

2nd Opinion: Of faith and film

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The relationship between faith and film is a hot topic in the popular media. Several biblically based works are either just out or forthcoming. *Son of God* and *Noah* are the best known. My own love affair with the cinema goes back as far as I remember: I still recall being thrilled or terrified by films I saw as a small child. Over the years, though, I have come to recognize acutely just how central films are for understanding faith—and for teaching it.



Philip Jenkins Over the past century, cinema has become the defining medium of Western culture, occupying the role theater and the novel played in earlier generations. From the beginning of that history, religious themes have been critically important to film. We think of the work of pioneering directors like D.W. Griffith.

The range and quality of this material is broad. The cinema has produced vast biblical epics and intimate spiritual studies, sensitive biographical explorations and provocative revisions of Scripture, alongside sentimental expressions of popular piety. Some of those films are worth remembering and preserving; others definitely are not. But among this diverse work, we find some of the greatest religious art of modern times, and specifically the finest Christian art.

A vast resource

Cinema represents a vast resource for religious exploration and debate, for discussing the relationship between art and faith. Potentially, it also is immensely valuable for religious education, instruction and evangelism. Film, after all, is a medium appreciated, even loved, by people who normally would not be open to religious messages. Within churches, film references abound in sermons, because pastors know their hearers will have enough common points of reference to appreciate their arguments. “Film nights” in churches offer a rich basis for discussion and teaching.



A scene from *Babette's Feast* (1987), a Danish film that is among Pope Francis' favorites. Even better, we live in a time when technological changes have opened enormous opportunities for ordinary viewers to see films that once would have been confined to specialized art cinemas.

Having said this, some obstacles stand in the way of using these resources. Long decades of controversy have left many believers deeply suspicious of Hollywood and the secular mass media. At the same time, it is by no means easy for nonspecialists to discover the wealth of resources available from so many resources and such various countries, still less to select the finest works that unite art and faith.

Although the scholarly study of film is a rich field, religious issues still are underplayed. Secular-minded critics routinely miss or misunderstand explicit religious messages in film. And discussions of film theory can be far

too academic and off-putting. One film with an overtly religious setting might be ill-informed or contemptuous of faith, while another notionally secular piece might be much more valuable. How is an ordinary viewer to know which films to seek out?

Of course, this is a highly subjective matter, but which religion-related films have a special resonance for you? My personal problem is that I would be choosing from such a large list of possible candidates, but here are some of my special favorites:

'Tender Mercies'

I would certainly begin with work of Robert Duvall, and especially his 1983 film *Tender Mercies*. This triumphant Texas-set film succeeded amazingly in bringing themes of conversion and redemption to a mass public. While *Tender Mercies* was firmly set in a Baptist context, his 1997 film *The Apostle* was a sympathetic portrayal of a tormented Pentecostal evangelist.

Both the Duvall films are well known to a general audience, but how about *Babette's Feast* (1987)? The fact this Danish film is not obviously religious in its subject matter has not prevented it becoming beloved in churches across the nation. It tells the story of a rigid, joyless community revived and inspired by a wonderful feast prepared by a servant in an overwhelming act of self-sacrifice. The film's appeal spans denominations and traditions: Pope Francis cites it as his favorite.

And then there is *Ostrov*, a Russian film released in 2006. Although this tale of a holy monk is set in the 20th century, this film so precisely catches the flavor of the early church we might be tempted to suspect the filmmakers were using time travel. It's a brilliant study of personal holiness and redemption in a world that takes spiritual warfare very seriously.

I could have chosen so many other classics: Martin Sheen's *The Way* is a glorious study of a modern-day pilgrimage. *The Gospel of Us* retells the

story of Christ's life and passion in the context of a modern industrial town. *Black Robe* explores the dilemmas of mission.

Film and faith conference planned

We will address these issues in a major conference Baylor University's [Institute for Faith and Learning](#) will offer this fall, Oct. 23-25. We aim for a definite real-world application. In particular, this means helping churches and churchgoers discern which films might be particularly rewarding for them.

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