

# FILM WATCHING GUIDE

*with apologetic  
sensitivity*



*By Jess Fadel*

With streaming giants like Netflix, Amazon, and Hulu providing thousands of films for us to consume at the touch of a screen, we, as Christians, have the opportunity to study and understand how films impact our world, our culture, our relationships, and our own hearts and minds. For some Christians, watching certain kinds of films has been a point of contention, one that has even caused us to retreat from film culture. Many people in our American culture are watching films, and there is a way for us to step into those spaces and have redemptive conversations about these films and so, I believe that it is worthwhile to study film for our own pleasure, edification, and so that we might build relationships with others.

It can be easy to view movies as mere entertainment, maybe you even think they are a waste of a Christian's time, or that by watching films, we are conforming to secular culture. I hope that through this guide, you can see the great value in watching, thinking about, and understanding films. We will seek to see how we can better observe, make sense of what we observe, and engage others through the medium of film.

I would like to ask you to consider the art form of film by offering you this quote from Robert K. Johnston, a professor at Fuller Seminary, who has dedicated much of his life to studying films. He says,

*God is involved with all of humankind  
and uses the wisdom and insight of  
nonbelievers to communicate his truth to  
those who believe.*

Films are able to portray and communicate the stories of our world through powerful imagery. They echo the creativity, beauty, and truth of God through stories, music, characters, and scenery. And even when the goal is not to explicitly communicate the gospel, film can bring to light gospel principles through engaging characters and storytelling. They attract viewers with compelling visuals that cause us to pause or consider what we are seeing.

Perhaps you grew up in a home where certain movies or genres were viewed as evil or especially sinful. Or maybe if a movie had a particular rating or contained certain words or images, it was not allowed to be seen. If you grew up this way, my goal for you is to help you to see that many of these things, even with their rough edges, can show us honest and truthful things about ourselves and our world. Movies have the power to put words to our sorrows, emotions to our joys and pains, and imagery to our longings. Or, maybe you grew up in a home that celebrated movies and talked openly about what they offer to each viewer. If this was your upbringing, then my goal for you is to encourage you to look for ways to share those findings in dialogue with friends and family members.

If we see the truthfulness of the quote above, we can begin to look for the ways God is active and at work in the lives of those who create films and begin the work of celebrating their wonderful artistry. Maybe instead of looking at films as primarily “worldly” or sinful, we can begin to see the beauty and wonder of these films and filmmakers and affirm the truth that we see in their work and personhood. Filmmakers are, after all, humans created in the image of God who can’t help but image their Creator. So, instead of distancing ourselves from the culture around us, we can step into that world and see the ways in which it is speaking not only to those around us, but to our hearts and minds. And, as I am arguing, a simple way to do this is by watching movies.

There is a well-known poem by William Blake that I often think about in relation to film and the first few lines are this:

*To see a world in a grain of sand  
and heaven in a wild flower  
Hold infinity in the palms of your hand  
and eternity in an hour.*

This is what I believe art does for us. In the form of our created world, we see and know that there is more than simply a grain of sand and a wildflower. We can see great expanse in each. They tell us a story, they paint us a picture. And I see that film does this as well. We are able to enter into worlds, places, and the thoughts and minds of people, if only for a few hours. Some who watch go on unchanged; others are changed forever. My hope is that through this guide and by being mindful of how we observe films, we can begin to see the vast world they introduce us to; and, in turn, we will see our world anew. So, we will begin to do this by making observations, noticing our emotions, connecting to the biblical narrative, and seeking to engage with others.



*MAKING*

*OBSERV*

*ATIONS*



As you watch a film, there are many things that you are observing all at once: colors, lighting, characters, sets, landscape, moving objects, mood, sound, music—the list goes on and on. With all of these things happening at the same time, it can feel overwhelming to know where to begin with your observations. After all, we all observe different things and in different ways, and that is a good thing! To understand films well, we need multiple perspectives and insights, and we need each other to see and understand things we might miss on our own.

As you watch a movie, try recognizing and naming whatever you notice. You can do this out loud (if the person you are watching with doesn't mind), you can write down your observations, or you can just take mental notes of the things you observe. At this point, you aren't necessarily analyzing or placing those observations in "right" or "wrong" categories. This is a time to explore the things that each individual person in your group notices, celebrating each other in your differences. There are no observations that are too small.

When the movie is over, talk through your observations with someone else. Make this a time to speak freely, remembering that you are not necessarily analyzing or interpreting your observations. Listen to what the other person observes and delight in the differences in what you both see and don't see. If you are confused by some of the things you observe or didn't observe, you can do further research to investigate. Try finding an article by someone who has a different background, religion, or race than you. Hear from their perspective and see how their life experiences inform the way they observe this same film.

## QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER:

*What are some things you observed in this film?*

*What can you say about the lighting, mood, style, music, script, etc.? What is something you won't forget? What are some things you are still thinking about?*





*NOTIC-  
ING  
OUR  
EMOTI-  
IONS*



I think the way a movie can cause us to feel a wide range of emotions is one of the most exciting things about going to watch a movie with a group of people at a theatre. Of the hundreds of seats, you may only know a few people, but you are all experiencing something big at the same time. You react together, you sigh together, you get scared together, and you even cheer and cry together. I remember when I saw *Won't You Be My Neighbor?* in the theatres. It was a small theatre, and there were maybe only fifty other people watching with me, including my husband and my in-laws. I had never seen a documentary in a theatre before, and I realized thirty seconds into it how different it felt—even from watching the previews. Not long after it began did the tears begin to flow and unlike a tender moment in a drama, I didn't feel the need to wipe my tears away because behind me was an older couple who were both sniffing. And then, along the way, each person in that theatre sniffled, and wiped, and blew their noses. And at the end, we all silently, but hopefully, left the dark room covered in popcorn.

I was thankful that I didn't feel pressure to hide my emotions during that film. Hearing the emotions of the people around me freed me to feel all the feelings the story provoked. And for me, it added so much meaning—I think I'll always remember that experience because of it.

Whether our reactions are small or life-changing, we come away from watching a movie with feelings. I often like to exit a theatre silently as I listen to the people behind and in front of me talk about the movie we all just watched. I find it fascinating how quickly people say things like “amazing” or “not that great.” It can sometimes take mere seconds for us to arrive at a conclusion of a film. And that can be due, at least in part, to how it made us feel.

Therefore, the next step in the process is noticing our emotions. It can be something small that made you squirm or something that caused you to gasp or enter into deep sorrow.

*That part made me uncomfortable because...*

*That scene made me sorrowful...*

*That dialogue reminded me of...which brought up emotions of...*

*This part made me want to get up and dance...*

It is important to note that our first-felt emotions are not always indicative of the effectiveness or quality of the movie. A movie could have made us feel bad or icky, yet that doesn't mean the movie was bad. If we are just rejecting a movie for the way it made us feel in the moment, we might be missing the larger point and not considering the intent of the filmmaker. Likewise, we may come away feeling offended that a film struck down a harmful belief we had constructed and simply want to label this movie wrong or unhelpful. Yet, movies also have the power to help us see things from different perspectives and from the lives of others. For instance, in movies like *Just Mercy* and *BlacKkKlansman*, we are confronted with systemic racism and prejudice against Black people in America. If these films cause someone to feel defensive or uncomfortable, that doesn't necessarily mean it's a bad movie. More than anything, we need to interrogate our emotions in order to better engage with the narrative of the movie itself. "Why am I feeling uncomfortable?" "What is making me feel defensive?" Often, films are designed to provoke reactions from us so that we would begin to ask questions and learn from them.

So, we must ask, how do we acknowledge those feelings, but help them find their right place? Try taking note of these emotions and consider the power that a film can take on our emotions. It might leave us feeling empowered to take a step of faith or it might cause us to consider and question the way in which we are currently living. Maybe the emotions are too big to process right after you watch, so consider, once again, writing in a journal or making a note on your phone about your current emotional state. If you do feel that your emotions don't align with the intent of the film, discuss with a trusted friend how the movie affected you. Again, seeing things from someone else's perspective may help us to see how these films can help us grow and learn in new and helpful ways.

Just as in life, I think there is great value in noticing and naming our emotions as we watch movies. So as you watch, try this practice while you watch films, and reflect on their effect on your mood and feelings.

## QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER:

*How do the things you noticed make you feel?  
(Sad, happy, inspired, contemplative, etc.) What  
are some things that made me feel this way?*





*THE BIB-  
LICAL  
NAR-  
RATIVE*



The Biblical Narrative that we will be working from follows four basic categories: Creation, Rebellion, Redemption, Restoration. Each of these components of the narrative of the Bible not only speaks of what has happened within the biblical story, they also make sense of our world today. With this framework, we can situate stories and films, seeing how they connect to this narrative. In each film, we may see each part of the narrative or we may only see one or two. As you become more familiar with the Story, certain aspects of the narrative might stick out to you more than others. The goal is to begin to see how the biblical narrative is written on the hearts of every person, Christian or not, because we have all been created in the image of God, made to reflect him, and are participants in this broader story, even if we don't yet recognize it. Let's take a look at each part of the story and see how to begin recognizing these in films.

# *Creation*

Creation tells us how and why the world was made—created by God for his glory and for our good—and it also tells us of the Lord’s intention for his creation. We see that all creation was created good. Humanity was created to live in right relationship with the earth, other creatures, ourselves, and ultimately with God. So, as we watch movies, we can notice the ways in which the story affirms God’s good creation—often and especially through how humanity itself is meant to image God in the world.

## *Example: 1917*

What compelled Will to act in selfless ways toward Tom, Tom's brother, and the rest of the soldiers? What are some things that are common or uncommon about this? What sets Will's actions apart from other soldier or even from people in our own lives? Consider and share a personal experience of selfless love.



# *Rebellion*

That same good creation—including the ways that humanity images God—was broken by the sin of a man and a woman called Adam and Eve. This caused separation, distortion, and evil to enter into the world. When we watch films, we can notice the ways in which God’s good gifts—relationships, food, sex, money, creation, creativity—have been twisted for evil. We can also notice how films portray things like sin—is sin celebrated and depicted as something to be desired or is it shown for what it actually is: destructive and counter to who we are as God’s image bearers?

# *Example: Mad Max: Fury Road*

How is the destruction and evil portrayed in this film? Who would you label as the hero and why? Who would you label as the villain and why? How does the portrayal of destruction make you think about any destruction you see in your own life or in the world around you? Who did you find yourself blaming for the state of the world in this movie? Why?



# *Redemption*

Despite the brokenness, God made a promise to redeem the whole world through another man. This redemption required God to become a human in the form of Jesus. Through him, the great decay that began in Rebellion was finally reversed, hope is restored, and we see that there is light in the darkness. Many films have what can be called a “savior”—a person who makes bad things right. Also, almost all films will make clear that there is a “right” vs “wrong” struggle, and it is through our participation in this real story of creation’s redemption that we resonate with the same themes in the films we see. As we look for ways to see redemption in films, we can see the way it reflects the story of Jesus’ great love and sacrifice for us.

## *Example: Harry Potter*

How does Harry's character, one who is constantly laying down his life for others, affect you? Is his and other sacrificial deaths threatening, upsetting, or loving to you? What other characters in these films show sacrificial and selfless love? Name and observe some of the struggles in this movie between right and wrong.



# *Restoration*

As Jesus' work provided the way for all bad things to be made right, our final hope is that one day, there will be no more darkness. Creation will be restored to its original glory where humans, creation, and God will live in harmony, and death and sadness will be gone. This is our hope. Jesus gave the proof that this is a reasonable hope when he rose from the dead, and he has promised to finish his work once-and-for-all. This category shows up often in films where there is longing or grieving for things to be good. It can also show up in utopian depictions of what things would be like if there was nothing wrong in the world.

When we watch movies, we can look for ways that characters or stories communicate not only the need for restoration, but the ways in which restoration has already begun to take place because of Jesus. This means that people who look for ways to make wrong things right are reflecting the heart of Jesus in their actions.



# *Example: Lars & the Real Girl*

What are some ways in which Lars' family and friends seek restoration and healing for Lars? How do they seek to build relationship with Lars and his girlfriend, Bianca? Notice some ways in which Lars was treated by others—who do you relate to, have you been treated in the same ways, have you treated others similarly?



## QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER:

*What are some ways that this film speaks honestly about our world? (destruction, emotions, life, etc.) What can we affirm about this film? In what ways does this film affirm/portray a message in which it only makes sense in God's world (the biblical narrative, CRRR)? Consider and name some ways you see characters reflecting God's image. What are some ways that you see sin or destruction portrayed in this film? Who or what is expected to bring resolution? What are their idyllic hopes for the future? What is their "happily ever after?"*



*ENGAG-*

*ING*

*WITH*

*OTHERS*



Engaging with others through things like film is one small step that you can take toward another person to begin building a relationship. It may seem insignificant, but as we have seen, these stories are powerful tools that have the opportunity to move us in big and small ways. If you have a friend or family member who enjoys movies, you can take a step toward them through a shared experience of film. You can even ask questions about why they like a particular movie and begin to discuss and talk about what you both observed and noticed about your emotions as you watched.

Films can dismantle our fears, spark our excitement, show us our true desires and longings, or put language to our inaudible sighs. These stories have a way of lowering a fear barrier. They open us up to be vulnerable in our joy and in our pain. They can make us think, and they can cause us to question or doubt. And after the screen goes dark, we can be a safe place for someone to process what they just experienced.

You could begin to think about how a particular film helps you to engage your neighbors, friends, and family who are other-than-Christian. (Does it offer a sense of hope, does it speak to longings in our hearts, does it show us a better way to live, does it show the devastation of sin? What does it say about our current moment or culture?)

If you are discussing observations with someone who is other-than-Christian, resist the urge to correct their observations or steer them toward a particular “spiritual” observation. Instead, you can see this as a time to learn from someone who has different beliefs than you. Notice, as you are listening, how these observations lead you to understand this person and their perspective. This requires that we have a posture of humility, grace, and gentleness because it reminds us that those who are other-than-Christian have thoughts and emotions that we can learn from.

As we begin to take these steps toward understanding films and then, in a larger sense, a part of culture, we begin to have insight into what our culture values and believes. We can begin to see the value of films, how they teach us about our world and ourselves. We may even find, along the way, that there are more similarities in our beliefs with the filmmaker or the audience. Or, in other cases, we may find that our conclusions are vastly different.

Once you have listened and observed together, you could ask some of the questions from the previous sections.

*As you watch films, my hope is that these tools would widen your appreciation and understanding of these beautiful stories that can show us more of our world and our God who created it. These works of art echo the story of God and his creation; they provide insight into the lives of others; and they show sacrificial love, the hardships of this life, and the joys of creating. So, as you continue to observe, notice your emotions, connect these stories to the biblical narrative, and engage with neighbors and friends in the films you watch, you will see how film can be a beautiful, good, and redemptive art form.*