



# St Mark's Review

A Journal of Christian thought & opinion

No. 234, December 2015 (4)

SUMMER EDITION



## FILM, FAITH & CULTURE

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## **Film, faith and culture**



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## Film, faith and culture

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# Editorial

## 'Film, faith and culture'

The Australian summer might be characterised for many by languid days on the beach or in a pool, the soundtrack provided by the cricket or the tennis. In recent decades the summer has also come to mean the 'blockbuster' season at the box office. This year is no exception, of course, with the release of the most anticipated and ridiculously hyped film of the last decade, the seventh instalment—or the fourth instalment, depending on your opinion of the last three films in the franchise—of *Star Wars*. Millions of Australians will flock to the cinema this summer to revel in the visceral storytelling power of film, helped of course by buttery popcorn, reclining seats and air conditioning as a welcome escape from the heat (or, as our cover picture suggests, the cool night air of the outdoor cinema). But millions more will watch films at home, thanks to the exponential rise of online and Pay TV platforms like Netflix, Foxtel and iTunes.

Cinema has become perhaps the defining medium of Western culture—no less in Australia than elsewhere—and now assumes roles previously played by the novel and the theatre. The downside of this cultural shift, as Scott Cowdell laments in his article below, has been a '3D deluge of plot-less and character-less commercial product full of CGI effects and empty of insight'. Nevertheless, 'high art remains widely available from the cinema and its proxies. Hence the baton of great literature is passing de facto to film in our time, as does the prophetic insight that might once have been expected from Christian pulpits.' Although the scholarly study of film has long been a rich and vibrant field, it is only in recent decades that theologians and Christian thinkers have begun to engage seriously with the messages and medium of film. Yet the potential of film for theological engagement is vast, especially given the ways in which popular films depict religion, values and theological themes in relation to the human condition, evil and suffering, transcendence, moral and religious redemption, and religious and cultural difference. Film also represents a powerful visual and narrative medium for public debate on moral and religious issues in church and society. Like literature and other cultural products, film provides a medium for theological reflection, and a

medium for engagement between theology and culture. These themes are the focus of this special summer issue of *St Mark's Review*.

The first four articles in this issue are a reminder that questions of faith are not confined to films that are explicitly religious. Faith-related themes pervade all genres of film, often in subtle and surprising ways. Kutter Callaway encourages us to listen to the way music functions in film, both aesthetically and theologically, in this case in Sam Mendes' cinematic masterpiece, *American Beauty*. Callaway argues that the film's two musical leitmotifs strike an 'innately theological' note, acting symbolically to unify and reorient key characters' ostensibly competing visions of beauty in the world. The 'pervasive presence' of the film's music suggests, in the end, that 'no one stands outside the influence of the "incredibly benevolent force" that suffuses the whole of our lives,' not even middle-class materialists with their 'bourgeois banality'.

Scott Cowdell's essay on a recent Japanese-American film, *Kumiko*, identifies a similar thematic core that was missed by most critics and reviewers, namely the film's critique of the illusory, self-destructive desire of romantic individualism that is so widely celebrated and embraced in our contemporary culture. Cowdell's careful reading of *Kumiko* identifies the film's subtle implication that the romantic-individualist approach to life fails to grasp the fragile beauty and contentment that is close at hand in the midst of seemingly mundane relationships and modest prospects (here the resonance with the themes of *American Beauty* are striking).

While both of the abovementioned films evoke a sense of God's immanence, Nikolai Blaskow's study of *Birdman*, the winner of this year's Oscars for best picture and best director, highlights the capacity of great films to reorient our gaze to the transcendent. At the heart of *Birdman*, argues Blaskow, is a search for love and transcendent meaning amid the narcissistic pretensions of lowbrow cinema and highbrow theatre.

Jonathan Holt alerts us to different ways in which films establish meaning, not least the tension between commercial and artistic imperatives that all filmmakers have to negotiate. Accordingly, a film establishes meaning as both a mirror (reflecting back to the viewer what they want to see) and a window (on to the meaning or message offered by the film's artistic creators). Holt identifies meaning-making as a common ground for dialogue between film and theology. By taking account of the dual mirror/

window functions of film, the theologian can engage creatively and critically with ways in which films establish meaning.

The final four articles in this issue bring films with explicitly religious themes and subjects into conversation with Scripture and theology. Jeanette Mathew's incisive analysis of two recent epic films based on Old Testament narratives, *Noah* and *Exodus: Gods and Kings*, encourages the viewer to see such 'biblical movies' not as literal representations of the story,

but rather as artistic improvisations of familiar accounts. Although the text is foundational, a visual representation will entail new angles of vision on the story. Gaps that are present in the narrative may be filled with improvised interpretations, or may be left as open questions that remain with us. Creating and viewing biblical movies are as much an act of interpretation as reading the text itself.

In a similar fashion, Katherine Rainger notes ways in which intertextual readings of film and Scripture can illuminate each other, offering fresh insights into each text and into the larger themes they explore. When scriptural and cinematic narratives are heard together, and on their own terms, they create an 'interpretive triangle' of film, scripture and reader/viewer. Rainger models this approach through an intertextual reading of the biblical narrative of the *Book of Ruth* and *Wadjda*, the first Saudi Arabian feature film (and the first to be written and directed by a woman). Both the film and the scriptural text resonate with each other in their exploration of themes of loss and redemption, solidarity and the pressure of societal expectations, as well as the question of how much autonomy a woman can exercise within the context of patriarchal societies.

The final two articles consider Christ on film. Geoff Broughton shows how cinematic portrayals of Christ during the first century of cinema can provide an index of the relationship between Christ and culture. He concludes that most twentieth-century films about Jesus have tended to reveal more about their viewers (and possibly their directors) than about Jesus or the meaning of his life, death and resurrection. The result has been a cinematic Christ made in their image—one to be admired, but not adored or worshipped. In the twenty-first century, however, at the end of a century of cinematic portrayals of Christ, that situation has changed:

Jesus is largely unknown to the audiences that come to witness his story, often for the first time. Recent portrayals suggest that if filmmakers can narrate a Jesus story that is credible (such as *The Son of God*) and visceral (such as *The Passion of the Christ*), then there are likely to be many more cinematic Christs in the next century of film.

In the final article of this issue, Bernard Doherty highlights ways in which films may be shaped by a director's theology and worldview, in this case Mel Gibson's *Passion of the Christ*. Controversy initially surrounded the film due to allegations of its unhistorical, anti-Semitic and bloodthirsty imagery. Yet, as Doherty shows, the film might be better understood in the context of Gibson's brand of traditionalist Roman Catholicism and various ways in which Gibson's theology and churchmanship appears to have shaped both specific elements within the film and Gibson's larger artistic vision.

Two further threads run through this issue: the cultural and theological importance of film; and the pressing need for thoughtful Christian engagement with it. Broughton points out that at the dawn of the age of cinema 'most people went to Church weekly and the movies rarely. Today, some people watch movies weekly and most rarely go to Church.' 'Just as Christian commentary on literature has been a modern constant,' argues Cowdell, 'so now must Christian film criticism be regarded as a missional imperative.' Blaskow contends likewise that 'film, when allowed to speak on its own terms, is a truth-teller to be taken seriously and often, in great films, a form of theology in its own right.' While the articles in this issue certainly offer a compelling rationale for theological engagement with film, they also offer a model of what that kind of critical engagement might look like. There are stimulating insights here that you might profitably take with you—along with the popcorn—to the movies this summer and beyond.

**Spoiler alert:** articles discussing *American Beauty*, *Kumiko*, *Birdman* and *Wadjda* divulge key plot points.

*Michael Gladwin*  
Editor

# Music and the mundane in *American Beauty*

Kutter Callaway

The true measure of a great film is whether it can withstand the test of time. Sixteen years have passed since *American Beauty*<sup>1</sup> first graced theatre screens and captured the hearts of a generation of moviegoers. Yet, perhaps now more than ever, Sam Mendes' cinematic masterpiece continues to confront us with a compelling vision of life's fragile beauty in the midst of an otherwise fractured and cynical world.

It is precisely because of its many enduring qualities that *American Beauty* garnered such critical acclaim when it was originally released (it won five Academy Awards, including Best Picture, in 2000). It also explains, at least in part, why this film continues to draw the attention of those who are interested in the spiritual possibilities of cinema. But it is not simply film critics and cinephiles that hold this film in high regard. For example, one website dedicated to the exploration of spirituality within popular culture named *American Beauty* the number one encounter with wonder in their '50 experiences in wonder' series.<sup>2</sup>

Thus, it comes as no surprise that, over the years, numerous individuals have reflected theologically on *American Beauty*, offering their take on why this particular film connects so readily with the contemporary cultural imagination. In his beautifully written *Catching Light: Looking for God in the Movies*, Roy Anker explores this very question.<sup>3</sup> I am quite fond of Anker's work. However, I must admit that I am bringing his voice into this conversation for a somewhat self-interested purpose.

In contrast to Anker and others who have reflected on this film over the years,<sup>4</sup> I want to suggest that the reason that *American Beauty* continues to connect so profoundly with contemporary individuals is not simply because

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of the script or the cinematography or the acting. Rather, it is because of the way music functions in the film. For, as it is with any great piece of art, a truly transformative movie engages us holistically—through our eyes and our ears, our minds and our hearts—and *American Beauty* is no exception.

According to Anker, the thematic core of *American Beauty* is directly related to ‘the necessity to “look closer,” to behold with wonder the exquisite beauty of ordinary human life.’<sup>5</sup> Indeed, the film follows Lester Burnham during the final year of his ‘stupid little life,’ from his imprisonment in bourgeois banality to his gradual awakening from a stupor of apathy and discontent, and finally to his appreciation of life’s heartbreaking beauty.

Yet, for Anker, the film charts a path to this destination of wonderment by contrasting two competing, wholly divergent notions of beauty. Anker suggests that, in the character of Ricky, Lester’s young neighbor, the film supplies ‘another rendition of beauty, one diametrically opposed to the renditions set for by Carolyn, Lester, the gay Jim and Jim, Angela, or Ricky’s own father ... In Ricky’s radically different vision of life, the emphasis falls on beauty itself, pure and very simple, free of its often grotesque American incrustations.’<sup>6</sup>

Thus, Anker’s interpretation of the film centers on Lester’s eventual rejection of what he believes to be the ephemeral desire that lies at the heart of American culture in favor of ‘true’ beauty, or the ‘amazing, uncompromised glory of the created world.’<sup>7</sup> According to Anker, the ‘first note struck in the film,’ and the one that ‘plays repeatedly throughout’ is a satiric condemnation of the ‘soul-numbing niceness and triviality’ of suburban utopia.<sup>8</sup>

Yet, if we pay attention to the music in *American Beauty*, we quickly recognise that this highly cynical take on American life is in fact not the first note struck in the film. Nor is it the final word. Rather, the first note we hear in the film comes from the marimba leitmotiv. Technically speaking, a leitmotiv is a short musical figure that is repeated throughout the course of a film, serving as one of the primary devices by which the score as a whole is organised and structured. However, in this case, the symbolic meaning that the marimba leitmotiv conveys is not related simply to a musical phrase, but rather, to the marimba itself.<sup>9</sup>

The marimba figures prominently, not only in Lester’s opening monologue regarding the vapidness of his suburban life, but also in Carolyn’s attempts to close one of her real estate deals and in Lester’s sexually charged dream sequences. It appears while Lester jogs with Jim and Jim, while Carolyn and

Buddy begin their affair, and while Jane and Ricky watch a funeral procession move slowly down their street. Moreover, we hear the marimba as Ricky captures a number of bizarrely beautiful moments on his camcorder: Jane in her bedroom, Lester posing in his garage, a bird lying dead on the side of the road. Thus, we cannot directly associate this leitmotiv with any one of the film's characters. Rather, as its numerous iterations sound and resound over images that reflect various conceptions of what constitutes a meaningful and beautiful life, the marimba leitmotiv serves to signify the aesthetic impulse that both compels and unites all of the film's characters. In other words, according to the film's music, each person in his or her own way is driven toward beauty.

Contrary to Anker's contention though, the music does not set these various drives toward beauty in opposition to one another. Rather, the marimba leitmotiv connects the aesthetic impulse that motivates each of these characters by pointing toward their collective disorientation. To be sure, Ricky's obsession with capturing the magnificence of the ordinary world on film is seemingly more contemplative than Carolyn's longing for professional success and prestige. Yet, just as Carolyn confuses human fulfillment with materiality, Ricky often blurs the line between quiet contemplation and voyeurism, between a pure and simple appreciation of life's beauty and a medicinally mediated engagement with the world. Thus, rather than offering two renditions of beauty as Anker suggests, the film's music functions to unify these characters through their distorted visions of beauty.

Ultimately, though, just as the marimba leitmotiv signifies the characters' aesthetic impulses, the transformation of this leitmotiv signifies a reorientation of their basic understanding concerning the good, the true, and ultimately, the beautiful. As Ricky and Jane watch footage of a plastic bag being tossed about by the wind (as Ricky puts it, "the most beautiful thing I have ever filmed"), the marimba leitmotiv is displaced and finally replaced by a new theme; it is, in a certain sense, 'over-written.' Rather than a marimba, we hear a single piano with a string accompaniment; rather than the major and minor 3rds of the prior figure, we hear a progression of harmonic intervals that are now comprised of perfect 5ths. And it is this new, 'mundane beauty' figure that emerges as the primary musical theme for the rest of the film.

While the transformation of the leitmotiv is marked symbolically by a shift toward modal 'stability' and tonal 'resolution,' this musical transition

should not be understood as a straightforward pre-figuring of some kind of 'redemption' per se. The music can only hint at personal and communal transformation. In doing so, it does not coerce or demand, but rather invites. That is, the development of the leitmotiv opens up an affective space—for both the audience and the characters in the film—within which they are able to feel out their world in new, and potentially liberating, ways. But other than Lester, who is now reflecting back on his life, it remains uncertain as to whether or not the film's primary characters will respond in ways that are commensurate with this musical invitation. Instead, the music simply holds out the possibility that their collective desire for beauty and goodness might one day become properly directed. In other words, not everyone has the capacity to look and listen closer—the eyes to see and the ears to hear. And even more tragically, those who are able to develop their sensibilities in such ways often do so all too late.

In the penultimate sequence, as Lester awakens to the emptiness of his sexual fantasies while the object of his lust lies naked before him, it is the 'mundane beauty' theme that accompanies his reorientation. Suddenly, not only are Lester's eyes opened to his radically misplaced desires, but also, as Anker suggests, 'Lester has come to recognise and care about something apart from himself.'<sup>10</sup> Moreover, in the final sequence, as he narrates from beyond the grave, we hear this music once again playing over images of Lester's life. As his voice-over narration makes clear, through an unexpected encounter with life's unspeakable beauty, Lester has stumbled upon the true source of joy and contentment. If there is a tragedy here, it is that he only recognizes this truth in the waning moments of his life. More than any other element in the film, it is this 'mundane beauty' leitmotiv that functions to indicate that which Lester encountered, the very thing that cannot be contained in the images we see—the pervasive presence of life's beauty.

In this way, the leitmotiv, in both its earlier and later manifestations, functions much like what film music scholar Michel Chion calls an *acousmètre*, the structuring presence of an absence.<sup>11</sup> It signifies a real presence in the diegetic world that is heard but not seen. It is an 'otherworldly' presence that speaks from a transcendent realm beyond the image, but nevertheless impinges directly upon the film's narrative world.

In both its earlier and later manifestations, the leitmotiv pervades the whole of the film from beginning to end, impinging upon the characters' lives and the film's progression. Anker is therefore surely correct to emphasise

the film's affirmation of the ordinary world as 'resplendent and suffused with a radiant, implacable love that shows itself in the exquisite beauty of the very fabric of the created world.'<sup>12</sup> Yet, by not attending to the film's music, it is difficult for him to recognise the more central problem that besets the characters in the film. That is, their inability to see and engage with the ordinary world's 'exquisite beauty' is not so much a matter of misapprehension or misconception, but of misdirection. Consequently, his interpretation unnecessarily denigrates the legitimate impulses that compel persons to pursue material wealth, sexual expression, and aesthetic pleasure, but have simply become disoriented.

Without question, *American Beauty* offers a scathing criticism of those whose passions have become disoriented and who misconstrue the object of their desire as an end in itself. However, as it signifies the beautiful presence that saturates life, the film's music affirms these characters' basic impulses by effecting not an abandonment, but a reorienting of their passions. Thus, rather than presenting us with two competing visions of beauty—one 'grotesque' and one 'pure,' one beyond redemption and one charting a path toward redemption—the film calls upon the pervasive presence of the music to envelop all these visions from the very beginning. In doing so, the first note that the film actually strikes is innately theological. It suggests that no one stands outside the influence of the 'incredibly benevolent force' that suffuses the whole of our lives, not even middle-class American materialists.

## Endnotes

1. An earlier version of this article was originally posted by the Reel Spirituality Institute at <http://www.brehmcenter.com/initiatives/reelspirituality/film/articles/american-beauty-music-marimbas-and-the-mundane>.
2. Eric Kuiper, 'Seeing American Beauty,' 19 October 2012, <http://rednow.com/film/seeing-american-beauty/> (accessed 13 November 2015).
3. Roy Anker, *Catching Light: Looking for God in the Movies*, Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 2004.
4. Two other insightful theological analyses of *American Beauty* can be found in Robert K Johnston, *Useless Beauty: Ecclesiastes Through the Lens of Contemporary Film*, Grand Rapids, Baker Academic, 2004; and Gareth

Higgins, *How Movies Helped Save My Soul: Finding Spiritual Fingerprints in Culturally Significant Films*, Lake Mary, Relevant Books, 2003.

5. Anker, *Catching Light*, p. 345.
6. Anker, *Catching Light*, p. 356.
7. Anker, *Catching Light*, p. 356.
8. Anker, *Catching Light*, p. 349.
9. For an expanded discussion of the leitmotiv and other forms of musical narration, see Kutter Callaway, *Scoring Transcendence: Contemporary Film Music as Religious Experience*, Waco, Baylor University Press, 2013.
10. Anker, *Catching Light*, p. 358.
11. It is important to note that I am slightly adapting Chion's term here to indicate a presence that is not actually in the diegesis, but nevertheless functions as if it were. Symbolically then, the leitmotiv in *American Beauty* is functioning like an *acousmètre* does, even if its source does not exist within the diegetic world per se. See Michel Chion, *Audio-Vision: Sound on Screen*, trans. Claudia Gorbman, New York, Columbia University Press, 1994.
12. Chion, *Audio-Vision*, p. 350.