experiences and on the paradigm sketched out by Barsotti and Johnston, I want to share a few films that I believe have helped me to “find” God in a new and interesting way.

**Wall-E** (dir. Andrew Stanton, 2008, G)

This animated fable about a trash-collecting robot might seem an unlikely means by which to find God at the movies. But the gentle storytelling, the charming characters, and the clever critique of American consumerism make *Wall-E* a rewarding and thought-provoking movie-watching experience for viewers of any age. While the “romance” between Wall-E and Eve takes center stage, the messages about avoiding conspicuous consumption and promoting environmental stewardship caught me from the start, enabling me to reflect in a fresh way on our responsibility to care for God's beautiful gift of Creation (Genesis 1:26-28) and reminding me of how that same Creation groans, waiting for restoration (Romans 8:22).

**Lars and the Real Girl** (dir. Craig Gillespie, 2007, PG-13)

Lars Lindstrom (Ryan Gosling)—a quiet, painfully shy, and emotionally wounded young man—buys a life-size doll, names her Bianca, and takes her as his girlfriend. Although initially concerned, his brother and sister-in-law play along with Lars' charade—an approach eventually adopted by all the members of the small Midwestern town in which they live. As the community rallies around Lars, welcoming and accepting him despite his peculiarities and their skepticism, the young man begins to lower his defenses and confront his pain. For Christians, director Craig Gillespie's understated, heart-felt comedy/drama offers—in the words of one *Christianity Today* movie critic—“a powerful

look at the body of Christ in action—and the relentless and patient nature of God's love.”<sup>4</sup>

**The Visitor** (dir. Thomas McCarthy, 2008, PG-13)

When lonely college professor Walter Vale (Richard Jenkins) finds an immigrant couple squatting in his vacant New York City apartment, he does the unexpected—he befriends them. In doing so, Vale learns an important lesson about the value of friendship—and the ravages of the immigrant experience in America. Far from a polemic about immigration reform, *The Visitor* offers Christians in particular a riveting, nuanced, and empathetic look at the power of “welcoming the stranger,” and calls us to remember that we were once strangers ourselves (Deuteronomy 10:19).

These movies—and the thirty-three identified by Barsotti and Johnston in *Finding God in the Movies*—are just a few of the films that deserve to be seen by Christians looking to link their movie-watching with their faith. As Barsotti and Johnston have written, such movies—when viewed with eyes to see, ears to hear, and a soul to ponder—“provide occasions for our spiritual growth, for our spirit's encounter with the Spirit.”<sup>5</sup>

*Devin C. Manzullo-Thomas is pursuing an M.A. in public history at Temple University. He and his wife, Kate, attend Circle of Hope Broad & Washington (Philadelphia, Pa.). When he's not watching movies or studying for grad school, Devin blogs about Brethren in Christ history at <http://devinthomas.wordpress.com>. In writing this piece, Devin acknowledges his intellectual debt not only to the authors quoted in the footnotes, but to Jeff Rioux and Beth Claassen Thrush. Thanks for the conversations.*

## Notes:

1 Barsotti, Catherine M., and Robert K. Johnston, *Finding God in the Movies: 33 Films of Reel Faith* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Books, 2004), p. 12.

2 *Ibid.*, p. 31.

3 I know other groups with Brethren in Christ connections have done the same kind of faith-based cultural engagement. In a 2007 edition of *The Bridge*, Messiah College's alumni and parent magazine, Susan K. Getty of the Grantham BIC Church wrote about *Odd Men Out*, a “movie watching, debating fellowship of film enthusiasts”—many of whom attend Brethren in Christ churches. See “*The Odd Men Out: Messiah alumni and faculty form the fellowship of the film*,” *The Bridge Online*, Spring 2007, <http://tinyurl.com/2fr6z4p>.

4 “*The Ten Most Redeeming Films of 2007*,” *ChristianityToday.com*, <http://tinyurl.com/25yxvgs>

5 Barsotti and Johnston, p. 25.

# Watching Movies with Children

by Lisa Brown

**I'll be the first to admit**, raising kids is hard work. So when yours comes home from school asking to watch the latest popular movie because her friends have seen it, what's a parent to do?

We strive to allow our kids to fit in, belong. No one wants their child to be the outcast. And as followers of Christ, we try our best to instill in them the values that the Bible teaches. We read them the wonderful astonishing stories from the Old Testament, teach them to love others as Jesus commanded, and live in a way that honours God.

For my husband and me, movies are more than a hobby. They are a passion. There's something magical about sitting in a darkened theater traveling to places I'll likely never go while seeing visions some brilliant mind has created. It's exhilarating. And to be able to escape the busyness of life even for a few hours is really a gift. Doing this while surrounded by strangers just makes the experience even more extraordinary.

In 2005 when our daughter was born, I never dreamed she would share our enthusiasm for movies. From the first time she experienced the theater at age three, she was content to just sit still and watch. Once we discovered her love of film, we had some decisions to make. Are animated kids' movies the only ones she should be permitted to watch? Is it okay for her to see Christian movies about Jesus' death? Are movies symbolizing the life of Christ too deep for her to understand? Should we rely on the Canadian rating system?

I think as parents, these questions should be answered no differently than asking whether it's okay to read Bible story books about the same topics. It's all about how we explain what's going on and why the characters are acting a certain way. While we tell our children that the Bible is truth and movies are fictional, it's important for them to understand that sometimes movies are made to illustrate history and life as we know it at present.

With kids growing up faster these days than ever, we sometimes struggle with what our daughter wants to watch. Often, what

it comes down to for us is the attitude of the characters in the movie. With her mind being so easily influenced, and the number of people in her life influencing her already, we are careful to ensure that she's not picking up on poor attitudes from the characters in the movies we select for her.

Saying that, she has watched and loved several movies that some would say are inappropriate for her age. I believe that God has blessed us with a child who is intellectual for her age. *Star Wars* is one of her favourite movies. For some reason, she just seems to get it. She understands the story line. It makes me laugh because I often have to ask her questions about the characters and their relationships. She's not afraid of the villains in the movie, and she asks plenty of questions as to why they are battling.

Often, as Christians, we're quick to point out the negative influences in movies. Objectionable words, violence, sexual content and less than desirable values are blatant in most secular films. But sometimes, if we can get past these “Hollywood” attention grabbers, there are important lessons we can glean.

I'm not suggesting that small children should be permitted to watch R-rated movies. Obviously there are films that are clearly not intended for younger audiences, but it's about communication. The conversations you have with your children after watching something together is very important. Ask lots of questions about what you saw. Help them to understand that it's important to talk about things they may not have understood and feelings they might have about images they experienced.

*Dead Man Walking* is one of my favourite movies. Although violent and graphic, the message of God's love, and the forgiveness of sins, far outweighs the images of hate and despair. At a time when I was just learning what it meant to be a Christ-follower, this movie showed me that even someone who the world deems as the worst sinner deserves God's forgiveness. It showed me that if God can forgive a sinner, I too should follow that example.

When *The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* came out, I remember hoping that moviegoers would really leave the theater seeing the parallels it held with the life of Jesus. Often it's easier to discuss something secular like a movie with non-Christ-following friends, than it is to suggest they sit down and read a passage from the Bible.

It's the same with *The Passion of the Christ*. After leaving the theater, I had an overwhelming sense that although the movie was very graphic and heart wrenching, God was working through it. There were many people who could not control their emotions after it was over. I heard of plenty of churches using this movie to start a teaching series. What a great way to get people talking about the life and love of Jesus. Sometimes it takes a bit of brutal reality to wake us up to the truth.

Movie clips are often used at our church. We've also often had members of the congregation comment that they think this practice is inappropriate. No matter what your opinion, we need to keep in perspective that God can work through any medium.

Although our job as parents may be to protect our kids, it's also to let them learn the ways of the world in the same way that non-Christian folks do it—by living. If this means allowing your child to go to a movie theater for a birthday party or see a DVD with a friend, it might just be the start the conversation needed to introduce Christ to them.

*Lisa Brown is a freelance writer who lives with her husband Kevin and their daughter Abigail in Oakville, On. The family attends The Meeting House where Lisa is also the receptionist. All three are movie fanatics.*

# Movie Reflections and Recommendations

I asked folks who subscribe to the BIC-Talk internet discussion group to respond to a brief survey about movies. I posed two questions: 1) Do you go to movies in the theater or watch them online, on TV or DVD? If not, why not? 2) If you go to/watch movies, name three of your favorite movies of all time and write a couple sentences about why each one is a favorite. I also invited additional comments. Thanks to all those who responded! (Note: responses have been edited.)

**Sherri Hartshaw**, *Montoursville, Pa.*

Our family only goes to the movie theater once or twice a year. There are more movies I would like to see, but it is so expensive (especially if purchasing popcorn and soda!).

I like to rent movies on DVD when the kids are home from college. If my son picks, it is Sci-Fi or action - favorites are *Matrix*, *Lord of the Rings*, *Star Wars*. If my daughter picks, it is what my husband calls “chick flicks,” but we would define as drama. Favorites are *Titanic*, *The Notebook* and *Letters to God*.

My favorite genre is definitely drama. I want it to have a plot (not just car chases and things blowing up) and I don't want a predictable ending. I want it to affect me emotionally. For this reason *The Notebook* is one of my favorites. It is about love that lasts a lifetime in contrast to superficial love. To see a man love his wife with Alzheimer's so desperately that he will invest so much time telling her their story for the reward of just a few minutes of her remembrance, is inspiring.

Another movie I would recommend is *Avatar*. It is the first 3D movie I saw, and I definitely think it would be better at a theater than on DVD. What I especially enjoyed about this movie was the creativity of the film makers to conceptualize the world where the movie takes place. When I watched it I kept thinking about the beauty, the iridescence and the unique features this planet had which I could never imagine. It made me think again of what heaven will be like, which will be beyond anything that we can comprehend.

I found *The Matrix* particularly fascinating because there are so many parallels to Christianity. The first was that the world we live in is not the true reality; there is another reality. The comparisons to a “chosen one” to save the world, the new world being called Zion, the oracle, and hidden symbolism throughout the movie is amazing. Although it is not a “Christian movie” there is much we can learn and these kinds of

movies are a great way to bridge the gap to talk with non-Christians about our faith!

**Donna Climenhaga Wenger**, *Harrisburg, Pa.*

Three all-time favorites are *The Mission*, *Lion in Winter*, and *Lives of Others*.

The criteria [for choosing movies] I generally use is my perceived WORTH of the movie. Has it gotten good reviews; does it have a worthwhile topic or theme that it deals with; is it made to speak to the audience, not just entertain or garner lots of profit?

There was a time when I stopped going to the movies altogether. I went through a very religious period during my college years when I was attending Messiah College. The teaching at the time was that movies were at the very least questionable. In fact, they just might be...immoral.

One incident from my childhood illustrates this antipathy toward movies. When I was about eight years old, my parents and I (and younger brother) were staying with my paternal grandparents. At the time, my favorite aunt was living nearby, and she had me with her for a day of entertainment. Somehow, she decided to take us to the movies. She swore me to absolute secrecy, as my grandfather sternly disapproved of “the movies.”

I have NO recollection what the movie might have been. Whatever it was, it thrilled my small girl self. And, the moment we returned to my grandparent Climenhaga's house, my promise of secrecy went right out the window. As my aunt recalls it, we got back to the house and I ran inside and PROMPTLY announced--guess what, Grandpa, we went to the movies! My sternly disapproving grandfather sternly disapproved indeed.

That antipathy did not really spill over into my personal choosing to see movies. I recall seeing the Walt Disney movie *Fantasia* when my parents and I (and younger

brother) visited California, during this same time. And, as a student attending boarding school when we returned to (then) Rhodessia, I went to see movies on our Saturday outings.

But, for some reason, when I began as a freshman at college, I was seized with the conviction that movies were immoral. I eschewed them for quite some time. And, then the movie *The Cardinal* came out. Some of my college girlfriends were going. Did I want to go? Did I? I must have worked around in my reasoning, because I decided—OK, after all the subject matter is religious. I went. I found the movie most entertaining, if not somewhat maudlin.

Later in my life, when I was by then teaching at Messiah College, I organized the first ever movie festival at the college. We got the movie *Wait Until Dark*, the movie *Cat Ballou* and one other one I can't recall. Since those days of foregoing movies, I have been an enthusiastic watcher and discussor of movies.

**Tom Grosh**, *Elizabethtown, Pa.*

My wife Theresa and I go to the theater once or twice a year for film we anticipate are much better seen “on the big screen.” We watch a film on DVD (from a library or a friend/family member) about three times a month. We gave Netflix a try, spinning off a relative's membership, but we don't have enough time to make the subscription economical.

We enjoy watching films straight through and as such almost never watch a film on TV (Note: We have limited cable to bring in the local stations, so we don't have any channels with uninterrupted film offerings and few regular channels show films except the “everybody has seen before holiday films.” If we had movie channels we might change our perspective, but we're not going to invest more in this particular area.)

With regard to our four children (10, 10, 5, 2 years of age), in a given week they watch

pre-selected VHS/DVD offerings from the library, friends/family, and our local congregation. The younger two watch one or two per day. The older ones one or two a week. The three older ones go to the theater about once a year, accompanied by one of us for a special film and/or as part of an event sponsored by an organization of which they are a part.

Theresa and I have watched *The Truman Show* several times. We appreciate its irony, wrestling with reality, the chronicling of life, how reality (and growing up) is communicated and learned, and in what reality we truly find ourselves. Personally, I appreciate films which portray the work of God through the people of God through “history.” I confess that this genre is a mixed bag. The films which capture/motivate me are *Amazing Grace*, *Chariots of Fire*, *Hotel Rwanda*, *Invictus*, *The Mission*.

At times I find it hard to discern how one comes to appreciate or even becomes exposed to a given film, particularly the international and/or artistic. No doubt one's community and media sources have significant influence. My family, friends, colleagues, regularly pass along suggestions. I keep up with movie reviews in *Books & Culture*, *Christianity Today*, and *NY Times*. When a film is of interest (old or new), I explore it further through the International Movie Database, [imdb.com](http://imdb.com). I enjoy watching, discussing, and posting on films, [http://groshlink.net/category/speculative\\_literaturearts](http://groshlink.net/category/speculative_literaturearts). I wish that I had more time for such engagement with film.

**Dorance Calhoun**, *Morrison, Il.*

We watch a few movies a month, generally at home—rentals from a nearby movie store. I can't remember the last movie we saw in a theater. We refuse to watch movies chopped up by commercials and we don't think the movie channels are worth the money.

Favorites for me: *Lord of the Rings* trilogy (We own the extended versions, and watch them at least once a year); *Chariots of Fire* (We own a copy of this one too), and the original *Star Wars* trilogy (Surprise! We own these too).

**Aubrey Hawton**, *Barrie, On.*

Yes, we go to the movies, but usually only on “cheap Tuesdays,” when the family can get in for less than a week's pay cheque! We also

watch quite a few movies on DVD/VCR at home. Primarily, they're kids' movies that we watch with the entire family.

My three favourites: 1) *The Sound of Music*—probably because it was the first movie that I ever watched in a theater....back in the days when movie-going was still frowned upon. My parents, rebels that they were, took us all to the theater in Collingwood to see TSoM, and I was hooked. It's become a Christmas tradition to watch it each year at some point during the two-week school holiday. My love for the movie didn't wane, even after hearing the Christopher Plummer refers to it as “The Sound of Mucus”! I guess it wasn't one of his favourite roles. 2) *Mississippi Burning*—no particular reason. 3) *To Kill a Mockingbird*—probably because it's my favourite book, so the movie should be on my list somewhere!

**Rod White**, *Philadelphia, Pa.*

I study movies as well as enjoy them. They are the literature of our times (along with the TV commercial). Favorites: *Brother Sun, Sister Moon*—great story of St. Francis, of people coming to a radical faith and of acting it out; *Quo Vadis*—I love 50's epic Christian movies; *Scott Pilgrim vs. the World* – got to keep up! Check out my blog for more thoughts about

[rodwhitesblog.wordpress.com/2010/07/26/summer-flicks-reactions/](http://rodwhitesblog.wordpress.com/2010/07/26/summer-flicks-reactions/)

**Ron Howell**, *Salina, Ks.*

We go to a theater occasionally. It helps to have a Senior Discount now and there's just the two of us. We just saw *Secretariat* last weekend. I would highly recommend it. It's a very inspirational story and you'll leave felling good. Most of our movies we watch on DVD. Rarely on TV.

My Top 10 List, in no particular order: *Driving Miss Daisy* - cultural prejudice, enduring non sexual love, and true servanthood all in one package

*The Apostle* - Religious zeal, redemption, and human fallibility

*Forrest Gump* - Spiritual truth, overcoming handicaps, and great soundtrack

*Gettysburg* - The glory and the agony of war, the confusion of will and destiny, the importance of a “cause”

*Glory* - overcoming racial bias, courage,

honor

*The Mission* - Redemption, the cost of decisions

*Lion King* - Overcoming great loss, courage, integrity

*Pay It Forward* - the simplicity and magnitude of a great idea

*Saving Private Ryan* - the importance of sacrifice, the product of courage, the call of duty, the value of a life

*Amistad* - the horrors of slave trade, the strength of the human spirit, the call of home, the importance of good law

**Kerry Coup**, *Abilene, Ks.*

We watch DVDs more often than not, but we do like watching some movies in the theater. Favorites: 1) *The Shawshank Redemption*—powerful story of finding friendship and opportunity in the midst of suffering and injustice. 2) *No Country for Old Men*—gut-level portrayal of the depravity that human beings can sink to; and the story of one man's struggle to believe that evil can be overcome. 3) *North by Northwest*—nothing profound to say here. This is one of those rare movies for me that I can watch over and over again. The Cary Grant and James Mason characters are fascinating to me. And how can you go wrong with Hitchcock?

**Daryl Climenhaga**, *Steinbach, Mb.*

We rarely go to the movies or rent DVDs. I prefer reading for most stories, and find myself playing games such as chess and *Scrabble* more than watching movies. I do find movies difficult to process, because I get too wrapped up in the story line and have to leave the room to let go of the tension. Makes for difficult movie watching. Favorites: *Lord of the Rings*; old comedies (e.g., *The Court Jester*—1950s Danny Kaye); something like the original Pink Panther movies with Peter Sellers—or maybe detective stories, such as the BBC productions of Lord Peter mysteries and the Poirot mysteries.

**Drew Shumaker**, *Manheim, Pa.*

I like to go to the theaters to watch movies that look really intriguing to me (or when I actually have the time and money to go to the movie theater). I mostly watch them online

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## “Movie Reflections and Recommendations”

continued from page 7

or on DVD though. I rarely will ever watch a movie on TV because I can't stand the commercials. Once I start a movie, I don't like to be interrupted unless it's something important, and commercials are not important :)

As a film major it's always been hard for me to rate my favorite movies. If I ever had to actually really narrow it down my Top 3 (in no specific order) would be: *Star Wars* (all of them), *Glory*, and *The Truman Show*. *Star Wars* has always been a personal favorite of mine since my freshman year in high school. I'm not exactly sure what drew me to them. Maybe it was something to do with space and I love anything spacey. There was action, there was space. What more could a teenager ask for?!? And the technology they used when there wasn't that technology really in use at that time is very creative. *Glory* I love because the story line in it is so awesome. Not only is it a true story, but they used amazing actors to help the story out. And *The Truman Show* is a great movie with all the hidden messages in it about faith and Christianity.

The criteria I use in rating movies (which is convenient because I write movie reviews for my church's youth group newsletter every month) include multiple items. Is the movie captivating? Does it have a good story or plot line? How many mistakes can I pick out (either with a boom mic in the shot, or continuity errors in a scene)? How is the acting? How are the special effects? Most movies are either a 3 or 4 on my scale, but it doesn't mean that they aren't really good movies. Only a few (including my top 3 here) have made the 5 out of 5 star rating on my scale.

## “My Top Seven Redemptive Movies”

continued from page 3

to become the heavyweight champion of the world. Throughout the story, Braddock depicts a man of integrity who strongly values his family.

An “oldie but goodie”—**It's a Wonderful Life** (1946)—stars Jimmy Stewart and Donna Reed. Stewart plays George Bailey whose imminent suicide on Christmas Eve brings about the intervention of his guardian angel, Clarence. Clarence shows George all the lives he has touched and the contributions he has made to his community. Watching this film is a Christmas tradition in our family.

A 2006 docudrama independent film—**End of the Spear**—tells the story of five American Christian missionaries serving with Summer Institute of Linguistics in the 1950s in the jungle of Ecuador. Their efforts to evangelize came to an end on January 8, 1956 when all five—Jim Elliot, Nate Saint, Ed McCully, Peter Fleming, and Roger Youderian—were attacked and speared by a group of Huaorani warriors. Several years after the death of the men, the widow of Jim Elliot (Elisabeth) and the sister of Nate Saint returned to Ecuador to live among the Huaorani. Although I disagree with some of the “evangelistic techniques” portrayed in the film, it is a powerful redemption story.

I end this article with another film directed by Clint Eastwood called **Invictus** (2009), a biographical drama centered on the 1995 Rugby World Cup which was hosted by South Africa. The poem *Invictus* (Latin for undefeated or unconquered) is the inspirational gift from President Mandela (played by Morgan Freeman) to the South African Springbok rugby team captain (played by Matt Damon). Mandela uses the almost all white rugby team to unify the recently post-apartheid nation. The story is based on the book by John Carlin, *Playing the Enemy: Nelson Mandela and the Game that Changed a Nation*. It's a slow moving film but worth watching.

*Kimberly Tucker has been taught everything she knows about movies by her husband Paul who is an independent and foreign film buff. She also is a member of the Dillsburg BIC church.*

# Editor's Notes

**Subscription renewals:** Early in the new year, you'll be receiving the 2011 subscription letter asking you to renew your subscription for another year. We'd be delighted to get a head start on our 2011 fundraising with your extra gift now to support *Shalom!*

### Projected Topics for 2011:

Winter 2011: “What's in a Name?” (our denominational name; congregational names; names for God; family names; speaking out and naming our needs, joys and sorrows; naming sin)

Spring 2011: “Relating to People Who Are Not Like Us” (exploring issues of inclusion, religious and political pluralism and tolerance, class, religion, education, culture, race, language, sexual identity, etc.)

Summer 2011: “Pursuing Peace: How Are We Doing?” (taking off on a question posed to the denomination by Mennonite World Conference; exploring “hot button” topics like gun control, criminal justice, national security, personal and corporate violence)

Fall 2011: “Then and Now: Editor's Choice” (reprising some of the editor's favorite articles from the past 30 years, updated by their authors in light of changing circumstances and perspectives)

# A Plea for Quality Christian Movies

by Vern Hyndman

**Robin Longstride faces the King**, and in a defining moment, the King asks for a single honest man, with an honest answer. The King knows of his own wickedness, and asks, “Would God be pleased at my sacrifice?” speaking of the bloody trail of people left between England and Jerusalem by his Crusaders. Robin faces the King and delivers the truth with no wrapping, “No, your majesty, He wouldn't.” It was the massacre of the Muslim woman and children, Robin continues, that would have soured God on the whole expedition. And then movie cuts to Robin and his friends in stocks at the rear while the battle continues.

I've read the Robin Hood story many times, and how is it that *this* rendition is so completely different? The movie opens my heart somehow to Robin and his men, and creates revulsion in me for the nobility at the time. OK, OK, I get that this is the point of the story in the first place, but how is it that the movie does this so efficiently in me?

Somehow what I'm seeing on the screen is not the product of actors playing a part; it so includes me that it's like I was there the entire time. I feel like I know each character, and were we to meet for a drink some evening, we'd probably all be speaking in the same brogue and dialect, and be in the same costumes.

Rewind a bit to another movie I bought recently, *To Save a Life*.

Given that I want movies to resonate with me and bring out truth that is already deep inside me, this movie should have been a slam-dunk. The scenes of the movie were so well known to me, and the contexts, from the wild parties to the church youth group environment, should have been as familiar as my own living room.

Something was wrong, however, in how this movie resonates with me. If Russell Crowe's *Robin Hood* is the brass section of the orchestra, then *To Save a Life* is the kazoo. It's flat and whiny and one whole song on the thing is plenty. How could it be that *Robin Hood* could resonate while *To Save a Life* burns on the launch pad?

Initially I thought that “money” (or

the lack of it) must be the prime culprit. I own some substantial video post-processing equipment, and I have some basic idea about how processing happens – the nuance of color correction and the way that post processing can change the viewer's experience. And beyond equipment, I also thought that budget for sets and to pay top actors might be the problem.

I have no doubt that overtly Christian movies suffer from low budgets, and therefore they can't afford top-notch equipment or skilled actors, but there seems to be something deeper that drives this quality gap—the gap between story-telling that draws me in versus story-telling that is confoundingly irritating.

For a movie to totally draw us in it has to reflect truth; it has to resonate perfectly with what we know to be true. So a distraught and suicidal African American kid with a gun in school is probably going to have some dialog that reflects that reality. *In To Save a Life*, Roger Dawson speaks in polite church youth group diction and vocabulary. Since the audience for whom the movie is intended won't use the F word even when discussing the word as an entity, I assume that the more likely dialog that would resonate perfectly with the scene, and authentically reproduce what people in the real world would expect, is simply out of the question.

The problem is that it is impossible to sanitize life and still accurately portray it. At some point, the larger Christian community started to believe that there is a list of forbidden words and adheres religiously to the list. Even the list itself is spelled out oddly, with missing or distorted letters lest the word be used when describing what words are forbidden. Banning certain words from the movies prevents some of the versatility and flexibility of the English language. I've come to believe that it's the context and meaning of the words, not the word itself, that is at issue for Christians. Spelling out words is an exercise in futility, given that the word is still communicated

effectively. So for a single example of a range of like problems, trying to sanitize the language of characters in movies renders them single dimensional and plastic.

Not that Robin Hood had any bad language that I remember, but there were scenes of simulated sexuality that one would expect in the war camps of marauding Christians. To see life as it really exists, even if it is gritty, is not the same as living life gritty and dirty. It's not what comes in that condemns us, it's what comes out.

However, “sanitation” alone does not explain how predictable and one-dimensional overtly Christian films tend to be. I believe it's in the script as well. Hollywood, for all its faults, knows how to identify what is “epic” in life and draw us into epic. I believe that the best that humanity has to offer and the best and most epic stories reflect some version of the story of creation and Christ. How many epic movies have a messianic figure in them? A few examples: *Braveheart*, *Robin Hood*, *Saving Private Ryan*, *Gladiator*, *The Passion*. Somehow, however, Christian movie makers reduce what is epic and messianic to what is tame and can come to the front row of church with no risk of alienating or disturbing anyone. The epic struggle in *To Save a Life* becomes a guilt-wracked adventure in missing the point. The epic struggle in *Fireproof* of the main character for the heart of his wife becomes whiny and trivial.

I bought *To Save a Life* as well as *Fireproof* even though I think they are both horribly produced movies, partly because I so agree with their message and partly because I want to encourage rather than only criticize. And I keep hoping the quality of Christian movies with important messages like these will improve.

*Vern Hyndman attends The Engage congregation in Carlisle, Pa.*

## Movies I'd Like to See

by Jeremy Ritch

This edition's theme is a particular challenge for me because I rarely go to the movies. I do not have cable TV or a Netflix account. So I had to dig around to find an angle from which to write. Then it hit me! Instead of talking about a particular movie or movies that I have seen, I thought what about movies I would like to see. I thought about what movies that haven't yet been made or made well.

I think especially of biblical movies that are both relevant and artsy, that tell the classic stories of God and his people and capture the realism and wonder that moviegoers seek. I think about the 1956 epic *The Ten Commandments* starring Charlton Heston and how it captivated me as a young kid when I first saw it with my parents. I remember its being on TV every year around Easter. The scene of the Red Sea parting was movie magic; I can't help wondering how that would be done today with all the special effects we now have. Or perhaps the story of David? The battle of Jericho? Even the story of Pentecost? With the talent and technology that is available today, these and many other stories could be told in a vivid way that even skeptical non-Christians could appreciate.

Unfortunately, most "Christian" movies are poorly produced films that go straight to DVD and feature sub-par or has-been actors. Many times they are adaptations of scripture or just fictional stories with agendas. They are more ministry tools than they are historical or Biblical retellings. With the exception of Mel Gibson's *Passion of the Christ* and Robert Duvall's *The Apostle*, I can't think of a Christian movie I've seen that was both well made and well received.

I think Christian movies could be done well. The stories of the Old Testament may be debated in both Christian and scientific circles for their validity but they are great stories. They are vivid epic tales of heroes and villains. They have messages of grace, love and redemption. To see a movie that tells the story with no agenda or motive would be refreshing. Simply sharing an ancient tale on the big screen, complete with



good acting and amazing effects, would be something special.

There is something awesome about seeing classic literature and mythology come to life on the silver screen. I think of fiction like Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* trilogy which was a huge success in book form and then became a phenomenon as films. The movies opened up this epic adventure to millions of people, and many of them even then read the books. Just think what might happen if some brave director decided to take the stories of the Bible and put the same detail and care into them that Peter Jackson did with *The Lord of the Rings*. What would that look like? Would it lead to a new appreciation of biblical history? Perhaps in an indirect way it could even lead to many people re-reading the stories that many haven't heard since Sunday school.

Christian entertainment has come a long way. Christian music is near or on par with secular music, but I don't think film has caught up yet. Rather, Hollywood has avoided the subject of Christianity in a historical sense for years. Movies like *The Ten Commandments* are not being made although I don't know why not. If Bible stories are done as historical or even mythological pieces, they could be very compelling. The scriptures tell stories that are just as compelling as any other epic tales in history. There are complex characters and breath-taking scenery. Perhaps it's wishful thinking, but every time I see a commercial for an upcoming movie based on classic mythology or literature I think to myself, "What about Jonah or Job?" Now those would be cool movies!

*Jeremy Ritch* directs *Holdfast Ministries* and is also part of the *Harrisburg (Pa.) Brethren in Christ Church*.

## Biblical Criteria for Enjoying Earthly Pleasure

By Fred Miller

### 1. Set Your Highest Affections on God (The "Affection" Criteria)

"in the last days, people will be . . . lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God" (2 Timothy 3:4)

### 2. Don't Adopt the World's Values and Thinking (The "Values" Criteria)

"Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind." (Romans 12:2; also Colossians 3:2)

"For everything in the world—the cravings of sinful man, the lust of his eyes and the boasting of what he has and does—comes not from the Father but from the world." (1 John 2:16)

### 3. Don't Neglect Love and Relationships (The "Love" Criteria)

"Be imitators of God, therefore, as dearly loved children and live a life of love" (Ephesians 5:1-2)

### 4. Examine the Benefit (beyond mere pleasure) (The "Benefit" Criteria)

"Everything is permissible for me'—but not everything is beneficial." (1 Corinthians 6:12)

### 5. Examine Your Freedom (The "Control" Criteria)

"Everything is permissible for me'—but I will not be mastered by anything." (1 Corinthians 6:12)

### 6. Seek Rest and Refreshment in Order to Live Faithfully to God in Your Life (The "Rest" Criteria)

This piece and Fred's article on page 3 were excerpted from *"Earthly Pleasure: Reclaiming Recreation, Media, Sports and Sex,"* by Fred Miller. The full text is available online at [www.CVCLIFE.ORG](http://www.CVCLIFE.ORG) (Spiritual Resources/Sermon Outlines/Life Issues/General).

## Movies from Around the World Recommended by MCC Staff

### Africa

*Leopold's Ghost*: story about King Leopold II of Belgium and how under his reign, Congo suffered unimaginable horrors.

### China

*Beijing Bicycle*: story about a migrant worker getting a job in Beijing for a local bicycle courier company. The Silver Mountain bike will be his once he earns Y600 (\$80), but as he makes his final payment the bike gets stolen by a city boy. The story goes on to show how the migrant worker searches the city for his bike, finds it, takes it back, and the ensuing conflict—and creative solution—that follows.

*The Blood of Yingzhou District*: a year in the life of children in the remote villages of Anhui Province, China, who have lost their parents to AIDS. Traditional obligations to family and village collide with terror of the disease. A disturbing portrayal of life for those who have AIDS or loved ones die of AIDS.

### Egypt

*Hassan and Marcos*: explores the complexities of Muslim-Christian relations in Egypt. A Christian priest and a Muslim preacher survive separate assassination attempts. The two men are not familiar with each other but both of them are forced to go on the run. Eventually, they end up taking refuge in the same safe house in a downtown Cairo neighborhood and unknowingly assume each other's religious identity. As their friendship develops, so does their neighborhood's dissatisfaction with their perceived closeness. As time passes, things come to a head in a climactic showdown (from *New York Times* review).

### Indonesia

*40 Years of Silence*: An Indonesian Tragedy; story of one of the largest unknown mass-killings of the 20th century. In 1965-66, an estimated 500,000 to 1,000,000 people were secretly killed when General Suharto began a bloody purge of suspected

communists throughout Indonesia. For decades, the Indonesian government repressed all memory of this event, and the world looked away.

### Jordan

*Captain Abu Raed*: deals with sensitive social and domestic violence issues in Middle Eastern culture. Faced with the options of using violence or nonviolence to confront an abusive husband, Abu Raed chooses the latter. Here's the story line: "Abu Raed is an old airport janitor who has always yearned of seeing the world but has never been able to afford to travel. One day a group of children in his poor neighborhood assume he is a pilot and beg him to share stories of the world outside of Amman, Jordan. Through imaginary tales a friendship forms and he finds the grim realities of the children's home life. He takes it upon himself to make a difference."

### Latin America

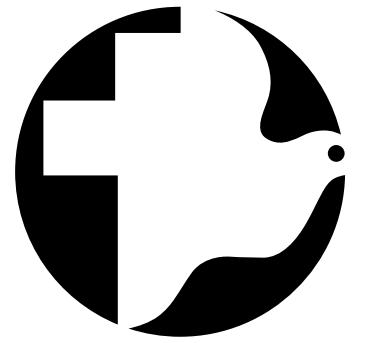
*Motorcycle Diaries*: gives an authentic bird's eye view of South America.

### North Korea

*State of Mind*: a British documentary that follows two young North Korean girls as they prepare for the Mass Games, the world's largest choreographed gymnastics performance. Provides an incredible look into the life of a family in Pyongyang, DPRK.

*Crossing the Line*: British documentary about U.S. Army defector James Dresnok currently living in North Korea after having defected during the 1960s.

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### United States

*American Violet*: based on the civil rights lawsuit filed on behalf of 15 African-American residents in Texas who were indicted on drug charges. The lawsuit accused authorities of conducting racially motivated drug sweeps for more than 15 years.

### Vietnam

*A Dream in Hanoi*: story about Vietnamese and Americans joining forces 25 years after the end of the Vietnam War to stage the first performances in Vietnam of Shakespeare's play *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

Thanks to **Ed Nyce** who works in Communications for MCC for helping to collect these movie recommendations.