

words that Mazur must put together to describe the appropriate equations are unwieldy and can be confusing.

Imagining Numbers disappoints in that it has the potential to be a ground breaking and imaginative book on par with those of Hawkings or Sagan. Unfortunately, Mazur never achieves what the book promises. Placing poetry and mathematics side-by-side, Mazur is never able to connect the two for the reader. Nor is Mazur able to provide insight into what in the minds of ancient mathematicians first led them to grasp the idea of numbers that can only be imagined.

Brian Anderson is a teacher currently working with Holy Cross priests in Bangladesh.

HOW MOVIES HELPED SAVE MY SOUL: FINDING SPIRITUAL FINGERPRINTS IN CULTURALLY SIGNIFICANT FILMS

GARETH HIGGINS
RELEVANT BOOKS, 2003
\$13.99, 284 pages

Reviewed by J. Christian Beretta

Reviewing film is a difficult and risky enterprise. As with any art critic, the reviewer is attempting to objectify what is by nature a deeply subjective experience of something created by another. And while no movie review can ever be completely extricated from its author's fundamental visceral reaction, a certain attempt to qualify one's response with some objective feedback is usually expected by the reader.

However, from the opening paragraph of *How Movies Helped Save My Soul*, Higgins admits that the reflections provided will be unapologetically subjective; religious commentary is intertwined with attempts to understand a personal faith journey very much in progress:

Film is so wrapped up with the fabric of my life that, along with the community of friends and family with whom I'm blessed to travel, I simply cannot explain myself without it. That's probably what this book is about – explaining myself. (p. xvi)

Therein, Higgins expresses the fundamental flaw that plagues the book from the start. Though often interesting and sometimes insightful, the book reveals much of Higgins's love for film, a little gratitude for certain films in particular, and a great deal about the author's personal faith journey – perhaps too much of the latter. Like a flawed film, the constant interjection of personal issues makes the reader forever aware of the artist's presence, an interference that minimizes the overall impact of the larger purpose.

Higgins covers a wide range of films, from the classic (*The Wizard of Oz*) to the blockbuster (*The Matrix*) to the obscure (*Koyaanisqatsi*), organized somewhat haphazardly under general themes of human experience such as brokenness, fear, justice, war, and death. Occasionally, the author's words capture profound elements of individual films, or shed light on infamous and fascinating characters, such as *The Godfather's* Michael Corleone: "The temptations of power and loyalty to his father lead him down a different path. In embracing fear as a means of controlling others, he loses his very self" (p. 216). Often, Higgins effectively illuminates the core questions raised by films, as with those surrounding Dr. Lecter of *Silence of the Lambs* and *Hannibal*: "We really need to ask how it could be that the most popular entertainment character of the 1990s was one of the most evil" (p. 20). Higgins seems to enjoy the analysis, taking the opportunity to share personal insights into life and love of cinema. The author's enthusiasm for cinema is palpable and quest for the spiritual evident as insights are offered informally and frequently skip from one point to another as if the reader is an old friend.

But too often, the informality of the one-sided conversation on film lends to a disappointing sense of carelessness. In Chapter 11, entitled "1968-1975, America," Higgins simply lists 24 films, notes a fascination with the turmoil of the period, admits the films pre-date the author, and concludes with an admonition to see the movies listed, stating: "If I were you, I'd start with *The Wild Bunch*, *The Conversation*, and *Papillon*, but – hey! – this is a democracy, so knock yourself out" (p. 183). Nowhere does the author explain why *Planet of the Apes* or *Young Frankenstein* appear in the same general category as masterpieces such as *The Godfather* or *The Exorcist*, other than the fact that they were all released in the same 7-year period. The two-paragraph chapter is the most striking of many examples leaving a lasting impression of incompleteness. But nowhere is the sense of incompleteness more ironic than in the final chapter, where the author presents "The

Nine Commandments of *The Matrix*.” For a film that Higgins refers to as “a work of spiritual discernment” (p. 245), one might think a 10th commandment could have been offered, just for the sake of form.

Too often, Higgins shares insights that are clearly little more than wild guesses or assumptions about the spiritual content of films, and surprisingly much of the commentary is laced with stinging criticism and obvious anger toward institutionalized religion. In the review of *Fight Club*, for example, the author remarks, “My view is that this film is a wake-up call from our generation to the Church, and if we don’t pay attention, we will remain as dead as [the film’s] unnamed narrator is at the start” (p. 76). The film, which is anti-establishment across every category of human existence, obviously fueled the author’s personal theological and ecclesiastical perspectives and prejudices. But by such remarks, which take huge leaps in interpreting the film’s message and purpose, readers are learning more about Higgins than *Fight Club*. Personal insights can be valuable, helpful, and entertaining when reviewing film or any other art form, but careless, inflammatory, and obviously biased interpretations such as these gravely limit the author’s effectiveness. Spiritual and religious issues are repeatedly engaged with passion, but alarming imprecision.

Nowhere is this lack of precision more evident than in chapter 8, devoted to films that focus on God. The author’s comments on Martin Scorsese’s highly controversial *The Last Temptation of Christ* reveal a painfully simplistic understanding of the theologically explosive content of the film. “It says something about the broad Christian community that in 3,000 years of church history, the idea of Jesus as a truly human being still cannot find resonance among any but those on the fringes of the institutional church” (p. 126). To be sure, there were vocal and unwarranted condemnations of the film from many Christian leaders who had not seen the movie. But to paint such broad strokes over all but a few in institutionalized Christendom is hardly fair or accurate. In the book by the same name on which the film is based, author Nikos Kazantzakis freely admits that his Jesus is not so much the Christ of the Gospels but rather a reflection of his own interior struggle between human and divine, good and evil. This makes the book – and the film – much more complex, and infinitely less controversial, a thought lost not only on those who condemned the film, but also on Higgins who exalts it. The images of Christ writhing in pain, doubt, and turmoil are certainly meant to provoke, but instead of shedding light onto some of the Christological controversies, the simple argument that Higgins enjoyed the film is the strongest case made, relishing in the doubt and struggles that Scorsese’s Christ brings to the screen. “I can think of no higher praise for *The Last Temptation of Christ* than to assert that, in short terms, this is a Jesus I could believe in” (p. 127). “Identify with” might have been a better

choice of words, but regardless, it would seem that a film of such theological complexity deserves more.

Higgins's treatment of the critically acclaimed *The Apostle* offers more of the same. Spiritual themes in the film are roughly organized into two categories: aspects found repulsive and those found attractive. Interwoven with comments on the film is a personal critique of evangelical Christianity, as though Higgins was given the perfect opportunity to pontificate on the flaws of organized religion in general: "Too many 'professional Christians' seem to think they're so important that they need to be all over the place preaching" (p. 134). Even his concluding recommendation of the film is tainted with cynicism: "If you feel you need catharsis and healing from your own experience of the Church (and who doesn't?), then this film may be just the medicine you need" (p. 140).

Other than Higgins's anger toward churches, the one constant throughout the book is a sense of lost opportunity, as though a gifted and insightful connoisseur of the craft of film cannot bridge the gap between cinema and the spiritual life. And the failed attempt is not because connections do not exist, but because the author's own issues and struggles too often relegate spiritual reflections to a purely personal stream of consciousness regarding favorite movies, punctuated with random comments on the spiritual issues that may or may not be present within them. Hypotheses regarding *Superman* as a powerful metaphor for Christ, Zefereilli's *Jesus of Nazareth* as undercutting true Christian faith, and *Field of Dreams* as deserving elevation from touching baseball fantasy to an eloquent spiritual sermon on "the miracle of redemption, the coming of the kingdom of God, the restoration of all things" (p. 132), are all raised, but left unverified and unresolved. Higgins argues with passion and often with humor but cannot establish any criteria or objective reason for most of the arguments offered. Like a spirited debate with a friend after watching a film, the book sometimes makes for entertaining conversation but is too unfounded and unresearched to accomplish anything lasting or memorable.

Instead, Higgins's theological impulsiveness and imprecision are a constant distraction from the alleged purpose of the book. The title uses the image of "spiritual fingerprints" to refer to the presence of such themes in films that are not explicitly religious. But Higgins can only illuminate partial prints for the reader, never definitively defining spiritual themes other than the recurring mistrust of institutional Christianity. "There's something mighty calming about the love of community that the Church should be," the author offers. "Many of us find churches to be the most fearful places, rather than the safe places where we can truly be ourselves" (p. 66). To the reader that might feel alienated from a church or from faith itself, the numerous barbs, rants, and jabs might establish points of connection. Even for them,

the rehashing of wounds and raising of obvious personal issues with the Church never find resolution or establish a path toward healing – or even a need for it.

But to anyone whose spiritual frame of reference includes organized religion, the numerous outbursts indicate that Higgins's work has perhaps accomplished a therapeutic purpose for the author but offers little to the world beyond. Judging by the author's own commentary, maybe that is all it was ever intended to be; this makes it difficult, however, to recommend the book to anyone whose ministry is exercised within the institutional Church. The educational value is further limited by the fact that many of the films reviewed have R ratings, and even for those that could or should be shown in the classroom, Higgins's jaded commentary offers little spiritual insight that could be easily translated to even a high school audience. The book may have some limited use for fine art or film instructors, or perhaps appeal to parents or teachers that are avid filmgoers with an interest in spiritual themes. But even they will be wishing that many of Higgins's scenes had been cut or sent back for a rewrite.

J. Christian Beretta, OSFS, is the principal at Bishop Verot High School in Fort Myers, Florida.

INVESTING IN CHILDREN, YOUTH, FAMILIES, AND COMMUNITIES: STRENGTHS-BASED RESEARCH AND POLICY

KENNETH I. MATON, CYNTHIA J. SCHELLENBACH,
BONNIE J. LEADBETTER, & ANDREA L. SOLARZ, EDS.
AMERICAN PSYCHOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION, 2004
\$49.95, 380 pages

Reviewed by James M. Frabutt

This edited book is an engaging text that brings together social science and policy experts to articulate the advantages of strengths-based research and