GRANT HORNER

MEANING AT THE MOVIES

BECOMING A DISCERNING VIEWER

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Preface

The Celluloid Mirror

"On both sides thus is simple truth suppressed."
William Shakespeare, *Sonnet 138*

"You think you can sacrifice someone else's life? You're an
animal!"
"No. Worse. Human."

Runaway Train (1985),
directed by Andrei Konchalovsky

THERE is an incredibly riveting moment late in *Runaway Train*—a
well-reviewed action movie based on a script by the great Japanese film-
maker Akira Kurosawa, directed by a Russian, and made in America.
Well into the story, we see three characters, two escaped convicts and
a female engineer, trapped on an out-of-control speeding train. They
cannot shut down the damaged engine nor can they jump off due to
the train's great velocity. They are hurtling across a frozen Alaskan
landscape to certain doom. It is only a matter of time. They form an
uneasy alliance, hoping to pool their meager resources in hope of find-
ing a solution to their desperate quandary. Unbelievably, this brief and
fragile pact quickly devolves into a vicious, brutal conflict, with the
doomed trio in a fight to the death in a tiny locomotive compartment

that is rapidly becoming their mausoleum. "Manny" (Jon Voight in a phenomenal performance), the older convict and a hardened killer, comes up with an incredibly dangerous plan that just might work. He suggests all the risk be borne by "Buck," the none-too-bright younger criminal, who agrees. "Sara" sees this self-serving and manipulative plot for what it is, and in the ensuing argument and snarling fight, calls Manny an "animal."

But Manny knows better. Much better. He's worse than an animal. *He's human*.

Screaming violently while trying to kill each other with crude weapons, their faces contorted with wrath, the three finally stare deeply into each others' eyes; they slowly drop their weapons, begin to shake with grief, and then huddle together like long-lost friends. The wheels of the train pound out the rhythm of their inexorable journey to a grinding death as they cower together waiting for the end. They are like three friends attending their own funeral. The agony of the moment is unbearable. The camera pulls up above them and looks straight down upon their pitiful state: senselessly murderous humans, paragons of futility, moments before a death they will in no way escape.

It is hard to imagine a clearer picture of the human condition.

Perhaps the most important question we can ask of art is, "What does our art say to us *about ourselves*?"

Though this book is nominally about movies and theology, it is really, as all books are, about being human. As a believer committed to the God of the Bible and to the great flow of Christian thought from the ancient world to the present day—thought grounded specifically in the Old and New Testaments—I unapologetically base my view of human nature and human culture on two sources. These are the dual revelations of Scripture and the observable reality known as nature. This pair has long been called the Two Books of God (Scripture and nature). The former—while existing inside the latter—always takes precedence. Scripture guides interpretation of nature, while nature reinforces Scripture. Though the Bible is without doubt one of the core documents in human history, a vast number of even

highly educated modern people are woefully ignorant about what it actually says. Wild speculation and utter misinformation abound in both mass media and private opinion. And of course movies themselves constantly present Christian faith as the province of lunatics, fools, and hypocrites. Which is part of what makes them so interesting to me.

How This Book Works

This book is not a series of movie reviews, or simply a set of theological interpretations of specific films, or a Christian critique of Hollywood as the source of all evil. If you're looking for a list of movies you should or should not watch to be a "good Christian," you'll have to look elsewhere. Those books have all been written before, and no doubt will be again. There will always be a market for them. This book is quite different. It is an extended meditation on why we have movies at all, why they are so powerful, and why Christians need to think deeply and theologically about film art—indeed, about all human cultural production. Furthermore, I do not take the position that believers should watch movies in order to "engage culture" or "be relevant": both of these ideas are wildly popular in Christian circles at the moment, but whenever I ask someone exactly what they mean by the terms, I inevitably meet with awkward silence. (We professors can be an annoying bunch.)

My primary concern here is how film works on our consciousness. My approach is biblical-theological. Because I believe man is a spiritual animal and that he is a hybrid of material flesh and immaterial spirit, and because the phenomenon of human consciousness seems to me to be the central crux of the issue of man's total being, it is natural for me to focus on how movies and consciousness interact. In fact, I think I may convince you that movies and consciousness have quite deeply interpenetrated one another—and that this is not without significance.

A New Theory of Culture

What follows, then, is a set of interconnected essays about how movies *work* and how they *work on us*. Because we humans are so dependent upon "methodologies" or patterns of thought that guide actions, I too

have developed a broad system for thinking about culture in general and movies in particular. I do not claim that this approach is either entirely innovative or is totalizing in its explanations, but rather that it is designed to open up and perhaps enrich conversation about culture, man, and God.

Built to some extent from aspects of systematic and biblical theology, particularly the ideas of Augustine, Calvin, and a number of the English and American Puritan authors with whom I spend so much of my study time, this theory will be explained in detail in the first chapter. It is most important however to note that the main source of the theory is my own close reading over a quarter of a century of the Old and New Testaments. I am not by nature a "systematic theologian," nor do I write here as an academic. The chapters that follow are written in a relaxed and familiar style that I hope you will find engaging and challenging, but very readable—almost like a good conversation after a movie. But what follows is undeniably a theological kind of conversation.

And while my own theological position is evangelical and conservative, I have also learned from sources as disparate as the early church writers and contemporary philosophers and cultural theorists. Here is the point: over many years of studying, thinking, and teaching through the tangled issues of Christianity and culture, I have come to the conclusion that the single most important passage of Scripture regarding human cultural production is the first chapter of Paul's letter to the Romans. This might seem an unlikely move; many great thinkers on the culture/Christianity problem stick closely to texts such as Acts 17 and similar passages. While I agree with many of their arguments, and while I have learned from many who have gone before me, I find myself compelled to focus my attention on the first great passage by Paul in the entire New Testament. Just as Moses' first words in the Old Testament are crucially important, so are Paul's in the New. My theory also considers the books of Ecclesiastes and the Song of Solomon, the Mars Hill sermon, and many other scriptural texts—but I find myself always returning to that opening chapter of Romans. Paul's brief words on the Athenian Areopagus (Acts 17:22–31) are grounded in the nature (and culture)

of fallen man—on which we find Paul expounding most fully in the opening of Romans.

With all that said, I do earnestly hope that my explicitly theological viewpoint will not too quickly convince those who do not share my faith (or even my particular theological positions) to stop reading. This book is intended for believers, for almost-believers, for wish-I-could-believers, and for nonbelievers alike. It is a wide net, cast deep. A major part of my purpose is to demonstrate the persuasive power of a well-thought-out philosophy of man and his creation of culture—and one grounded in Scripture while observing nature. Moreover, I believe that these ancient biblical texts provide the best available explanatory model for why we create what we do—why we are driven to create *anything at all* that does not have immediate material value for us. Why, in the face of a natural world that seems bent on killing us as quickly and anonymously as possible, should we bother with anything as utterly wasteful as art? What serious purpose could it possibly serve? Furthermore, I am not only interested in the "end" or goal of art, what philosophers would call the *telos*; I am at least as interested in its *origins* as its end. The consummation of a revelation is always dependent upon its genesis.

Thus, I hope my readers will consider the arguments presented here as they are intended: the thoughts of a believer who has spent many years observing human cultural production and wondering, *where does all this come from?* Maybe you have wondered about that, too, believer or not.

A Map of the Book

I begin with an introduction that presents my theory of the suppression of truth and the origins of culture, particularly its relationship to the effect of film narrative on our consciousness. Part 1 features three brief chapters on the theological and practical elements of discernment, especially regarding film. Part 2 is built of five longer chapters featuring detailed film analyses; these essays deploy my theory of culture derived from Romans 1 as laid out in the first chapter, as well as the practical arguments in part 1. As such, the final five chapters model my approach to film critique in particular and cultural critique in general. In other words, it is necessary to read the introduction

carefully and then chapters 1 through 3 in order to understand what I am doing in the analysis chapters.

The introduction, "Movies, Truth, and the Origins of Culture," delineates my theory of the origins of human cultural production. Here I discuss "screen culture" and its potent effects on consciousness; I attempt to provide a working definition of culture and the cultural objects we produce; and then I treat the question of human culture and its origins from the suppression of the truth of God as Paul describes it in Romans 1. Finally, a detailed analysis of the brilliant *Unforgiven* (1992) presents a concrete example of how my theory works practically in thinking through a popular and powerful film.

Chapter 1, "Thinking about Looking: The Lost Art of Discernment," is a theological study of the crucial process of biblical discernment—the recognition and proper valuation of ideas and their interrelationships in human culture. Chapter 2, "Welcome to the Real World: The Many Ways of Misunderstanding Basically Everything," functions as a kind of worldview catalog. This provides a general grid for grasping the philosophical underpinnings that all movies have. Chapter 3, "How to Interrogate a Movie," continues in this vein. Here we develop a series of helpful questions to ask and categories to explore when thinking about the films we watch. This brings part 1 to an end, and prepares us for the in-depth analysis chapters that follow.

Chapter 4 is titled "A Time to Laugh: A Theological Approach to Comedy." Everyone laughs, but we rarely think about laughter itself. Why is anything ever funny at all? Why is laughter pleasurable? I will show that in fact humor has a theological basis in perhaps the least expected place—the doctrine of the fall. Chapter 5 treats a much heavier subject: horror films. "Exorcising the Psycho: The Invention of Fear for Pleasure" is the application of my theory of the origins of culture from the suppression of truth to that popular genre of movies that has a single goal: to frighten its audience. Fear is a naturally unpleasant sensation. How in the world did it come about that we have a multibillion dollar industry that produces fear for pleasure? Chapter 6 turns to romance. "Hollywood Invents Romance: Of All the Gin Joints, in All the Towns, in All

the World, She Walks into Mine" looks into the theological basis for love, both human and divine, and considers why this genre is so powerful in its attraction. Date movies may not be as entirely shallow as we thought.

Chapter 7 moves again into a realm of the more disturbing facets of human existence as shown in film art: the subgenre known as film noir. It is particularly interesting to think theologically about a large body of movies that pull back the curtain on human nature and show us in a clear mirror what we are really like. "Film Noir: The Dark Side, or Solomon Goes to Hollywood" does exactly that. Chapter 8 moves in a somewhat different direction. Instead of focusing on a genre I look closely at several films sharing the common theme of memory, consciousness, and technology. I believe these elements curve back into *the very nature of film itself*, which is a kind of technological representation of and replacement for memory—the foundational aspect of human consciousness. The films I deal with in this chapter, perhaps more than any others, show us what it means to be human. Thus, "The End of the Matter: Movies and Meaning, Memory and Man" is not only a summation of the previous chapters, but a final restatement of the theory of the suppression of truth and the origin of culture upon which the entire book has been built. I conclude with a brief coda on the city without memory—the city where movies come from, where sea, mountain, and desert all meet in an endless sprawl of stucco tract homes and strip malls and palm trees and affluent desperation—my own city, Los Angeles.

A Word about Spoilers and Content

I try not to spoil completely any plots at all. A significant part of the value of watching a narrative film is the linear discovery of what happens next. My wife often says to me about our favorite movies—the ones we rewatch periodically—that she wishes she could "forget" them in order to experience them again as brand new.

As a reader of this book you will be at something of a disadvantage if you have not seen a fair amount of movies and perhaps a greater disadvantage if you have not seen a particular film that you are reading about. I've tried to frame the discussions of particular plots in

such a way as to make them valuable for the reader who has not seen the movie as well as the one who has, while not ruining the movie for either. I strongly urge that before you read a chapter with specific and detailed "spoilers" listed below, you watch those movies. You could also glance through whole chapters and try to watch the unfamiliar movies first, even if they are not on the spoiler list. This will help you to follow the chapter's flow much more easily.

Therefore I strongly suggest that you watch the following films before you read the chapters where I discuss them: *City Lights* and *Dr. Strangelove* (chap. 4); *Psycho* and *What Lies Beneath* (chap. 5); *Marty* (chap. 6); *Double Indemnity, Sunset Boulevard,* and *Scarlet Street* (chap. 7); *Citizen Kane, 2001: A Space Odyssey, Blade Runner,* and *Memento* (chap. 8). Of course, I discuss dozens of other movies throughout the book; these are just the ones that would likely be ruined by reading before watching.

Not unrelated to the issue of movie spoilers is the question of objectionable content. I am often asked if I can recommend any good, nonoffensive movies. The answer is simple: no. There are some who will be offended by every movie, and there are some who will be offended by none. This does not at all mean that there are no standards for a Christian when it comes to film. But I should say two things: first, if you are a believer, you should follow your own conscience as it is informed by Scripture about what constitutes an edifying use of your time and what does not. Second, just because I mention a film does not mean I necessarily approve of the content itself. The introduction explains what I mean by all of this, especially my contention that a "nonoffensive" movie can't be made. But be advised that my approach is not intended to produce for my readers a universal list of acceptable and unacceptable movies for any particular person. I will say, however, that your taste in movies should tell you a great deal about what kind of person you are. No doubt many of my readers will be irritated that I left a certain favorite film of theirs out of my consideration, while still others will agonize over some of the ones I *did* include! To either sentiment I will simply quote the Roman poet Horace: *ars longa, vita brevis*: art is long, while life is short. Thus editors are necessary—to force writers to end their books.

Movies are perhaps the most perfect mirror that we have so far constructed to show ourselves what we are. But like all mirrors, the mirror of movies is always in some sense a lie, in some sense, a distortion. How could it be otherwise after the fall of man?

Are you going to find God in the movies? No. Not a chance.

But he just might find *you* there.

Let's dim the lights, then, shall we? You can see so much better that way.

Introduction

Movies, Truth, and the Origins of Culture

"The effect of the unbroken flow of images . . . is uncanny.
     If cinema is sometimes dreamlike, then every edit is an
     awakening. *Russian Ark* spins a daydream made of
     centuries."

                                        Roger Ebert

"You know what your problem is? You don't watch enough
     movies. All of life's mysteries are answered in the movies."
                    "Davis" (Steve Martin) in *Grand Canyon* (1991)

ALL the world's a screen.

The original phrase is *totus mundus agit histrionem*—"all the
world's a stage"—a famous saying of Petronius. Another formula-
tion, by Shakespeare, adds that we are but players:

All the world's a stage,
And all the men and women merely players;
They have their exits and their entrances;
And one man in his time plays many parts.[1]

In a way, this statement has always been quite accurate, so much
so that sixteenth-century Protestant theologian John Calvin repeat-

edly used the same metaphor in his monumental work *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, calling the universe God's theater for displaying his glory and nature. I believe that by our point in history, film has become a significant theater displaying *man's* nature—in both its glory and its shame. The question then raised is, what kind of spectators are we? And what kind of actors? For we are in fact both. As Steve Martin's movie director character says in *Grand Canyon*, there may indeed be many mysteries that are opened up by gazing into the magical screen.

Alas, the stage metaphor alone is no longer sufficient. Our technology and our love for storytelling has transplanted and transformed the historically small, temporary, localized physical stage with its actors, backdrops, and props and replaced it with the incredibly complex art of filmmaking, where many thousands of elements (and many millions of dollars) all combine to produce the final cultural location of the moving screen image—infinitely repeatable, geographically distributed, not bound by time, and at least as apt if not more so to be loaded with rich cultural weight. *All the world's a screen.*

Think of how much of our lives we now spend looking at a screen. Film screens, television screens, and computer screens dominate our visual and even tactile experience; we are taught, we are entertained, and we purchase by screen interfaces; we get our news, make our decisions, and manage our money and possessions with two-dimensional screens. The electronic page has not yet replaced paper, but it has made serious inroads. I can still touch a screen to get a "hard copy" made of the image of the document in front of me. Screen-experience can be communal (a movie theater on Saturday night) or solitary (playing solitaire on your computer). Twenty-first century communication is almost overwhelmingly screen-based, with e-mail, social networking Web sites, and even our tiny cell phones having widely varied GUIs (graphical user interfaces). We have electronic "friends" all over the world that we have never met in all three dimensions. The simplest purchases in a grocery store are shown to us by a screen, nicely angled toward us so we are as visually involved in the transaction as the harried clerk (price, member discount, coupons, *total savings!*), and also somehow providing a pleasant screen-verification that we in fact now

own the broccoli, milk, and nasal spray bagged in front of us. If it is on the screen, it must be so. The screen has in many ways become the world. And, as I will try to demonstrate in this book, most of the people in the technological West have built most of their ideas about the universe in which they live from looking at screens—and movie screens in particular. *All the world.*

My first question is, is this good, or is it bad, or does it matter at all? And what do we do with this reality as we now find it?

The purpose of this book is to help us think through these kinds of questions in regard to movies. Why do we think the way we do about the world? Is filmmaking an art, in the classical sense? Is it philosophy in some technologically advanced form? How influential are movies, really? Can they have a bad effect on us? Can they promote virtue in any way? How do we think in a biblical and theologically rich way about film in general and specific movies in particular? And why is film so incredibly powerful? If we had a truly biblical way to think about the culture of film, what would that look like?

As is well known, there has been a long and tortured relationship between Christianity and the arts and philosophy—and culture in general. If mankind is indeed fallen from God as the Bible alleges, and we are now depraved, blinded, and in a state of rebellion against God and all that he is and all that he requires of us, then it is to be expected that human cultural production would reflect these elements of man's nature. The question the Christian faces is, now that I have been saved *out* of the world, how do I live *in* it? Some will say, "Separate yourself entirely from culture," and this is often meant in a literal, physical way. You can indeed live in an isolated area, cut yourself off from exterior cultural influences such as television, music, movies, the Internet, books, art, magazines, fashion, and so forth, and raise your family as if the last one hundred (or one thousand) years of cultural change had not occurred. On the other hand, you could live in Manhattan or the tony West Side of Los Angeles, read widely, watch all kinds of movies and television shows, spend a lot of time on the Web, and participate broadly in cultural events. The digital age is of course breaking down most of these physical barriers; you can access almost anything anywhere with the Internet, just as you can lock yourself in

a Manhattan apartment and try to seclude yourself away from the world in a concrete cloister.

Most Christians in America tend to be somewhere in the middle of these extremes. They read *some* things, but not everything; they watch *some* TV and movies, but draw certain lines when it comes to content; and in general, they adopt a moderately conservative approach to interaction with culture in general. The usual reasoning behind this stems from the recognition that fallen man produces fallen cultural objects (artifacts and ideas) that are often very attractive to our own fallen natures and that can cause us to sin. Yet longstanding arguments made from Scripture suggest that total or near-total separation from the culture we live in is not Scripture's standard, any more than indiscriminate acceptance of paganism is.

I take the position in this book that there are valid and valuable reasons for Christians to enjoy and thoughtfully study culture in general and film in particular. The believer should approach this enjoyment and study like all the rest of life: you must learn to seek God's wisdom and will in the choices you make, great and small. The key to a wise and godly life is to fill the heart and mind with Scripture and then make your decisions based upon the broad principles and the direct precepts found in the Word. I contend that Scripture does not call us to evacuate ourselves entirely from the pagan culture that surrounds us, but to use our wise and prudent interaction with that culture to help us grow in our appreciation of God's grace toward us, to see that what God says about fallen mankind is in fact absolutely accurate (even as found in pagan works), and to better equip us for interaction with the many human beings who do not yet know him. So why should Christians study film?

Simply put, film is the ultimate form of cultural expression in the modern world. Film is where culture is at. Film is the most powerful image of itself that humanity has ever produced. No one would deny that books, art, music, politics, social consciousness, and so forth are significant, but film is the one "cultural location" where all of these other categories may meet and have a discussion. In film, all the varied and disparate elements of the human experience come together and talk with each other. Have you ever seen a politically driven movie? Or watched a film that took your breath away because it was art,

pure and simple? How many movies in the last twenty years have been based on classic literary texts? Film is a rich combination of storytelling, painting, philosophy, history, and politics all wrapped in technology. This supremacy of film may of course change in the future as film technology advances and is inevitably supplanted by newer technological/artistic methods. In some ways, film has helped create modernity itself, as it is a highly technological, mass-culture medium of art and philosophy, appealing to several senses, and embodying the spirit of its own age—an age that it helped to usher in. *All the world's a screen.*

Certainly Christians should not watch everything that is produced. At the very least, that would be poor stewardship of time, money, and attention. Disengaging from all film is an equal and opposite error, the other extreme from watching anything and everything indiscriminately. There are two distinct reasons for participating in a moderated and thoughtful experience of film viewing.

First of all, for most of us, movie going is a social event. We watch with others and react with others, and then share our responses, opinions, and critiques. We often end up in vigorous debates because many of us are highly opinionated about film. So film watching helps us engage *individuals*. It can be a very fruitful form of human interaction. I think it is an error to try to "engage" or "redeem" culture. It sounds nice, and it sounds theologically deep, but God does not call us to redeem culture *per se* and somehow create a "Christian" culture. True belief is always an exile, not a kingdom on earth. Furthermore, culture is not separated from God— individual people are. Culture is the product of both individuals and the masses. While individuals may be positively influenced by a Christianized culture, this does not guarantee that they will be so influenced, or that the spiritual results will be in any way significant to the individual. Millions of people have watched movies about Jesus—even theologically accurate ones—but this does not make them followers of Jesus anymore than watching *ET* makes me want to "phone home" or "be good." Nor would watching perfectly wholesome and inoffensive movies make you wholesome and inoffensive. But having a conversant familiarity with your culture is a critical point of intersection with the living, breathing individuals

who also inhabit your cultural system. This is an observation made by many effective missionaries who enter alien cultures, then use features of those cultures—pagan though they may be—to establish rich, genuine contact with the people who know nothing outside those cultures.

Second, film watching helps us engage *culture*. I am not at all reversing what I just said, but actually following the logic through in a thorough manner. Cultural involvement is one aspect of living as a believer in a fallen world. How do we "engage culture" then? I believe there is only one biblically valid model, and that is to critique culture theologically, bringing Scripture to bear as an object of critical inquiry that dismantles error while also pointing out truth in human cultural production. This is what we see in the lives of Moses, Joseph, Daniel, and Paul as they live their lives in pagan cultures. And if you have any familiarity with Greek philosophy, you can clearly see that the author of the New Testament book of Hebrews knew platonic philosophy intimately and was making powerfully subtle arguments to dismantle it so it would not skewer a proper understanding of the old and new covenants. Similarly, Paul could argue brilliantly against the Stoics, Epicureans, and Platonists on the Areopagus in Athens, within sight of the great temples of the Acropolis, while Moses was learned in all the religion and superstition of the Egyptians. Daniel and his companions, the cream of the crop of Israel, mastered the learning of their Chaldean masters and used that learning wisely in the service of the one true God. On top of all this, it is a mistake, and unbiblical, to assume that Christians have the corner on truth. Bible-believing Christians have a corner on the gospel and on the person of Christ. Scripture is the revelation of God, and it is absolutely complete, without error, perfect, and the only true way to learn of God. But we should note that Scripture does not deal with every conceivable topic directly, and at the same time we should remember that Christians—even very mature ones—are not infallible. Wise and mature Christians should have a wild boldness when it comes to proclaiming the truth of God in Christ, and godly humility when talking about everything else. Furthermore, it is a bedrock principle of Scripture that man, despite his fallen state and utter depravity, still bears in himself the

image of God and can discover certain things that are true even if he never knows truth itself in the person of Jesus—who said he was "the way, the truth, and the life." In fact, the most basic truths about God, man, and the universe are hardwired into all humans (Romans 1), a topic I deal with later in this chapter and extensively throughout this book.

Thus we may say that there is biblical warrant for studying the culture around us, in order to learn and to recognize the following things:

(1) All humans have certain basic *knowledge* of God, man, and the universe built into us.

(2) This results in certain *expectations* that are more or less universal among all people.

(3) These important *elements of humanness permeate our cultural production*. We all know, deep down, certain things, and we all, deep down, have certain expectations about the world and the ways we think things ought to be. While these are not perfectly universal, certain kinds of patterns of values, ideas, and questions do recur across widely divergent cultures and expanses of time.

(4) While Scripture is the ultimate source of authority and truth for believers, there are elements, *partial truths, present in all human cultural production*, including film. As I like to put it to students making intensive study of literature, art, film, philosophy, and theology: if it agrees with Scripture, it is true. If it disagrees with Scripture, it is still true, even in its falsity—because it is the nature of fallen man to argue against God. Or, to put it another way: *everything is biblical*. To agree with God is biblical. That's what God says we should do. To disagree with God is also "biblical," in the sense that this is what God says we actually do in our sinfulness. As the saying goes, the fool is convicted with the words of his own mouth.

(5) For the believer, these extrascriptural truths do not compete with Scripture, nor do they supplement it in the strictest sense; their value lies in their demonstration that *what Scripture says about man is true and valid*.

(6) The sum of all this is that for individual believers, cultural interaction forms an important opportunity (though not the only

one) to learn that Scripture is meant to be used—*to be an active agent of critique*—in the believer's life. The Bible exists to break you down and remake you, and to teach you how to recognize the true nature of the world around you. The Bible doesn't do you much good if it just sits on your shelf or rests in your mind as a series of carefully memorized religious precepts. Scripture itself claims "the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart" (Heb. 4:12). This implies strongly that it is most effective as a sword, an object of penetrating, cutting, and opening (what we might call criticism) of man and man's condition. Furthermore, those believers who know the Word intimately are called "the mature," and they are those "who have their powers of discernment trained by constant practice to distinguish good from evil" (Heb. 5:14). Clearly, this "practice" involves saturating the mind with the Word—and then comparing it with the world. Discernment is judgment. Scripture in the hands of the wise Christian should open up an effective, sophisticated, and edifying mode of interpretation of the culture surrounding us, and ultimately, enable us to reach individuals with God's truth while minimizing the negative impact of fallen culture on us.

What are we to do, then?

Many Christians tend to view film as "mere entertainment." But really there is no such thing for the believer. Everything has meaning and relevance, because God rightly claims sovereignty over all aspects of our lives, no matter how minor they may appear. Every decision we make about everything we experience has real value to God. Film is not just mass media art or pop culture either. Film is the modern-day equivalent of philosophy. It is an artistic representation of what we believe, what we dream of, what we hope for—indeed, of what we are in the core of our being. Instead of arguing about fate in the marketplace in first-century Athens, we now watch Clint Eastwood shoot people in *Unforgiven* or Emma Thompson forgive Anthony Hopkins in *The Remains of the Day* (1993). Film is the celluloid frame of our waking dreams. And I'm not just talking here about artsy black-and-white movies made in Sweden or highbrow

films from France based on obscure nineteenth-century novels. At its core, philosophy is a way of looking at the world, a way of explaining the world to ourselves, of orienting ourselves in the strange experience of being here and being conscious of ourselves being here. Film is intensely visual—just like humans are. The vast majority of our conscious experience is visual experience, and so film is the perfect medium for capturing what it means to be human. In fact, now that we have amassed over a century's worth of motion picture image production, and most of us have spent significant time in front of these screens, our memories of our visual experience is saturated with film imagery. So whatever else film is, it is not of no importance. It is an extraordinarily human endeavor and a richly human experience. Several generations before Christ, the Roman playwright Terence said *Homo sum: humani nil a me alienum puto*: "I am human, and nothing human is alien to me." Or, in a more sinister fashion, Dr. Tyrell says to Deckard in Ridley Scott's incomparably brilliant *Blade Runner* (1982) about his corporation that produces perfectly human robots: " 'More human than human' is our motto." And God said, "Let us make man in our image." God made us in his image; we make movies in ours.

Framing Reality

Our world is a framed world. Our eyesight has its limits every waking moment; we cannot see beyond the borders of our eyelids. Our other senses of course have their own limits, but vision is an especially framed sense. All that we see is as a picture in a frame, a film frame, a screen frame. Whether we consciously think about it or not, we experience a continual limitation and curtailing of perception. Only God sees all. We are ourselves framed in every way. We can only see what we are able to see. As some are colorblind, we are all spiritually blind to certain things in varying ways.

At first, a new pair of glasses is highly annoying to wear. You see the frame. Inside the frame: nice, focused images. Outside the frame: a blur. And always, sometimes for days or weeks, the maddening presence of a border—be it plastic or metal, thick or thin—that separates the visible world from the blurred world. But an interesting process of erasure takes place before long, and generally without

"This book will help Christians learn how to apply their faith to watching movies, to think more deeply and discerningly about those movies, and to avoid the pitfalls of both cultural anorexia and cultural gluttony when it comes to the cinema."
Brian Godawa, screenwriter, *To End All Wars*; author, *Hollywood Worldviews: Watching Films with Wisdom and Discernment*

"*Meaning at the Movies* develops a needed, insightful biblical perspective on how we, as believers, should process what is heard and seen in today's entertainment culture. It will encourage any reader, as it did me, not to be a passive audience member, but to develop a desire to find what's at the heart of the films we watch."
Rick Dempsey, Sr. Vice President, Creative, The Walt Disney Studios

"If you're looking for just another 'everyone-says-that-about-Hollywood' kind of book, look elsewhere. You are sure to become a more discerning viewer after reading *Meaning at the Movies*—I am."
Frank Pastore, host, *The Frank Pastore Show*

"Horner affirms thoughtful, joyful engagement with popular culture. *Meaning at the Movies* will certainly empower, perhaps even transform, Christian education in the arts."
Charles T. Evans, Executive Consultant, Paideia, Inc.; coauthor, *Wisdom and Eloquence: A Christian Paradigm for Classical Learning*

GRANT HORNER (MA, University of Alabama) is associate professor of English at the Master's College and has taught film at the college level for fourteen years. He has completed coursework for the PhD at the University of North Carolina–Chapel Hill. Horner was a contributor to John MacArthur's *Think Biblically!* and speaks regularly on current theological trends, philosophy, and popular culture.