

The past decade has seen a significant increase in literature exploring the subject of film and faith, particularly bringing theology and film into dialogue. From the early beginnings of cinema right up to the present there has been a thread of thinking that focuses on the alleged negative moral and spiritual impact of film on the viewer. This is now a diminished voice as we find theologically informed writers engaging in film criticism. Evidence that there has been a shift is the number of books and articles now available that explore the links between film and faith. Cambridge theologian David Ford has edited a massive volume (800 pgs) under the title *The Modern Theologians* (Blackwell 2005 3rd edition) in which he includes a section on theology and the arts – specifically, visual arts, music and film. Jolyon Mitchell’s article on film is a valuable place to begin the discovery of where things have been and where they are now in relation to theology and film. Mitchell observes that while “some critics have shunned the cinema as a medium that can corrupt morally, socially and doctrinally, ... others have embraced it as a catalyst for theological exploration or even an art form with transcendent potential.” (p. 739)

Current writing on film and theology is diverse and there are differing agendas. Mitchell cites Robert Johnston’s book *Reel Spirituality: Theology and Film in Dialogue* that describes how some critics begin with ethical

presuppositions providing an account of the film’s moral content while others who value



Stroma by Monique Sleidrecht

The island in the tide

I did not initially approach this work with any symbolism in mind. There is no coded message or secret meaning of any kind –

the revelatory power of film give themselves to the artistic and aesthetic qualities of the film before engaging the theological critique. (p. 739)

Forays into the arena of faith and film have often been limited to discussions of Hollywood productions, giving little or no attention to what the Academy calls foreign films. Asian, Indian or European films are often more astute at raising questions about the human condition than those made in Hollywood. Signs are afoot that theological exploration into film is giving attention to productions well beyond the Hollywood genre and beyond movies given to explicitly religious themes. If film as an art form is committed to probing the deeper questions

continued on page 4

the painting is simply a response to an actual experience of staying on the island of Stroma. Stroma is an extraordinary, elemental place and its ancient Norse name means ‘the island in the tide.’ It stands in the midst of one of the most elemental and dangerous tidal flows in the world. The Vikings were in awe of the place, and even modern seafarers navigate the Pentland Firth with fear and respect. It is a truly awesome and lonely environment, a completely deserted world of about eighty ruined houses and a few farm cottages. I stayed on my own in the old nurse’s cottage for several weeks and, during this time, the farmer took me around the island in his boat. This is when I first took note of the beacon in the tumultuous sea, and the massive strength of the towers in the midst of the elements. These images say something to me of a people who hold their own in all the trials and storms of the wild far north of Scotland, which is now my home too.

Monique Sleidrecht
msliedre@hotmail.com ■

Books on film

Among the recent books on film and faith we note two here. Ron Austin, *In a New Light: Spirituality and the Media Arts*, Eerdmans, 2007, and *Behind the Screen: Hollywood Insiders on Faith, Film and Culture*, Spencer Lewerenz and Barbara Nicolosi, Baker Books, 2005.

In this slender but important volume Ron Austin draws on his nearly 50 years in Hollywood to provide us with an insightful look into connections between spirituality and film. Actor, writer, producer and teacher Austin brings us to consider the spiritual quality of film and opens the reader to the deep humanity that film is able to disclose.

He begins with three foundational principles “being in the moment” by which he means what Simone Weil called attentiveness. Pointing to our modern disability to see or listen he invites us to practice “simply being present”. Affirming the mystery of the other is the second principle which he suggests

The Word Guild

Canada’s largest association of Christian writers and editors marks its sixth anniversary by becoming independent

Toronto – The Word Guild, Canada’s largest association of writers and editors who are Christian, is celebrating its sixth anniversary in January 2008 by graduating from its position as a start-up project under Imago and amalgamating with the charity Christian Info Canada (CIC).

“It has been an honour for Imago to partner with this energetic group of writers and watch it grow in its vision over the past six years,” said John Franklin, the Executive Director of Imago. “Now that it is launching into a new time of independence, we hope that The Word Guild will continue to broaden its influence and serve as a model for excellence in writing – both within, and well beyond, the Christian community.”

The Word Guild – has grown to more than 325 members from coast-to-coast, including more than 100 professional level members. Its momentum is having an increasing impact on Christian writing, publishing and book retailing in Canada.

is at the heart of dialogue – so vital to film. Transforming conflict is the third principle which he holds to be as essential for film. Form and content work together to help us see more deeply who we are and what it is that puts us at odds with one another.

Austin then turns to a brief history of film with an eye to spiritual (human) themes. He offers comments on such filmmakers as Chaplin, Renoir, Fellini, Bresson, Bergman, Scorsese and Woody Allen. He also cites two exiles from communism each with deep religious sensibilities, the Russian Andrei Tarkovsky and Krzysztof Kieslowski of Poland



Christian Info was originally founded in 1976 in Alberta. Lloyd Mackey, a pioneer in establishing Christian community newspapers in Canada, reinstated the organization as a registered charity in 1996 and changed the name to Christian Info Canada.

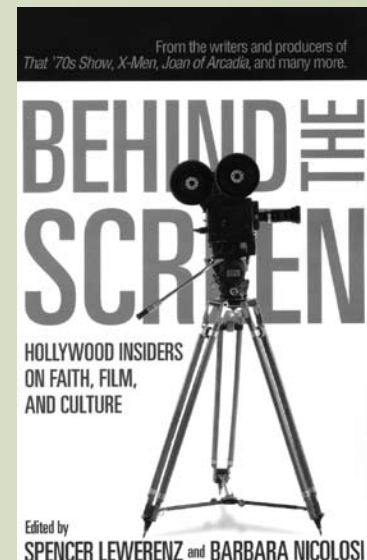
“It’s very encouraging to see The Word Guild coming of age and finding a place of its own. Christian Info Canada is a natural home for an organization that is doing so much to strengthen our far-flung writing community,” observed Doug Koop, of *Christian Week*. “We are thankful ... to Imago for helping us get established, and to Lloyd Mackey and CIC’s former board for welcoming us,” said new board chair Les Lindquist.

Co-founders N. J. Lindquist and Wendy Nelles will continue to have involvement. Lindquist as a consultant working on projects involving the developing and promot-

both of whom according to Austin would serve well as guides for filmmakers today.

We could say this book is a sustained meditation of the importance of film in modern culture and its unique ability to disclose the human condition and nurture our humanity.

Behind the Screen is a very different kind of book. It contains eighteen articles by Hollywood insiders who identify themselves as Christian. There is evident diversity in how that faith perspective is understood and expressed. Craig Detweiler, Ron Austin, Barbara Hall and Ralph Winter are perhaps the best know among the writers. However each piece brings a certain freshness to the conversation as to what it means to be a person of faith behind the scenes in Hollywood. There is nothing technical in the book it is more anecdotal and personal drawing the reader in to each story. This is a work that will provide a glimpse into a part of the Hollywood story that we don’t hear about and may serve to bring a little hope and perhaps some balance to the stereotype banter about all that Hollywood does. ■



ing of authors and Nelles in projects such as directing the *Write Canada!* conference.

Sandra Reimer and Denise Rumble who have helped with the management since 2006, will continue to oversee the day-to-day activities of The Word Guild.

For further information about The Word Guild and its programs, see www.thewordguild.com.

Write Canada!

June 13–14, 2008 in Guelph ON ■



Geez magazine

Geez, the Winnipeg based ad-free magazine devotes its spring 2008 issue to the theme *Art in an Age of Brutality*. The articles are woven around a quote from Thomas Merton in *Disputed Questions*.

In an age of concentration camps and atomic bombs, religious and artistic sincerity will certainly exclude all "prettiness" or shallow sentimentality. Beauty for us, cannot be a mere appeal to conventional pleasures of the imagination and senses.

Nor can it be found in cold, academic perfectionism.

The art of our time, sacred art included, will necessarily be characterized by a certain poverty grimness and roughness which correspond to the violent realities of a cruel age. Sacred art cannot be cruel, but it must know how to be compassionate with the victims of cruelty and one does not offer lollipops to a starving man in a totalitarian death-camp. Nor does one offer him the message of a pitifully inadequate optimism.

Our Christian hope is the purest of all lights that shine in darkness, but it shines in darkness, and one must enter the darkness to see it shining.

The art of our time, sacred art included, will necessarily be characterized by a certain poverty grimness and roughness which correspond to the violent realities of a cruel age ~ Thomas Merton

The style of the magazine is such that the articles are brief, engaging and thought provoking if not just provocative. The range of issues addressed is impressive and there is much to learn and much to disagree with. It has been said that learning takes place best in "conflict situations" that is in situations where there is a dissonance between what you think and what you are reading or hearing. It is in that place that reflection is engaged and critical thought does its work. *Geez* provides such a place.

Co-editor Aiden Enns writes about the art of compassion. Here he advocates for a public role for art – a role which invites the artist to speak to prevailing concerns in the culture. But he also sees art as having a capacity for consolation and so affirms both the prophetic voice in art and the hopeful presence of creativity. Nicolas Klassen is clear in his claim that art will not save the world. Despite strong and eloquent statements like Picasso's *Guernica* – human behaviour seems to show little sign of change. Miriam Meinders the other co-editor, in her *Notes toward a moral beauty*, reveals a particular take on truth and beauty when she asks "... what then of ugliness?" suggesting that it doesn't fit with truth and beauty. But surely it does – as art is able to capture the dark and difficult side of human existence and not leave us trapped there enabling us to see beyond – which she suggests is something we all wish to do.

Two other articles I will mention one raised some questions about theological concerns the other offered an implicit challenge to the approach the magazine employs in its engagement with social, cultural and religious themes. The first *Not Creator, Creativity* by Jesse Nathan offers a take on our understanding of God which counters traditional Christian accounts of God. The author writes about the theology of his great uncle Gordon Kaufmann – who taught for many years at Harvard Divinity School. No space here to engage the argument in detail

but in a nutshell, the claim is that "creativity is God, not part of God or an attribute of God or a product of God but simply God." Granted this has a certain appeal, not least for those for whom creativity is a central theme and activity. A telling line at the end of the essay says "By freeing us from the strictures of an out-of-date, no longer intelligible kind of religious thinking, Kaufmann's theology permits us to construct the sort of world we long for." There is a familiar ring here, is it Babel or just 18th century enlightenment's wish for autonomy and belief in progress? What is lost here is the tradition's understanding of God as triune – personal and engaging in history not least through incarnation. The underlying argument is the affirmation of mystery – but surely that is not incompatible with the received theological tradition.

The second article was by Calvin Seerveld which he titles; *Better to reform than to subvert, also with art*. In this brief and insightful article Seerveld explores the difference between subversion and reform. He writes "The root biblical mandate does not promote subversion but asks for a converted peoplehood who are prepared to do good for Babylon, where some are exiled (Jeremiah 29:7) and overcome evil by doing good (Romans 12: 9-21) at the cost of one's lifetime." Subversion is on the agenda of those at *Geez* magazine but it is the kind of magazine that opens the door to critical reflection on the issues and Seerveld has served up good grist for the mill on this subject.

Geez is not a magazine for everyone. It follows well its byline – "...holy mischief in an age of fast faith". I picked up a copy at a magazine stand in the Queen Street West area of Toronto – a place where popular culture, its practitioners and consumers, and all its attendant features loom large. But I think that many will find it a refreshing and instructive journal and I for one am glad it has taken up the subject of art.
www.geezmagazine.org ■

Lynne McIlvride Evans



Reserve the Date

Thursday October 16, 2008.

Imago will sponsor a talk by Roberta Ahmanson on the subject of *Faces* in the history of visual art. This is a fascinating theme as the face is so central to our identity and thus our humanity. Details of this Toronto event will follow in the next newsletter.

The past decade

continued from page 1

about what it means to be human then surely it is a place for reflective faith to engage. It should be noted that often the most theologically interesting films are not necessarily those with the most religious content.

Some recent publications have drawn on the movies as a resource for biblical literacy. Canadian biblical scholar Adele Reinhartz has this purpose in mind in her 2003 book *Scripture on the Silver Screen*. Robert Jewett another biblical scholar was well ahead of his time when he published *St. Paul at the Movies: The Apostle in Dialogue with American Culture* (1993). Robert K. Johnston offers a glimpse into contemporary culture in dialogue with scripture in his *Useless Beauty: Ecclesiastes through the Lens of Contemporary Film* (2000).

In 2005 customers in the USA spent \$45 billion on movies. Clearly there is something that is drawing us to the movies. Just what that may be can be answered in a number of ways. Perhaps we in North America like to

Lynne McIlvride Evans: Constructions and paintings

April 9 to May 1, 2008. The Lookout Gallery, Regent College, 5800 University Blvd., Vancouver, BC. Phone: 604.224.3245 www.regent-college.edu

Opening reception: Wednesday, April 9, 4:30 to 7:30pm.

Gallery hours: Monday to Friday: 8:30 am to 5:00 pm, Saturday: 12:00 to 4:00 pm.

Charitable status

Corps Bara Dance Theatre, Calgary (www.corpsbara.com) and **Lost and Found Theatre**, Kitchener/Waterloo (www.lostandfoundtheatre.ca) got their charitable status in 2007 after a sojourn under the Imago umbrella. These creative initiatives continue to engage in high quality artistry each in their particular community.

Hamish Robertson Show

Noir Architecture: Photography and the Play of Connotative Meaning.

May 19 to 31, 2008. Ryerson School of Image Arts, 122 Bond Street, 3rd Floor, Toronto.

Opening Reception: Tuesday, May 20, 6:30 to 8:30 pm.

Course offering at ICS

Art, Beauty & God: Recurrent Themes in Theological Aesthetics

Instructors: Dr. Adrienne Dengerink Chaplin and Dr. Wessel Stoker

Dates: June 30 to July 11, 2008. Institute for Christian Studies at 229 College St., Toronto.

Co-taught by a theologian and a philosopher, the course will explore the relationships between: art and beauty; beauty and God; icons and idols; art and worldview; theological and philosophical aesthetics. It will examine recent developments in theological aesthetics with a view to identifying which theories hold most promise for a holistic contemporary Christian aesthetics.

Registration by: June 21, 2008. Online: www.icscanada.edu Phone: 416-979-2331, ext 234.

be entertained and are in need of escape – escape from the demands of work, the social pressures of life, the chaos of the world situation or simply from boredom. Or it may be that the narratives of film – the stories we are able to enter into – give us a needed perspective on our own lives. Or is it that we gather in the theatres and living rooms of the nation to get some help with our values, to discover what we ought to believe, or to learn more about who we are. At its best, film can have the power of a religious parable providing insight and direction for those who take time to watch and reflect.

This dialogue between theology and film is still very young and we should not expect too much of it for now. There are strong signs that the level of discussion is deepening with time. The new works being published hold good promise for future understanding. Mitchell concludes his article with a number of questions about the film industry. Here are three of them: “How far has the film industry become an alternative kind of church, with its own sacred times and spaces, its own viewing rituals and canoniz-

ation ceremonies? How far does it promote the accumulation of wealth and individual celebrity over the formation of character and caring communities? How far does the industry create cinematic distraction from the real and endemic violence in the world?” Film has a profound influence in our culture and offers a rich and engaging resource for conversation on themes at the heart of human existence. The two books on which we comment in this issue are part of that exploration and our hope is that Imago will be able to help facilitate such conversations in the days ahead.

John Franklin, *Executive Director*
133 Southvale Drive, Toronto, ON M4G 1G6
416-421-8745 imago@rogers.com
www.imago-arts.on.ca