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Book Review: Into the Dark: Seeing the Sacred in the Top Films of the 21st Century. By Craig Detweiler.

Glenn J. Morrison

University of Notre Dame Australia, glenn.morrison@nd.edu.au

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Author: Glenn Morrison

Affiliation: The University of Notre Dame Australia, Fremantle

Into the Dark: Seeing the Sacred in the Top Films of the 21st Century. By Craig Detweiler.
Pp. 320, Baker Academic, 2008.

The art of interpretation demands good sense and sensibility before we can arrive at meaning. There are a multitude of choices and methods available. One popular option is to draw together theory and experience. Where we come to the world of theology and ‘top films of the 21st Century,’ the synthesis of thematisation of ideas and representations of experience is a predictable choice. Following this synthetic approach yet developing it as something that can be recycled anew, the theologian and Hollywood script writer, Craig Detweiler, has produced engaging and often exciting reflections upon many top IMDb ranked films of the early 21st Century. He has particularly limited his discussion to the genre of ‘film noir’. And so ‘into the dark,’ Detweiler takes the reader as closely as possible to experience the sacred in the movie theatre. Perhaps like Noah, he creates his own ‘ark’ of reflections or, like Derrida, a personal archive of memory from the Internet Movie Database, so that we make develop an ‘archive fever’ and invite theology on a journey into the dark of a world flooded by films and ‘the play’ of stories.

There are a number of layers of interpretation in the book. The author soaks the reader’s attention with many examples of top films like *Donnie Darko*, *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*, *Spirited Away*, *Million Dollar Baby* and *Finding Neverland* as mediums of revelation of the sacred. Detweiler does not have to be convinced that movies are a place for God’s communication to unfold. Movies are a popular medium and language of communication; they invite moments of reflection and the feelings they produce like

melancholy or joy can animate our imagination and thoughts towards the sacred. However, to press or persuade his reader, Detweiller bridges the divide between theology and film with the help of Hans Urs von Balthasar, Jürgen Moltmann and interspersed autobiographical reflections producing a passionate perspective of where God comes to mind in the top films of the 21st Century. In particular our author seems to partake of the spirit of von Balthasar's theological aesthetics. He even cautions the danger of falling into an aesthetical theology. This is a bold distinction to make particularly when bringing theology to the world of films.

For von Balthasar, the beautiful – like the good, the true, the one and glory – are transcendental values of being that help us to understand the data of revelation. Detweiller, by choosing von Balthasar's method has made more than a preliminary beginning. He has found a way to clarify, nurture and develop a number of theological contours in his chosen films to unveil them as a source and medium of revelation. And when reviewing films like *Mystic River*, *Million Dollar Baby* and *Talk to her (Hable con ella)*, Detweiller's is not afraid to deal some 'devastating punches'. Take for example, the film, *Million Dollar Baby* about Maggie the boxer and her boxing coach, Frankie. The comedy of intimacy and responsibility unfolds as a tragedy or collision of losing everything. This is a film where a radical ethical and moral stance can become like a plague to aesthetic concepts (such as eros and agape); the viewer is left enthralled and terrified by Frankie's and Maggie's tortured version of 'the truth'. So where does this leave theology and the discovery of the sacred? Detweiller's commentary on Clint Eastwood's film, *Million Dollar Baby*, exemplifies the fine line one must walk between a theological aesthetics and an aesthetical theology. He traverses the terrain by probing questions and highlighting concerns rather than giving solutions. His reflection ends by lamenting on the whole win-lose rationale of 'Winners are simply willing to do what losers won't' (p.174). Where the 'horrible but winning choice' (p.174) has led Frankie to pull the

plug on Maggie's paralytic state, they both lose out ignoring what Detweiller describes as 'the miraculous, ruling out potential advances in medicine and divine intervention' (p.175). Detweiller 'theological aesthetics' succeeds by initiating a distinction between the sacredness of creation and the revelation of God's word. It is interesting to see how well he does this. Effectively, he brings into play a style of practical theology. In other words, his reflections – like a Hollywood script having passed through several drafts – invite the reader to enter the drama between theology, human experience and society. The reader will further feel invited, if not compelled, to participate in the commentary.

The book is highly useful as a source for pastoral/practical theology. There are many examples of films to choose from to engage the class with the world of film and theology. And importantly, the book inspires the reader to take up the challenge to discover the sacred in films, and learn a theological aesthetic of seeing the glory of the Lord – that disinterestedness overflowing in our consciousness to guide our awareness of the wisdom of God's word dwelling in the world. Detweiller himself is full of surprises. In his final paragraph, he has alerted to the fruit of the eternal progress towards the revelation of God's glory. For all his passion in film, he has discovered a new dramatic experience to journey into the dark of realising transcendent moments. More than movies, he reveals the Eucharist as something greater than his cinematic experiences. There is an important lesson to learn here. Movies are a part of our life; they can steal our time away or teach us to develop our emotions and bodiliness. But if they can be used as a path towards a sacramental encounter with God, much can be gained. The liminal experiences in the dark of watching a film are on the near-side of the sacred. But the 'high-voltage' engagement may not last forever. Another voice, ever silent and surprising, awaits our presence. In his last paragraph, Detweiller has made a new programmatic statement of faith. Having immersed himself all his life in the

world of films and reflection, he has taken a step back to a world otherwise than Being-enthralled-by-movies to jump farther towards the living drama of the paschal mystery. Perhaps like Joel and Clementine in *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* transforming themselves anew through their brokenness and beyond the essence of their self-interest, the book is finally a testimony of the revelation of the Holy Trinity working in the innermost depths of the soul.