

**Brian Godawa's**  
**Hollywood Worldviews: Watching Films with Wisdom and Discernment**  
**A Review for The Journal of Youth Ministry by Brian D. Fuller, M.F.A.**

John's Gospel begins by announcing: "the Word became flesh." In his book, *Hollywood Worldviews*, Brian Godawa joins theologians who attempt to reverse the incarnational process. Despite their specialization, contributors to any film, his preface contends, "would agree that the story is king." Godawa's naively inaccurate premise defines the membrane that keeps Christians (and scriptwriters) fearfully at Hollywood's edge, their noses pressed to the candy store window.

The Church needs no encouragement to convert sensory experience into mere words; neither does it benefit from yet one more book that looks no further than script for meaning. Godawa is not – as the book's subtitle claims – teaching readers to watch films with wisdom and discernment. He is instead, grafting select principles of literary criticism onto James Sire's *The Universe Next Door* (also published by InterVarsity).

Sadly, the value of *Hollywood Worldviews* as even an aid to literary criticism is minimal, given a capricious selection of primary sources. The author explains he'll cite only mainstream American films from the last fifteen years. "The classics have much to offer in the way of analysis, but I am not as familiar with them, so they are for another to explore. . . . You are welcome to consider this bias a weakness or a strength." This isn't bias, it's simple laziness disguised as hip audience appeal.

Imagine chapter three's discussion of existentialism minus Sartre references, simply because the philosopher published before 1988 in a language other than English! Willful omission of that caliber would lower Godawa's stock as thoughtful researcher. Apparently he doesn't realize that a section on postmodern film minus Kurosawa's *Rashomon* (1950) similarly guts his credibility.

There are other problems with the postmodern chapter. Godawa cites *Pulp Fiction* as swimming against the "biblical notion of linear history" largely because its story is told "mixed up out of sequence. . . . This negation of linear narrative created a whole new postmodern nonlinear context for viewing story." By Godawa's reckoning, the book of Jeremiah, organized topically instead of chronologically, qualifies as postmodern. In fact, the foregone conclusion of Christ's return makes all of human history a bit like *Memento*, a film Godawa brands as postmodern because its plot runs backwards from end to beginning.

But the author's lack of depth as theorist and historian isn't the book's greatest shortcoming by far. It is a blind allegiance to story. In his chapter on Redemption, Godawa gets close to seeing there's more to film than narrative, observing, "The composition of a story leads a viewer through emotional and dramatic experiences to see things in the way the storytellers want the viewer to see. This is similar to the visual form, color and composition used by a painter to guide a viewer's eyes and mind to see what the painter wants him to see." Unfortunately, this observation is an asymptote that briefly passes close to insight without ever hitting it dead on.

His blindness reaches its infuriating apex in a discussion of *Amistad*: "A couple of the slaves get a Bible, and since they cannot read, they page through the engravings from Old to New Testament and 'read' the gospel in pictures. It is a long, powerful and moving scene that transcends the political message forced upon it by the filmmakers."

Who does he imagine created this scene? And how – without words – does it manage to powerfully communicate the Gospel? Of course, the director, cinematographer, editor, composer, and production designer created the scene. And, of course, they communicated by coaching actors, choosing lenses, pacing scene transitions, scoring music, and engraving illustrations – the things that filmmakers *do*.

If Godawa can't – or refuses to – identify any storytelling that is not primarily verbal, he will join (and, I'm afraid, add to) the ranks of those who can't quite figure out how to convey God's truth through film and other art forms. (A side note: The author cites *Amistad* as emblematic of the supposed Hollywood agenda to bash Christians. If Godawa's out to discredit stories that bash God's people as laughable objects of derision, he will have to exorcise Ezekiel from his Bible.)

To his credit, Godawa rightly anticipates some readers' inability to see film's "kingdom value" through the fog of the medium's unsavory reputation. For them, he offers an appendix that shows Scripture instructively, redemptively employs the same negative behavior and role models audiences often ascribe to the moving image. This may be the book's best chapter, since it turns the eyes of Philippians 4 on the rest of Scripture.

Throughout the text, Godawa invites readers to other appendices hosted on his website. A visit there reveals what appear to be unpublished excerpts from the book, which merely add to how much he can write about movies without writing about movies.

Probably the piece of his website most difficult to reconcile with the content of his book is a portfolio of Godawa's work as a graphic artist. The book's chosen ignorance of film's art seems a greater sin when it's evident Godawa must rely upon color, composition, and photography (the building blocks of filmic communication) to design web pages, posters, and print ads.

"Movies, after all, are art..." claims the concluding chapter. If that's so (and I believe it is), imagine Godawa writing a book encouraging a Christian appreciation of sculpture. That book, if written in the mold of this one, would include nothing about bas-relief, chisels, or marble. It would not distinguish cubism from realism. It would scrutinize only the works of this century. It would include, in its pages, almost no sculptors' names. It would value narrative sculptures above all others. It would credit Michelangelo's *Pieta* chiefly as a creation of the Apostle Luke, since the physician's story was the basis for the work.

If Brian Godawa understands how moving images communicate, this book offers little evidence of it. Tragically, he's preaching to a readership of evangelicals in search of a culturally relevant group Bible study aid. Questions at the end of each chapter are of the "watch-a-film-and-discuss-its-themes-with-others" variety. Thanks to the ubiquity of film that makes everyone a critic, odds are readers will praise the marksmanship of an author shooting blanks. Worse, they may come away from this book wrongly believing they are better equipped to winnow worldview from the complex medium of film.

While Godawa may, in fact, equip readers to discuss "The Gospel According to Neo," youth ministers in the field realize that 12 year-olds don't care about the theology of *The Matrix* until they've been wowed by "bullet-time," impressive martial arts and cool costumes. It's through excellence of form – and usually not story – that films most often win the right to teach theology.

But youth workers swing in the unsteady hammock between theme-sensitive parents and form-sensitive kids. *Hollywood Worldviews* will aid them in conversations only with the former. It will not afford them hip and necessary entrée in an audience of media-savvy teens.

These are the kids who love *Moulin Rouge*, who will extol the MTV editing of its dance sequences, who will swap pirated MP3s from its soundtrack. Sober adults in Godawa's mold will shake their heads at director Baz Lurhman's post-modern assault on the senses. Meanwhile, nobody is discussing the film's affirmation of Proverbs 7 with the 17-year-old girls who want to be Nicole Kidman on prom night.

Brian D. Fuller  
Montreat College, Montreat, NC