



Meaning at the Movies: Becoming a Discerning Viewer

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Hollywood produces, packages, and sells hundreds of movies every year. Many of these movies propagate a distorted sense of morality and ethics. Under the surface of immoral behavior and unlawfulness, however, there can be deeper problems in Hollywood's messages. What are these stories telling the viewer about life, relationships, and God? What worldviews and ideas do they espouse? If Christians are to tread carefully at the theater complex, they need resources to help them.

This book is just such a resource. By exploring the relationship between Christianity and art, the theology of biblical discernment, and a brief history of filmmaking, as well as through analysis of popular films, *Meaning at the Movies* equips readers for careful discernment in the cinema. The book does not simply list criteria for judging film art; instead it encourages Christians to develop biblical and critical discernment in regard to not only film, but all aspects of culture.

Meaning at the Movies: Becoming a Discerning Viewer Details

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Peter J Goeman says

Read this book because it has been highly recommended. Horner does an excellent job of discussing the presuppositions that go into the movies, as well as analyzing film genres (what makes them tick, what is their theology, etc.). The first part of the book is especially good as it reminds the reader that one must not "turn of their mind" when they watch a movie. Either you will observe thoughtfully, or you will be implicitly shaped by the movie you watch.

Rachel says

This book is fantastic. It will not give you any formulas, tips or tricks about what films to watch as Christians. Instead, it helps you to be able to discern the ideas in films and how they can affect your life. If you haven't seen the films listed in the book, you can watch them, but it is not necessary to read the book. They are discussed enough for any reader to be able to understand what is needed to comprehend the author's point.

John says

Dr. Horner thoughtfully and carefully examines the cultural origins in regards to movies/cultural productions/art. He then goes on to examine the various genres with depth and serious reflection. This book I believe to be helpful in interacting with the culture as the old saying goes, "art imitates life." I highly recommend this for any age group and would recommend parents have their children read it either as part of their curriculum if homeschooled or as an added resource while attending public school.

Jimmy says

Excellent book on a Christian worldview when it comes to viewing movies, and probably the best book of its kind. It stresses that Christians must bring the Word of God to bear concerning what they are seeing. The best question that a Christian can ask in evaluating any film is what does it say about the nature of man. Does the movie promote an anthropology that is contrary to that of Scripture or does it confirm it? The author makes the point that even if what it teaches about man is contrary to what our systematic theology tells us about man, yet it still speaks truth--that man would try to suppress the truth of God in righteousness. I love how he brings Romans 1 to bear in the topic of evaluating culture, in which film is an artifact of culture. The point he makes about Romans 1 goes beyond just movie watching but an analysis of other aspects and creative outflow of society in general. After an opening chapter on discernment and how to interrogate a movie which lays the ground work for the rest of the book, the author Grant Horner launches into analysis of several kinds of genre of films. If you have ever had an English literature class in which the professor is able to open your eyes and see a book you are reading at a deeper level of things you never noticed previously, you would enjoy experiencing the same epiphanies with this part of the book (it does help that Horner is an English professor at The Master's College). His chapter on comedy discusses about the Christian view of

irony--and how irony is the result of a fallen world in which the world is not the way it ought to be. Prior to this book I never thought about irony in these terms before. Horner does the same kind of analysis with scary movies as well, with a great discussion of how scary movies in light of Romans 1 is our way of managing fear that we can control--and how that helps us cope with our suppression that God is frightening for sinners. Scary movies then is our way out in order to release the valve so to speak. The author also devote a chapter on romance and most interestingly film noir. The author does not take you down a path of smut but was able to point out illustrations of Christian principles as well, and movies with bad ideology that viewers might not readily pick up. His last chapter on man and meaning of life and memory is a fitting end, in which he argues that man is trying to suppress the knowledge of God by also suppressing the memory of that suppression. As I said earlier I believe this is the best book of it's kind. It's filled with many observations of movies and also biblical discernment. I thoroughly recommend this book to everyone.

Shay says

"*All the world's a screen*" – at least that's how Prof Horner sees it, and I'm starting to agree with him.

Prof Horner's work here reveals both his love for film and for God's Word and how to balance the two. As an English professor, film guru, and a student of theology, Prof Horner is the right man to speak to this very important Christian question of *what do we do with film?*

This book will challenge any film lover, parent, student, and Christian to actually use discernment when watching movies, and not *just* view them for entertainment only. His purpose is not to tell you what movies to watch, but show you how to watch them. Additionally, his goal is teach us how to see ourselves in movies, and then compare that with how God designed us to live as revealed in the Bible.

For Christians, Meaning At The Movies should be added to your "to-read" list and pushed to the top of the list. It will create a conversation in your home, work, or church that will surely help us all use our time to the glory of God, even when we're holding a bag of popcorn and enjoying a movie together.

Patrick says

I read this book alongside a similar book, Mike Cospers's *The Stories We Tell: How TV and Movies Long for and Echo the Truth*. Both books compare and contrast movies with themes from the Bible, arguing that every human being, whether they realize it or not, has an inborn yearning for God, who is best known through the Christian gospel. Cospers focuses on similarities, while Horner focuses on differences (one of Horner's major arguments is that although we know the truth about God deep down, we consciously or subconsciously suppress it, and that this is evident in the stories we fashion). Both books were enjoyable to read side-by-side.

Leila Bowers says

I didn't make it all the way through, but this is the best resource I have discovered for studying film and worldview from a sound Christian perspective. My only fault with it would be I haven't seen many of the films he discusses, so I missed some of the context. That said, Horner effectively 'sets the scene,' so even if you haven't seen the films, you can still learn from the example.

Matthew Robison says

Christians should be discerning viewers of movies. But we a lot of the time, we get caught in the battle between those who only watch G rated movies, and those who think anything goes. That's a false dichotomy.

Some G rated rated movies are much more dangerous, in the idea and philosophies they exhibit, than many R rated movies. Likewise, the presence of violence or profanity is not an automatic disqualifier. What message is really being preached, for every movie has one. Those who would dismiss anything rated R would miss out, for example, on the modern western Unforgiven, which is a shame.

Horner analyzes many movies to help get to the worldview they are trying to preach, and tries to help us do the same. Worth the read, especially if you appreciate older movies.

I do wish he had gotten a little more practical. His "practical" chapter on how to analyze a movie didn't seem very practical. I also wish he analyzed some more modern movies. If he had a movie review blog, I would read it.

Jess says

This was a helpful read for my 10th grader and I. It may be better suited for an 11th or 12th grader depending on their maturity. The author speaks of many films I have never watched and have no intentions of watching, but recognizing the various world views that are often displayed in any movie made this book worthwhile.

Seth says

This was an okay book on the art of film. A little too simplistic and somewhat wordy, even though it is not a long book. There are better books on the topic.

Noah Nevils says

I expected more of an actual how-to as opposed to Horner's reflections on various films and how they tie in to biblical doctrines. But if that's what it was supposed to be, then it wasn't too bad. I enjoyed most of it. Wish he had explained more about why The Matrix is not a Christian film.

Mark says

Grant Horner provides an excellent tool for analyzing movies. He opens up by explaining that all movies have a meaning and a worldview behind them, and the job of analysis is to determine where the movie's

thoughts come from. He teaches a little basic philosophy and then moves into particular genres. All this tied in from a Christian perspective. I appreciated his insights and found myself wishing I could sit in his class and watch *Scarlett Street*.

Suzannah says

This was a decent book, although I think that if you want to get specific worldview tools for detecting philosophy in art, you're better off with Nancy Pearcey's *Saving Leonardo*

I was bemused that Horner defines *culture generally* as a Romans-1-style attempt to "suppress the truth in unrighteousness". While this definition might work well as a descriptor for specifically unbelieving cultural works as opposed to the cultural works of Christendom, I was fascinated to note that Horner never clarified this point. This shows the outworking of a comment early on that "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." I could not possibly disagree with this more strongly than I do. Not only is it a misinterpretation of Scripture, it's also at root a radically anti-cultural position: if all Christians are called to recognise the truth about God, and if all culture is devoted to suppressing the truth about God, then Christians can view culture only as their enemy: a highly sophisticated enemy ploy to deceive and misdirect. And forget about actually trying to produce your own cultural works.

Fortunately, Horner spends more time in the book describing how examples of unbelieving culture act out a Romans 1 suppression of truth, rather than fully elaborating on his retreatist theory of culture. And he's certainly onto something with the Romans 1 rubric. This is a particularly valuable artistic insight because it accounts quite neatly for the unquestionable *ambiguity* of art. We've all seen films or read stories which depressed us while enunciating a stark materialist or existentialist worldview. I'm reminded of the worst novel I ever read, a revolting tale of dissipation in Restoration London. The main character schemes, murders, and sleeps her way through a world in which virtue is only either *naivete* to be exploited or hypocrisy to be exposed. And she has a miserable time doing it. By the end, I had a knee-jerkingly passionate desire to be *really* good. Is a story like this an apology for vice or for virtue? Nothing was more evident than the main character's desperate need for redemption.

This would be a good example of Horner's thesis, which is that unbelievers suppress the truth in unrighteousness ("Embrace your inner promiscuous lying killer!"), but cannot suppress it fully and are constantly dogged by its triumphant re-emergence ("--and enjoy a lonely, futile, embittered life in which everyone hates you"). Because the truth has a way of slithering out and re-asserting itself, even unbelieving culture can be experienced as a source of truth--*if* we experience it mindfully, critically, and using the tools of discernment given in Scripture.

I did think Horner's anti-culture definition did trip him up occasionally. He calls our attention to Ang Lee's *Sense and Sensibility* adaptation in the chapter on romance, saying that the climactic scene in which Elinor reacts to Edward Ferrars's declaration of love in a sudden, uncharacteristic moment of pure emotion is a picture of how we should react--the same shock, the same euphoria--to God's love for us as humans. Horner doesn't spell it out in this passage, but taken in context, this of course means that a) the story is a work of culture (originally conceived by a woman whom I firmly believe to be a pre-eminent crafter of *Christian* cultural works); b) as a work of culture, whatever truth it may display comes as the result of an attempt to *suppress* the truth; and c) its particular suppression of truth is an attempt to place ultimate human meaning in romantic love (which is how he specifically characterises a similar moment in a previous chapter in a Charlie Chaplin movie).

But of course Austen meant no such thing in *Sense and Sensibility*. Yikes, in her original novel she even has

a character swear to let her romantic affections be "regulated by religion"! The truth is not in her story by way of *suppression*--it's in there by faithful God-honouring design. Horner's critique is like a parent banning CS Lewis's Narnia books from the house on the grounds that Aslan is a false god. By refusing to recognise the legitimacy of faithful Christian culture as expressed through symbolism, metaphor, and story, Horner blinds himself to how storytelling can intentionally point us beyond to greater truths.

So to conclude, this book was part good and part bad. It provides a great way to read works of unfaithful culture, a way that allows for reflections of truth and profound ambiguities and ironies within works of fiction. But when it comes to evaluating and appreciating Christian culture, it's pretty lacking.

John says

Though labeled and marketed as a book about the movies, this book is much, much more. This is actually one of the best culture and worldview books you'll encounter. The book is more a series of lessons on Christian discernment, worldview, and culture with movies as the primary metaphor and source material.

Horner's method, rather than simply talking about movies, teaches his reader how to use Christian discernment in evaluating culture and philosophy. His lessons are primarily drawn from Romans 1 and the unbeliever's suppression of truth and the inescapability of truth being revealed despite the attempts at suppression.

Horner defines "Christian discernment" as "thinking as God thinks." (p. 58) Those familiar with Van Til will recognize this mantra, and the book expounds Van Til's idea of antithesis and epistemology. None of it is explicit, nor is Van Til quoted--rather, it is all Scriptural--coming from a faithful study of Romans. Horner argues that all men know about God, they choose to suppress it in unrighteousness, rather than face the truth of their condition.

The first portion of the book discusses discernment and worldview, even dedicating a chapter to defining the predominant worldviews. He then begins applying his basic principles to film. But again, to reduce the book to movies alone is to minimize the scope of the book.

Horner argues that film is our new philosophy. He elaborates by demonstrating the significance of film in our cultural consciousness. Film is the primary vehicle for the communication of philosophy and worldview. He challenges Christians to a new awareness of what is being communicated in movies. But again, this awareness is much more than simply understanding movies. The very same thing can be said for understanding any cultural artifact--advertising, books, sermons, TV news, sitcoms, political rallies, etc. The call is to discernment, not just discernment in the cinema.

This is an outstanding book and should be read widely, even if you have no interest in movies. I highly recommend it.

James Harmeling says

This is tremendous volume that made me feel as if I took a class with Professor Horner. He recommends watching specific films before reading certain chapters describing particular genres. This is the best way to read the book and is easy with Netflix. His chapter on the history and development of philosophy that shapes the artwork of making films today is excellent. This book is not for the light reader. Horner makes you work

through films and understand the philosophical perspective of the director. A number of times I had to consider rewatching a movie after reading his critique because he saw much more than I did. I will be reading other books on media criticism for a class I am teaching, but this book written from a strong biblical perspective and academic background is a wonderful resource.
