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The Revealing Art of Film: A Review of Seeing is Believing

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The Revealing Art of Film: A Review of Seeing is Believing

Abstract

"Goodwin believes that great films are great art, and as such, are able to move viewers affectively and even change their lives."

Posting about the book *Seeing is Believing* from *In All Things* - an online journal for critical reflection on faith, culture, art, and every ordinary-yet-graced square inch of God's creation.

<https://inallthings.org/the-revealing-art-of-film-a-review-of-seeing-is-believing/>

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The Revealing Art of Film: A Review of *Seeing is Believing*

Josh Matthews

September 15, 2022

Title: *Seeing is Believing: The Revelation of God Through Film*

Author: Richard Vance Goodwin

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Several years ago, I came across an Abraham Kuyper quote that floored me, and I have thought about it nearly every week since I read it. Rarely am I floored. This did it, though:

“... (God) has ordained for this humanity all sorts of life-utterances, and among these, art occupies a quite independent place. Art reveals ordinances of creation which neither science, nor politics, nor religious life, nor even revelation can bring to light.”¹

In my view, the phrase “nor even revelation” should spark whole fields of study, as Kuyper claims that the realm of art uniquely “reveals” what nothing else can, not even “revelation”. I am not sure if by saying this he means general revelation in nature or special revelation, or both.

Applying Kuyper’s grand but vague statement should generate insights to film studies—if he’s right—which might prove very fruitful. In a way, Richard Vance Goodwin’s new book on film, *Seeing is Believing: The Revelation of God Through Film*, might help anyone trying to elaborate and extend Kuyper’s assertion about film as art.

Goodwin doesn’t rely on Kuyper, and it might be that his claims are even grander: film, he says, may provide “experiences” that are “revelatory,” including those that reveal the character of God.² Far from seeing film as mere spectacle or escapist entertainment, Goodwin argues for film as a medium where God can somehow be met, experientially.

What Goodwin means by “revelation” isn’t as clear to me as what Kuyper means by “art reveal(ing) the ordinances of creation,” though I have a general sense of what he’s getting at after reading the entire book. Films occasionally do provide the kind of profound, seemingly transformative experience that great art does. I am sure that you have watched a movie in the last few years that made you think deeply, that kept you up at night, that provided you with a vision where you could see yourself changing cognitively, emotionally, or both.

Goodwin believes that great films are great art, and as such, are able to move viewers affectively and even change their lives. He relies somewhat, and at times substantially, on the generally verboten concept of “viewer experience”—one that film studies, and other literary studies, shun because of its nebulousness and reliance on individual testimony over apparently more objective critical content.

Seeing is Believing may even be read as claiming something far more grandiose than that, for it argues for a kind of “divine encounter” in and with film-viewing.³ The first part of the book, the more theoretical half, describes how various styles of film (beginning with Paul Schrader’s argument for the “transcendental style”) might enact this divine encounter. Goodwin tries to open up what “encounter” means by appealing to Paul Tillich and various Christian traditions, arguing that the medium of film somehow enables a variety of religious experiences.

He emphasizes form over narrative and theme, a key point of his work.⁴ Aware of common ways to discuss film, often thought of as texts to be read and interpreted, Goodwin argues instead that the formal elements of film are the means by which religious experiences happen. The second half of the book—the better and more accessible half in my opinion—provides potent discussions of classic films: *Ordet*, *Silent Light*, *2001: A Space Odyssey*, and *Magnolia*. While it would be helpful to have seen those films prior to reading his chapters on them, I found that he writes capably to those who haven’t seen those films as well.

Regarding formal elements, Goodwin argues for what’s seen on the screen as the mediating factors for a religious experience: light, acting, movement, visual-style choices, and so on. He’s right to say that most Christians (and I am guilty of this too) emphasize what a movie means and how its story elements create that meaning, over the formal qualities that make film uniquely itself.

Still, Goodwin’s book has a major flaw that bothered me almost from page 1. In his emphasis on the religious experience at the movies through particularly formal qualities of movies, Goodwin’s book almost completely ignores sound. As we know, every movie ever, including the misnamed silent movies, had voices, sound effects, music and/or musical accompaniment. In some cases, such as *2001: A Space Odyssey*, sound is arguably more important or technically remarkable than the film’s visual elements. And in discussing how movies affect viewers, surely movie music, if nothing else, is generating quite a lot of individual affect, as Spotify numbers for any popular movie soundtrack would suggest. *Magnolia*, one of Goodwin’s favorites, powerfully relies on its soundtrack to connect and interlock different scenes. I am not sure why the book is not *Seeing and Hearing is Believing*, though that’s a less artful title.

A typical reader will find parts of this book helpful, but as a whole, the book is too much like a dissertation—more a demonstration of knowledge than an argument that persuades. I had this sense halfway through the book before noticing in the preface that Goodwin tells us that the book is a revision of his dissertation. His conclusion, however, with key questions for ordinary

viewers and scholars, could generate a lot more discussion and even film studies' work for graduate students.

I think, as well, that the general claims of divine encounter and religious experience could be dialed back. It may be true that movies are a kind of burning-bush scene—a medium that combines the static and the dynamic, the orderly and the transformative, the ordinary and the fantastical, with visuals that are really arresting. However, not only is “religious experience” a messy concept with lots of pitfalls, but I have major questions about how one would know which experience is a God-blessed one or not. Goodwin acknowledges this problem in a brief discussion of Leni Riefenstahl and Nazi propaganda films, which were certainly affective, yet not in God-honoring ways for sure.⁵ Let's put it this way: I am more suspicious than Goodwin that some films, including many of the so-called great ones, are powerfully hypnotic in potentially sinful directions. Or, that most viewers will struggle with film experiences that seem to them to be profoundly religious and yet actually contradict God's law-word.

Probably instead of arguing for movies as prayers or as divine encounters, a Christian film critic might work through Abraham Kuyper's tempered claims about art. Writing during the “art for art's sake” movement and not long after Romanticism, Kuyper was well aware of too-high claims that art can save us or save our culture, or that art is somehow divine, or that it should be indulged in because it's the greatest of human experiences.

In that quote I began with above, Kuyper does deliver his own high praise of human art, which now includes film, and he claims that it reveals “ordinances of creation” that nothing else can. Ordinances of creation? Yes, because film combines sight and sound, the aesthetic and the real, the theological and the political, and all kinds of aspects of creation. Any individual film is a unique combination of dozens of creational aspects, a synthesis that can be revelatory about something within the creation order. Since God created that order, He is at the movies. But perhaps film, created like everything else in Genesis 1:1, just more basically connects the rest of life and the universe that we might not yet be aware of. What are the ordinances of creation that film reveals, and how exactly does it uniquely reveal them? Here, as Christian critics, we have the potential for whole new realms of film and literary study.

1. Abraham Kuyper, “Calvinism and Art,” *Lectures on Calvinism*, pg. 163.

2. pg. 28-29, 55

3. pg. 2, 5

4. pg. 11

5. pg. 102-103