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## Deep Focus and Cinematic Faith: An Extended Review

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## Deep Focus and Cinematic Faith: An Extended Review

### Abstract

Reviewed Titles: *Deep Focus: Film and Theology in Dialogue* by Robert K. Johnston, Craig Detweiler, and Kutter Callaway. Grand Rapids: Baker Publishing Group, 2019. 262 pp. ISBN: 9781540960030; and *Cinematic Faith: A Christian Perspective on Movies and Meaning* by William D. Romanowski. Grand Rapids: Baker Publishing Group, 2019. 226 pp. ISBN: 9780801098659.

### Keywords

book reviews, Deep Focus, film, theology, dialogue, Robert K. Johnston, Craig Detweiler, Kutter Callaway, Cinematic Faith, Christian perspective, movies, meaning, William D. Romanowski

## Deep Focus and Cinematic Faith —An Extended Review

Every semester, I teach a Bible survey course, mostly to freshmen undergraduates. Early in the semester we arrive at Genesis 6, and I show them the first part of Darren Aronofsky's 2014 film *Noah*. Students are excited to be watching a movie during class, and there is a predictable groan when I stop the film to discuss the interpretive decisions of the filmmakers. There is also a predictable correlation: students who have grown up in church are much less likely to see much good in Aronofsky's cinematic vision. A-list actors, a blockbuster budget, and stunning cinematography notwithstanding, the film fails to captivate, much less challenge. These students' ostensible familiarity with the biblical flood narrative prevents the willing suspension of belief that appreciation requires. Exposure to intertestamental interpretive tradition and the pseudepigraphal texts that inspired Aronofsky do little to alleviate my students' suspicion. The film is far from perfect, of course. But I always find myself surprised at the lack of interpretive empathy here that they are quite willing to extend to other popular films.

The very practice of viewing a film, after all, requires us to see the world through someone else's eyes. Whether we like it or not, we bring our own lenses to the experience, lenses that are culturally situated, person-specific, and theologically freighted. The question is which of the many lenses through which we look should have priority. As Christian cultural agents, when should our posture shift from openness to suspicion, or from caution to appreciation? Or must appreciation—letting down our guard and opening ourselves up to the film's "magic"—always come first?

The literature engaged with these sorts of questions has become quite sprawling over the last two decades; one scholar's bibliography on film and theology now stretches to over eighty pages!<sup>1</sup> Two new books, penned by four significant scholars in the conversation, show just how sophisticated the dialogue has become. In this review, I will survey these two new volumes, taking them as emblematic of some important tensions in the dialogue between theology and film. Both books are well-written, accessible, and fluent in both disciplines. And yet, distinct postures in each book arise from differing theological convictions

about the relationship between the church and culture and about the revelatory presence of God outside the walls of the church.

### **Cinematic Faith**

William Romanowski's *Cinematic Faith: A Christian Perspective on Movies and Meaning* continues and concentrates the search that started with his book *Eyes Wide Open: Looking for God in Popular Culture* (2001, revised in 2007).<sup>2</sup> Romanowski, who is the Arthur H. DeKruyter Chair in Communication at Calvin University, opens *Cinematic Faith* with the promise that he is not a "hoity-toity film buff" (2). By this he means that he is just as interested in low-brow movies as high-brow films, if they are made well by the standards of the genre they represent. Indeed, he notes, our assessment of a movie's purpose (entertainment, popular art, embodied argument, vicarious experience) always shapes the way we approach the viewing experience. To return to my opening illustration, my churched students expect the Noah movie faithfully to represent the text as a historical narrative, and this genre decision prevents them from making much of the film.

This is to be expected, Romanowski writes, for film is "an aesthetic object and an experience," in which "meaning emerges from the interplay of film form and the viewer's interpretive stance." Our stance, which he also calls a "framework of expectations," is key. It describes the "bundle of expectations or assumptions that we have about cinema in general and that inform the way we think and talk about specific movies or kinds of movies." The experience of viewing a film ignites our framework of expectations, which include everything "from aesthetic principles, standards, and tastes to moral, cultural, ideological, or religious concerns" (7-8). Romanowski's primary metaphor for viewing a film is reading a map, "an imaginative map of reality," to help navigate the world (9). This metaphor reveals filmmakers as constructive cartographers, imaginative map makers who are sketching a take on what the world is like. It also draws attention to the sense that when we view a film, we are exploring a world of meaning, a "cultural landscape," by means of audiovisual immersion. Finally, just as maps function to orient us, so too films offer direction for moving forward in the world. A movie is a two-hour metaphor that says: "Life is like this!" (20).

Christian engagement with film, Romanowski writes, tends to hold two "religiously derived principles" in tension. The first is the desire to protect and promote

freedom of expression and individual conscience. The second is the desire to protect and promote the distinctiveness of the Christian vision, either in church or society. Those who emphasize the first principle see film as a space for cultural conversation, a chance to look into someone else's world. Those who emphasize the second principle are more cautious and tend to evaluate film for its (in)compatibility with a Christian worldview.

In view of this, Romanowski has three primary goals: 1) to heighten aesthetic appreciation through a deeper understanding of the ways that movies express meaning, 2) to acquaint readers with mainstream American cinema, with the way it shapes our imagining of the world, and 3) to model a method of critical thinking about the dominant cultural beliefs expressed in movies from a Christian perspective. The chapters follow this basic map. After two introductory chapters that develop a methodological (Chapter 1) and theological (Chapter 2) framework, we are given three chapters on the aesthetics of film: the enchantment of movies through the power of perspective (Chapter 3), the simulation of reality through the relation of form and content (Chapter 4), and the weaving of meaning through artistic style (Chapter 5).

These chapters are followed by four chapters that highlight dominant tropes in American cinema. Chapters 6 and 7 introduce us to the conventions of the "melodramatic aesthetic mode," which Romanowski takes to be the quintessential American story (128). Melodrama trades on "inspiring stories of empowered individuals" finding redemption, overcoming obstacles to win against all odds (*Rocky*). Self-realization is the goal, and characters find that what they needed was what they had all along (*The Wizard of Oz*). Romanowski notes how other films criticize and problematize this simple narrative (*Do the Right Thing*), but these counter-narratives only makes sense because the features of the melodramatic redemption story are taken as the standard American tale.<sup>3</sup>

Along the way, Romanowski includes fifteen reflections called "movie musings," in which he demonstrates his method of engagement with a variety of films (*Groundhog Day*, *Up*, *The Blind Side*) on a variety of themes (time, romance, race) through the lens of a variety of formal elements and conventions (pacing, storytelling, cinematography). These vignettes provide material that might be taken up by a film class, providing a syllabus of films with analysis that follows Romanowski's method and explores important themes.

## Deep Focus: Film and Theology in Dialogue

Running on a near parallel track with Romanowski is Robert K. Johnston.<sup>4</sup> Johnston is professor of theology and culture at Fuller Seminary, where he also codirects an institute named after his pioneering book on faith and film, *Reel Spirituality*.

Rather than release a third edition of the popular book, Johnston teamed up with two colleagues to write a new volume, *Deep Focus: Film and Theology in Dialogue*. His co-authors were once his students, but have themselves become respected scholars of theology and culture. Craig Detweiler is the president of The Seattle School of Theology and Psychology; Kutter Callaway is assistant professor of theology and culture at Fuller, where he has taken the reins from Johnston. The depth and breadth of the three authors' engagement—they report a combined sixty years of teaching classes on theology and film—is at times stunning. *Reel Spirituality* has been the standard text on theology and film for the last 20 years, but this book is intended to replace it (and likely will).

In *Deep Focus*, the authors make clear that this is a book about learning to see more clearly through various critical lenses. Their central metaphor is the *phoropter*, the instrument used by ophthalmologists to test vision: “by presenting a series of lenses through which to view movies...we seek to provide you, the reader, with tools (‘spectacles’) to achieve a deep focus” (3). The book is creatively organized according to these various lenses, delivering on the promise of dialogue in the subtitle. Chapters 1 and 2, “Coming Attractions,” lay a foundation by providing an orientation to the dialogue and a historical survey of the relationship of the church and Hollywood. Chapters 3 through 5, “Act I: Film,” approach film from three formal-critical perspectives: narrative, audiovisual, and critical. Chapters 6 through 8, “Act II: Theology,” give us three different theological-critical lenses: ecclesial, revelational, and ethical. Finally, Chapters 9 and 10, “Act III: Dialogue” give us two extended case studies, one thematic (“Encountering the Other”) and one auteuristic (the films of Christopher Nolan). The chapters on the formal aspects of film can become a bit of a slog for non-specialists, but this is balanced by the authors' warm and personal investment in their subject.

In the third section of the book, the authors offer a discussion of the range of Christian responses to film, adapting H. Richard Niebuhr's well-known typology. The typology highlights the tension between the allegiance of Christians to Christ and to the culture that shapes us and in which we make our way. Postures toward

film are emblematic of larger attitudes toward culture in general: avoidance (Niebuhr's Christ *against* culture), caution (Christ and culture in *paradox*), dialogue (Christ *transforming* culture), appropriation (Christ *above* culture), and divine encounter (Christ *of* culture).<sup>5</sup>

Christian engagement with film, the authors argue, has historically moved from left to right across the typology, starting with ethical deliberation (seeking worldview compatibility) and only just recently taking aesthetics seriously (experiencing and appreciating the filmmakers' world of meaning).<sup>6</sup> All five types, they write, are legitimate and necessary at various times:

No one size-fits-all approach can be applied to film viewing: don't watch a snuff movie; be careful in viewing that which lingers in your imagination in harmful ways; engage in theological dialogue with those stories that reveal life in its myriad particularities; allow a film's focus to affect your spirit deeply; be open to the Spirit of Life (the Transcendent might surprise you while at the movie theater). (126-127)

It is this final possibility—openness to divine encounter—that sets the approach of this volume apart. Indeed, the authors write as something like cinematic mystics, each reporting on a religious experience they had in a theater, a first-order experience with God upon which their second-order theological reflection rests. This conviction animates the volume: the writers believe that film is a space in which God regularly shows up, not just to listen but also to speak. Here we find not theology for film or film for theology but theology *from* film.

Movie critic Josh Larsen has suggested that in films we hear one side of a conversation, a wrestling match with ultimate reality. Movies, he writes, are prayers: a way that filmmakers offer up their hopes, anxieties, and fears to an unknown God, even when this is unintentional on the part of the filmmaker.<sup>7</sup> But if the authors of *Deep Focus* are right, films may also supply the other side of the conversation, God speaking through unlikely sources outside the covenant community.

## Differing Postures, Distinct Theologies

This point represents the fundamental disjunction between the two books under review. Both agree with the basic wisdom that various postures are necessary at various times. But using Niebuhr's reworked categories, each book works most comfortably within one or two types. Romanowski fits best in types two and three (caution and dialogue), while Johnston and his coauthors fit best in types four and five (appropriation and divine encounter). In other words, Romanowski is more interested in making sure that the church can see the contrast between biblical and studio imaginaries, while Johnston et. al. are more interested in being surprised and shaped by the world of the film. These dominant emphases reveal not just a difference in methodology between these two books, nor even just a different construal of the relationship between the church and culture, but rather a distinct theology that drives these differences.

Romanowski is characteristically Reformed in his analysis. He grounds his appreciation of film in the image of God and the creation mandate. This means that, for Romanowski, humans are irreducibly culture-makers and that there can be no division of life into sacred and secular. To Christian interpreters, "secular" remains a viewpoint but not a boundary, for in making culture we find that there is no place where we can escape the divine image and the divine command. As a human cultural endeavor, film is intrinsically valuable and incurably religious, affirming and conveying fundamental convictions about life's deepest questions. Indeed, because of common grace, they can enrich our understanding of the human condition irrespective of the film maker's personal faith or unbelief. This theological foundation leads Romanowski to advocate for a dialogical "two-pronged approach" that seeks both to give a distinctively Christian reading of a film and to listen to and learn from the viewpoint of the film. In order to do this, he writes, we must follow the Golden Rule for film critique: "treat the film preferences of others (and the values they represent) as you would have others treat your film preferences (and the ideals they stand for)." What Romanowski is ultimately after is a capacious Christian stance, one that will contribute to a "pluralistic cinema: an arena for discourse with room for diverse viewpoints, including Christian ones, on the universal search for human meaning in God's world" (27).

Notice that while Romanowski's posture seeks to be hospitable to diverse viewpoints, he wants to understand film fundamentally as a human aesthetic endeavor, and to see film engagement as an opportunity for understanding other



cultural viewpoints in relationship to a distinctively Christian perspective. This point is crucial for Romanowski: film is a human cultural product, and the encounters we have are aesthetic experiences, not religious experiences. In his earlier volume, Romanowski compares and draws a distinction between the two. Both aesthetic and religious experiences require imaginative engagement, both give us the sense that we are being swept up in the experience, and both can lead us to epiphanic insight. But, for Romanowski, to overidentify the two by making a film viewing into a spiritual event diminishes the film's intrinsic goodness as a human cultural product. It estimates the value of the film primarily in terms of its ability to act as a vehicle for revelatory encounter, and thus minimizes the real human encounter of artist and audience.<sup>8</sup> This is not to say that God is unable to speak through a film, but we should expect the sort of insights we glean in the theater to be more grounded, earthly, and ordinary. And that is good, because ordinary human endeavors have been blessed by God.

But this also leads to a sharper criticism of the "Hollywood worldviews" when evaluated through the lens of Christian faith.<sup>9</sup> This comes through clearly in Romanowski's discussion of American melodrama and the American hero. For Americans, the quintessential cinematic hero is the cowboy: a reluctant figure who wants to be left alone but ends up sacrificing himself because it's the right thing to do (John Wayne, Han Solo, John McClane). Christians tend to see such heroes as "Christ-figures," but Romanowski argues that they are actually Christ-replacements, flattened redeemers and secular saviors who save the world through regenerative violence. He notes that hero movies tend to elevate the individual over the community and display an anti-institutional, even anti-democratic, intuition. Salvation comes from courageous individual action, not from communal transformation "[n]or, I might add, from the Lord God almighty" (147). Romanowski wants to take seriously the power of film, and part of this means a healthy dose of caution about the way that it mal-forms Christian disciples. By contrast, the authors of *Deep Focus* argue that criticism can only proceed once we have allowed a film to have its way with us, so to speak. Indeed, the authors cite Romanowski in a footnote as an example of the approach that encourages viewers to be on their guard against "how a filmmaker might be trying to manipulate their emotions" through the mechanics of film. But such an approach, they argue, "will unfortunately also shield viewers from fully experiencing the truth, goodness, and beauty a movie conveys....[F]elt emotion is the essence of the

movie experience” (166). Unless we fully suspend our disbelief, we short-circuit the power of the film.

It is not that the authors of *Deep Focus* are unaware of dubious techniques and theologies. Rather, their willingness to surrender themselves to a film reflects their fundamental confidence that God encounters us through culture in general and through well-made films in particular. Johnston has written an entire volume expounding the theology of general revelation that undergirds this approach (he gives a chapter-length summary [here](#)). Finding traditional accounts of God’s presence in the world deficient, he argues for a cosmic pneumatology that expects to encounter “God’s wider presence” in the world through the Spirit.<sup>[10](#)</sup> This hopeful posture leads to one of the most interesting passages in *Deep Focus*, one that applies the medieval fourfold method of biblical interpretation to the viewing of a film. In keeping with *literal* meaning, we first seek to understand a film in itself, on its own terms, in accordance with a consideration of its formal features and cinematic artistry. Next, we consider the film *allegorically* (“in faith”), allowing the story to become in some sense our story, recognizing the connections between film and our spiritual vision of the world. Third, we consider the *moral* sense of the film (“in love”), the way this experience will shape our action. Finally, we consider the film *anagogically* (“in hope”), the “deeper meaning of a story [that] can speak to that which continues beyond life, to that which is ‘more’ than life” (128). It is not that the authors discount the humanness of the film as an aesthetic object or insist that film viewing must always be a religious experience. Rather, what the authors are after is a sort of prayerful openness in which we give our attention to a film as we might to a valued relationship, indeed, to a sacred text.

The question, of course, is whether it is appropriate to apply the medieval hermeneutic to a film. The church rightly expects to hear the voice of God in the Scriptures. But is it a step too far to expect this of a film, leading us to create a category for “cinema divina” alongside *lectio divina* (about which some are already suspicious for its subjectivity)? This, of course, is a larger critical question for Johnston’s account of general revelation: what are the criteria by which we identify and distinguish revelatory encounters? Or, to put it positively, how might we cultivate a spirit of recognition by which we discern God’s presence and work in unexpected places?

It is likely that adopting one approach or the other will largely depend on how comfortable readers are with this conviction of God's wider presence in the world. Our understanding of God's relationship to human cultural products shapes in turn how sharp of a disjunction we draw between religious and secular liturgies of meaning. It also influences whether we tend to be more accommodating of what goes on within the walls of the church and more suspicious of what goes on outside, and vice versa.

### **The Future of Film and the Dialogue with Theology**

Both *Deep Focus* and *Cinematic Faith* astutely note that dialogue between theology and film will continue to take on new dimensions as technologies continue to advance. But even as the line between the big screen and the small screen continues to grow thinner, and as content-delivery companies push all their chips to the middle on streaming services, film continues to function as more than mere entertainment. Movies provide common language, shared cultural imaginings, and deep existential meaning for many. Films form us, as well as the culture from which the church emerges and in which it makes its way. Our discerning appreciation of movies provides a sort of test case for our strategy of cultural engagement as a whole.

I opened with an anecdote about my students, and I will close with a confession of my own interpretive foibles. When I was in graduate school, I wrote an essay in which I was quite critical of two liturgical theologians. Upon sitting down to discuss the essay with the professor, he asked why I felt I had to be so negative, especially since I was new to the discipline of liturgical theology. I was confused: "Aren't we supposed to find all the weaknesses? Isn't that what we are learning to do in graduate school?" "Eventually," the professor replied. "But first you have to let them poke you and show you where you are soft." He was encouraging me to listen in a way that would call my own unexamined certainties into question. I have often thought of that conversation with regard to my scholarship, but also with regard to encountering rival visions of the world. There may be a time to "poke back," and Romanowski shows us how we might proceed. But appreciation—taking cultural artifacts on their own terms—should come first, and this is the contribution of Johnston, Detweiler, and Callaway. We can be thankful to all four authors for embodying what they prescribe: a long and patient look at cinematic culture through eyes of faith, hope, and love.

## Footnotes

1. See Terry Lindvall, "Religion and Film, Part I: History and Criticism," *Communication Research Trends* 23 (2004): 3-44; and "Religion and Film, Part II," *Communication Research Trends* 24 (2005): 2-40. Cited in Johnston, Callaway, and Detweiler, *Deep Focus*, 35.
2. William D. Romanowski, *Eyes Wide Open: Looking for God in Popular Culture* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2007).
3. This point is applied particularly well in Romanowski's final chapter, a meditation on melodrama and gender in mainstream Hollywood playfully titled "Stop Taking My Hand!"
4. Robert K. Johnston, *Reel Spirituality: Theology and Film in Dialogue*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2006). Johnston's book was first published in 2000; Romanowski's *Eyes Wide Open* was first published in 2001. Johnston's volume was revised in 2006; Romanowski's in 2007.
5. H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1975). This typology is also employed in *Reel Spirituality* and Kutter Callaway and Dean Batali's *Watching TV Religiously: Television and Theology in Dialogue* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2016).
6. The assertion that we start either with ethics or aesthetics and move toward the other is helpful, but this sometimes leads the authors to frame ethics and aesthetics as if they were in opposition, and thus to give us a thin account of ethics (what offends our sensibilities) alongside a thick version of aesthetics (how a film moves us through a myriad of evocative means).
7. Josh Larsen, *Movies Are Prayers: How Films Voice Our Deepest Longings* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2017).
8. Romanowski, *Eyes Wide Open*, 80-81.
9. This is the title of a popular book on film and faith: Brian Godawa, *Hollywood Worldviews: Watching Films with Wisdom & Discernment*, updated and expanded (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2009).
10. Robert K. Johnston, *God's Wider Presence: Reconsidering General Revelation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2014).