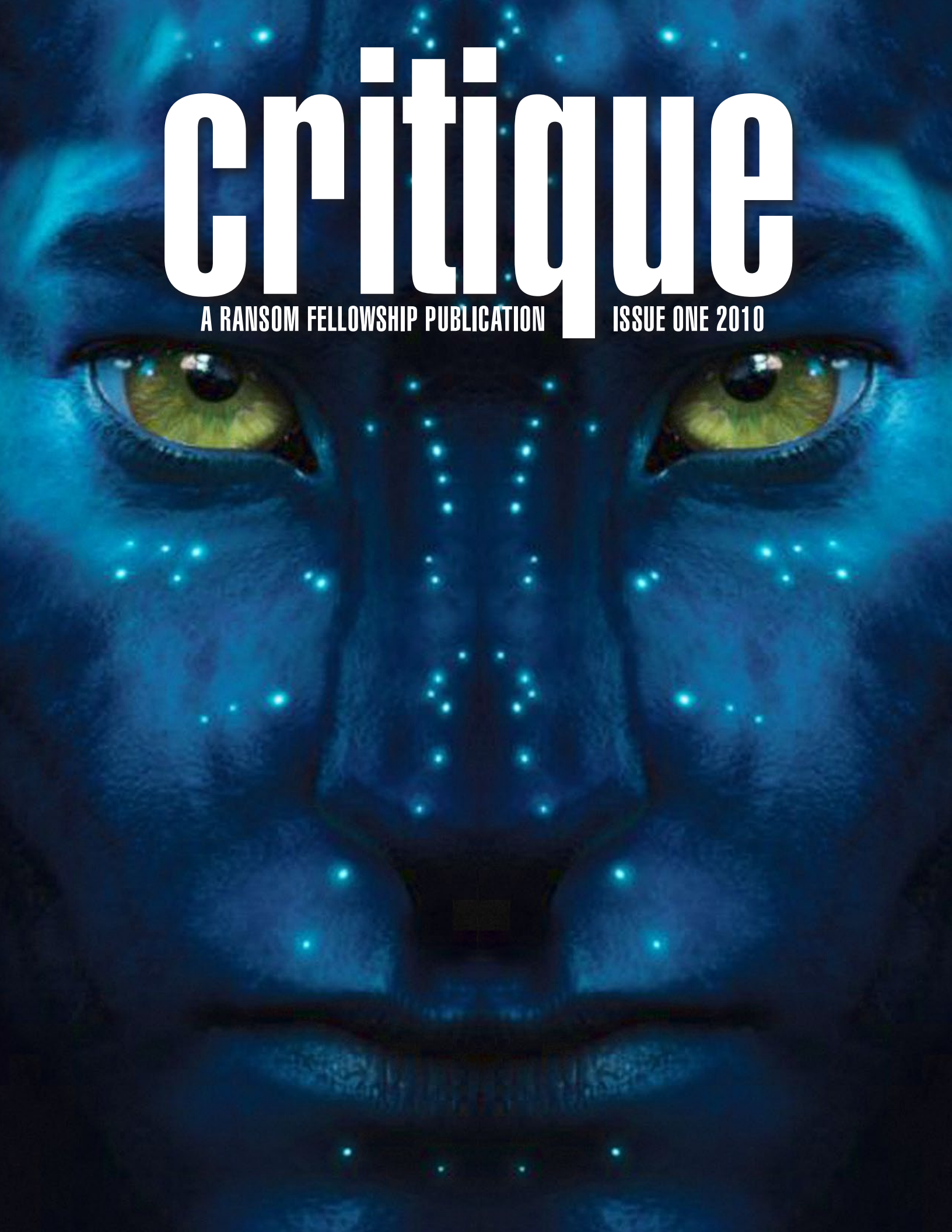


critique

A RANSOM FELLOWSHIP PUBLICATION | ISSUE ONE 2010

Text **Denis Haack** Photo **Bailey Mohr**

Glimmers of Light

If we have eyes to see, not all is darkness in this broken world. "Now and then, in some way or another," Roy Anker says, "Light does flash inexplicably, sometimes blazing, as in Moses' burning bush, or 'like shining from shook foil' (G. M. Hopkins). Most of the time, though, Light comes in flashes near the edges of vision, in a faint gleam, or in a tremor of color. Most often Light comes not as people would like—such as pure light spread sky-wide in bright neon dazzle—but refracted though an altogether different prism, one simultaneously more ambiguous and more personal, by means of touch or embrace, image or sign, glimpse or gaze, sound or music, beauty or horror, meeting or coincidence, forgiveness or blessing. The means are endless and always as new and unique as people themselves. In other words, when the divine does appear, it proves endlessly inventive and astonishing in the instruments of its showing."

This is the mystery of the gospel, the grace of "being transformed into the same image [reflecting Christ's light] from one degree of glory to another" (1 Corinthians 3:18). That it could be possible in someone like me is something I have to accept on faith.

It was Francis and Edith Schaeffer who first allowed me to see the glimmers of light that spoke of a deeper reality in life. I know they had clay feet, but that's not the point. The point isn't some sort of perfection. The point is whether there is a reflected light of grace, a grace in authenticity and safety, in listening and unhurried time, in hospitality and walking in a Story so compelling that it promises to satisfy our deepest yearnings and meet our deepest fears. A Christianity not of rules and pressure to evangelize and separation from people and culture and a brooding disapproval, but one where nothing matters except for Christ, and because of Christ, everything—every thing—matters.

My prayer for myself this year is to ignore the deadly temptation of attempting to schedule blazing sky-spanning light shows and instead be content with the glimmers that defeat every attempt at planning. They are far more effective at dispelling the lurking shadows of this broken world anyway.

Source
Catching Light: Looking for God in the Movies by Roy M. Anker (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans; 2005) p. 6-7.

critique
A RANSOM FELLOWSHIP PUBLICATION ISSUE ONE 2010

Editor
Denis Haack

Managing Editor
Matthew Hundley

Contributing Editors
Jennifer Disney, Steven Garber, R. Greg Grooms, Donald Guthrie, John Mason Hodges, Marsena Konkle, Preston Jones, David John Seel, Jr., Travis Scott, Andrew H. Trotter Jr, Wesley Hill.

Board of Directors
Steven Garber
Director, The Washington Institute for Faith, Vocation & Culture, Washington, DC

Donald Guthrie
Associate Professor of Educational Ministries
Covenant Seminary, St Louis, MO

Denis and Margie Haack
Co-Founders of Ransom Fellowship

Rev. Ed Hague
Pastor, Presbyterian Church in America
Tallahassee, FL

Bonnie Liefer
Vice President Marketing & Communications, Coalition for Christian Outreach, Pittsburgh, PA

Henry Tazelaar
Professor of Pathology,
Mayo Clinic College of Medicine

Submissions
Critique considers unsolicited manuscripts only for poetry: submissions@ransomfellowship.org or by mail (see below)

Correspondence
All other correspondence and changes of address notifications:

critique
1150 West Center
Rochester, MN 55902
info@ransomfellowship.org

For more about Ransom Fellowship visit:
http://www.ransomfellowship.org

VISIT US ONLINE
RansomFellowship.org

Toads Drink Coffee: Margie's Blog
http://ToadsDrinkCoffee.Blogspot.Com

A Glass Darkly: Denis' Blog
http://Blog4Critique.Blogspot.Com

Follow Us on Twitter
http://www.twitter.com/CritiqueMag

Become a Fan on Facebook!

Critique Mailing List:
Critique is not available by subscription. Rather, interested readers can request to be added to Ransom's mailing list, which is updated frequently.

Donors to Ransom Fellowship, a 501(c)(3) nonprofit, tax-deductible ministry, are added to the mailing list automatically unless requesting otherwise.

To Receive Critique:
Send your mailing address to: Ransom Fellowship, 1150 West Center, Rochester, MN, 55902.

Everyone on Ransom's mailing list also receives *Notes from Toad Hall*, a newsletter written by Margie Haack in which she reflects on what it means to be faithful in the ordinary and routine of daily life, and gives news about Ransom's ministry.

Critique is a magazine (published six times each year, funds permitting) designed to, by God's grace, call attention to resources of interest to thinking Christians; model Christian discernment; & stimulate believers to think biblically about all of life. The articles and resources reproduced or recommended in *Critique* do not necessarily reflect the thinking of Ransom Fellowship. The purpose of this newsletter is to encourage thought, not dictate points of view.

CONTENTS *issue one*

DIALOGUE *readers respond*

Response **Denis Haack**

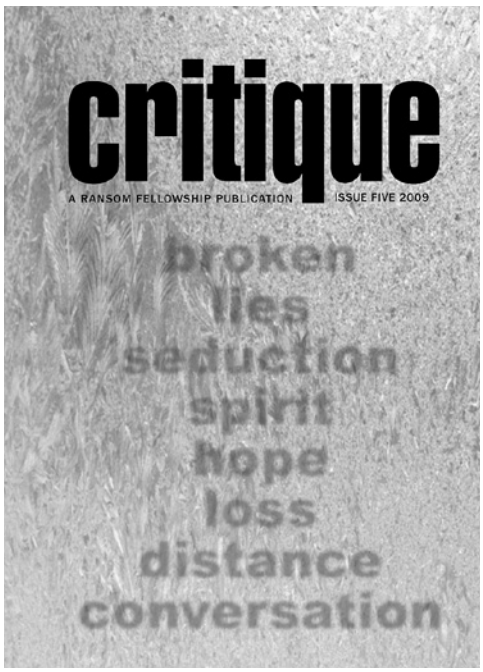
To the editor:

Thanks for your recent issue of *Critique* and thank Margie for her article on slowness [*Notes From Toad Hall* #4-2009]. My life used to be defined by my speed and my frantic pursuit of bigger and faster and better. But then a few months ago, as I turned 50, I had a dream in which I was rushing, running, panting, sweating up a hill in order to catch a train. I thought it was the only train that would take me to my destination so I ran up the hill with all my might. After my frantic, hurried pursuit I finally reached the top of a very long hill. As I looked down to the bottom of the hill I watched as my train slowly pulled out. "Damn it," I said, "I missed my train!" Then it slowly dawned on me that another train was coming. I didn't know when, but it would arrive when it was ready. I also realized that I had to go down—*not* up—to catch my train. So with a renewed but tempered and much slower pursuit I started heading down the hill, knowing that I didn't have to hurry to catch my train.

As you two know, Jesus has a way of leading us down not up—or perhaps down is really up. I've been meditating and writing on Matthew 1-4 and I see over and over again how our Lord descended into our pain and sin. He went down—without rushing or panting either.

Christ's peace to both of you,
Matt Woodley
East Setauket, NY

I realized I had to go down,
not *up, to catch my train.*
—Matt Woodley



To the editor:

I'm a bit surprised not to find a review of the movie (or book) *Twilight*. Any coming out soon?

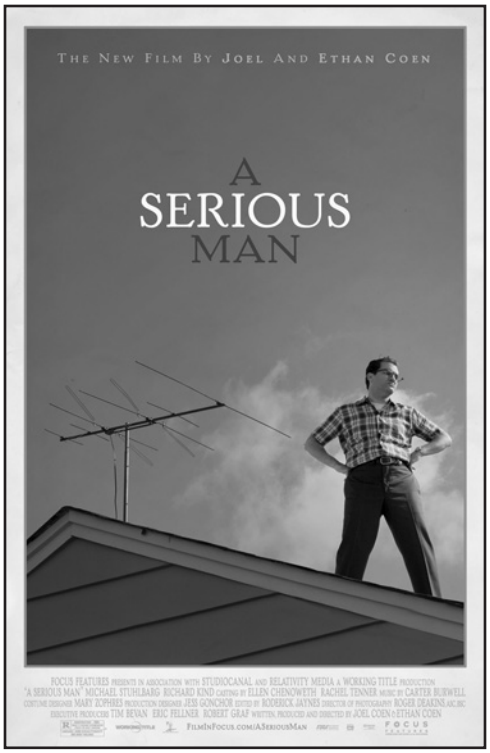
Aaron J. Scott
San Marcos, Texas (via email)

Denis Haack responds:

Aaron: No plans to review it. Though there is no formal tie between the ministries, Walt Mueller (of the Center for Parent/Youth Understanding) and I are good friends and see our two ministries as parallel—except they tend to focus on materials for Junior & Senior High and their parents, and we for college age and up (not a precise division, but still). You can find a review of *Twilight*, with discussion questions on their website [cpyu.org].

Text **R. Greg Grooms**

Laughing With The Devil



A Serious Man

Starring:
Michael Stuhlbarg (Prof. Lawrence Gopnik)
Richard Kind (Uncle Arthur)
Fred Melamed (Sy Ableman)
Sari Lennick (Judith Gopnik)
Aaron Wolff (Danny Gopnik)
Jessica McManus (Sarah Gopnik)
Peter Breitmayer (Mr. Brandt)
David Kang (Clive Park)

Directors:
Ethan Coen & Joel Coen

Writers:
Ethan Coen & Joel Coen

Producers:
Tim Bevan, Ethan Coen, Joel Coen, Eric Fellner, Robert Graf

Original Music:
Carter Burwell

Cinematographer:
Roger Deakins

Runtime: 106 min

Release: USA; 2009

MPAA Rating: R
(for language, some sexuality/nudity and brief violence)

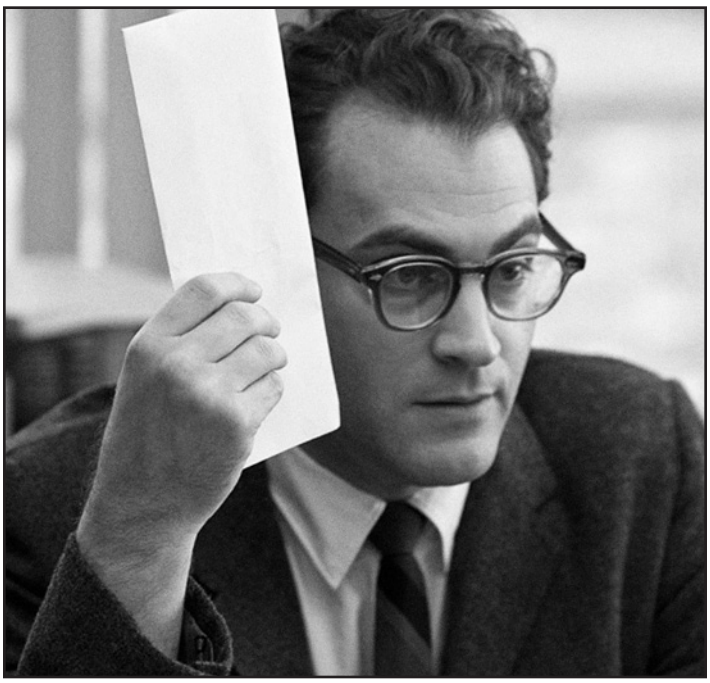
> *The devil laughs because God's world seems senseless to him; the angel laughs with joy because everything in God's world has its meaning.* —Milan Kundera

Humor is a funny thing. A comedian tells two jokes; he invests each with all his skill, experience, and timing. One gets a laugh, the other falls flat. Why?

Joel and Ethan Coen have been telling us jokes cinematically for years, and I've laughed at them all from *Fargo* to *O Brother, Where art Thou*? But their latest attempt—*A Serious Man*—fell flat with me, and I've been wondering why. It's a typical Coen brothers film with great camera work, crisp editing, and extraordinary casting. All the elements of good humor are there, so why am I not laughing?

In *A Serious Man* we meet Larry Gopnik, physics professor at a small college in the mid-west in 1967. (With a nod towards Garrison Keillor the Coens once referred to their film as "Jews on the Prairie".) Everyone wants something from Larry that he/she has no right to. A student wants a passing grade in physics, which he is willing to pay good money for. His daughter wants a nose job. His son wants pot and rock and roll. One neighbor has laid claim to some of his yard; another wants him to join her for sex and pot. The tenure committee at his college passive-aggressively passes on ominous rumor after rumor about his standing, all the while assuring him that all is well.

Worst of all, his wife wants a new man, not a younger, handsomer man, but Sy Ableman, a sort of old, fat Jewish Dr. Phil, who ironically is the only person in the film referred to as "a serious man."



A Serious Man is loosely based on the book of Job, but instead of three friends, Larry seeks advice from three rabbis: Rabbi Scott offers him a monologue about seeing God in a parking lot; Rabbi Nachtner, a story about a dentist who finds the words "Help me" engraved in Hebrew on the back of a patient's lower incisors. Rabbi Marshak quotes Jefferson Airplane's Grace Slick: "When the truth is found to be lies, and all the joy within you dies."

But Larry doesn't want somebody to love; he wants somebody to explain to him what "Hashem"—God—is trying to tell him in this, and here's the joke. You see,

Feel free to laugh at him, if you wish, but remember if you do, the joke is on you.

as a physics professor, Larry knows that on a quantum level the world doesn't make sense.

> "The Uncertainty Principle. It proves we can't ever really know… what's going on, so it shouldn't bother you not being able to figure anything out. Although you will be responsible for this on the mid-term."

So why insist religiously, philosophically that it should?

That's the Coen's joke, and well-told as it is, I still find it hard to laugh with them, and I think I know why.

A century ago, the bane of G.K. Chesterton's existence were slipshod typesetters who inadvertently turned the word "cosmic" in his essays into "comic". Eventually he came to see the humor in the error.

> "Whatever is cosmic is comic… Unless a thing is dignified, it cannot be undignified. Why is it funny that a man should sit down suddenly in the street? There is only one possible or intelligent reason: that man is the image of God. It is not

> funny that anything else should fall down; only that a man should fall down. No one sees anything funny in a tree falling down. No one sees a delicate absurdity in a stone falling down. No man stops in the road and roars with laughter at the sight of the snow coming down. The fall of thunderbolts is treated with some gravity. The fall of roofs and high buildings is taken seriously. It is only when a man tumbles down that we laugh. Why do we laugh? Because it is a grave religious matter: it is the Fall of Man. Only man can be absurd: for only man can be dignified.

Larry Gopnik is the most existentially feckless character since Hamlet. He gives in where he should stand up, smiles where he should scream. Stripped of any shred of dignity, he just isn't very funny.

Feel free to laugh at him, if you wish, but remember if you do, the joke is on you.

Greg Grooms, a Contributing Editor for *Critique*, lives with his wife Mary Jane in a large home across the street from the University of Texas in Austin, where they welcome students to meals, to warm hospitality, to ask questions, and to seriously wrestle with the proposition that Jesus is actually Lord of all.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION & DISCUSSION

1. What were you thinking about as the film ended?
2. Did you like the vignette about the dybbuk at the beginning of the film? How does it relate to the rest of the film?
3. Describe Larry Gopnik. Did you like his character? Do you think you were supposed to like his character? How is the fact that he is a physics professor significant? Discuss the meaning of his quote in the review.
4. What's the significance of the film's title, *A Serious Man*?
5. Larry's tragedies inspire a question in him: What is "Hashem" (God) trying to tell me? What are the answers the three rabbis—Scott, Nachtner, and Marshak—give him? If Larry came to you with the same question, how would you answer him?
6. The Scriptures teach "… we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose" (Romans 8:28). And yet often, especially in the face of tragedy, life can seem pointless and absurd. How do you respond under such circumstances and why? How should you respond?
7. If you have seen M. Night Shyamalan's 2002 film *Signs*, contrast it with *A Serious Man*. Which film did you prefer? Why?
8. Did you think *A Serious Man* was funny? Do you think the Coen brothers intended their audience to laugh? How did you respond to Grooms' criticism that the film, though well done, just isn't funny?
9. One film reviewer had this to say about *A Serious Man*: "The Coens seem to be working from a definitive stance that religion and God lead to nothing but confusion and fear. Their god, if they have one, is the cinema. And more often than not, their films speak to lovers of film more than lovers of life. But there's something about that love of film that also embraces the human experience with a striking honesty." Discuss this quote.
10. The film ends with Larry bending to the pressure of his troubles by doing something he knows to be wrong. What's the significance of this act? How do the Coens respond to it in the film?

Text **Steven Garber**

I SEE YOU

Reflections on *Avatar* and the Importance of People and Place

Putting on 3-D glasses so that I could "see" the story of *Avatar* that James Cameron has brought to the screen, twice now I have joined the millions who made the film millions.

For people who love movies, it is no surprise that it has broken all box-office records. Technologically astounding, yes—but it is more than that. Turning the lights down, inviting us into comfortable chairs, Cameron has drawn us into a mythic narrative of drama and romance—even as he also offers a window into his own hopes and dreams about the way the world is and ought to be.

"Seeing" is central to the story. The climactic moment of the film is when we hear, "I see you"—metaphysically and morally meaningful words, as they are meant to be. But who sees? Who sees truthfully? And how does one learn to see? The questions in the film are not so far from those that Jesus asked, conversation after conversation longing that people would have "eyes that see."

Deep within the Hebrew anthropology is the argument that we see out of our hearts, even as we live out of our hearts—and Jesus' teaching reflects that. What and why and how we see is always central to human life under the sun—a true truth for everyone everywhere. As the unusually perceptive Oxford moral philosopher, Iris Murdoch, once wrote, "We can only choose within the world we can see." More than most, she understood the moral dimension of human knowing.

Cameron as Storyteller

It is that reality that is the heart of the story of *Avatar.* Cameron imagines Pandora, a place that offers earth-dwellers the possibility of yet another world—to conquer or to steward. And it is in the tension between those visions where his story unfolds, as the humans negotiate their present and future with the native population, the Na'vi, a strangely-beautiful, blue-toned people with tails, whose sacred sites sit on top of an incredibly valuable mineral, unobtanium.

Having ruined one world, a version of what Eisenhower in the 1950s presciently called "the military/industrial complex" brings unimaginable fire-power to Pandora for the purpose of removing the Na'vi, who in their cultural naïveté have no appreciation for what lies beneath their trees and mountains. Rather, with innocence they think that a life together in relationship to each other and to the birds and beasts, flowers and trees, is of more value. (And yes, unobtanium almost seems a silly word; Cameron can't be serious?! But with some research I found that at least since the 1950s engineers have used the term when referring to unusual or costly materials, or when theoretically considering a material perfect for their needs—except that it doesn't exist. So there.)

"You can't leave your brain at the box-office"

There is caricature of course, as life is never if ever as black-and-white as Cameron tells the tale. There is a feel of *Dances With Wolves* about the storyline, perhaps even of a cartoonish version of "developed world" against "undeveloped world." All that is there, and more.

But knowing that doesn't take away from the richness of his vision, and the excellence of the film. What about it is worthy of our time and money? Do we go, and if we go, what will we see? Learning to be discerning people requires that we have lenses that can sift and sort what is true from what is not true, what matters from what does not matter. But never for the sake of being smarter people; always for the sake of being better people, more holy people, yes, even more human people. I never tire of remembering the novelist and essayist Walker Percy's far-reaching insight, that we can "get all A's and still flunk life." How do we learn to "see" a film, to see the world around us, in ways that lead us to Murdoch's thesis that there is always a moral dimension to knowing? That we are implicated in our knowing? That our seeing will require something of us, something that is central to us? Good questions for film viewing every time, but also questions that are central to the film *Avatar*.

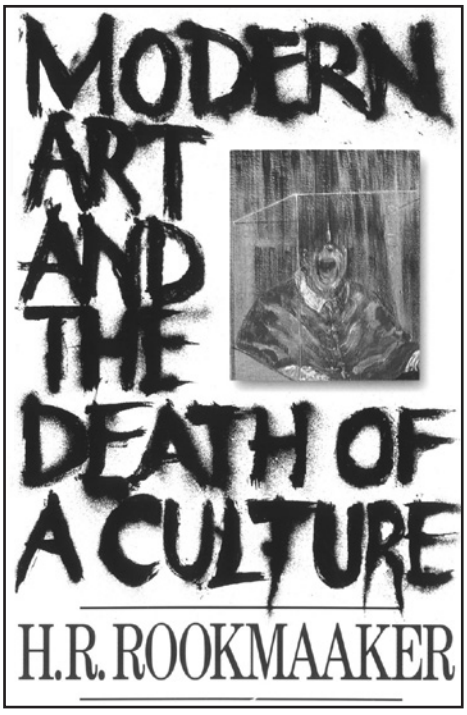
Years ago Donald Drew taught me to "never leave your brains at the box-office." I was an undergraduate, and he was a wonderful, thoughtful, kind, insightful lover of film. A year earlier he had published the first-ever book by a Christian taking movies seriously, *Images of Man: A Critique of the Contemporary Cinema,* so seeing a film with him was very special. We went into the theater, sat down, and he took out of his pocket a notepad and pencil. I looked inquiringly, and he said—with his British impishness that was also serious—"Dear Steve, I would never leave my brains at the box-office!" We began watching the film—and he took notes! I learned, looking over his shoulder and through his heart, something very important about "seeing" the

story of a movie. Not only to wonder about technique and story telling, but also to ask about meaning. What is being said? And why?

As I watched *Avatar*, I found myself responding on many different levels. I love a good story, and require that of a good film. This story is well told, so the almost three hours did not seem too long at all. And there is a coherent, compelling plot. But in my musing over the movie, I also thought of the Francis Bacons, of Michael Polanyi, and of Wendell Berry—with perhaps a little bit of Peter Gabriel too.

From Instauration to Alienation

The Francis Bacons? There were two, the 16th-century philosopher-statesman-scientist, and the 20th-century painter. As an undergraduate, beginning to understand the importance of ideas, of history, of cultural development and analysis, I spent most of my senior year working on an honors thesis, "From Instauration to Alienation: A Study of Two Francis Bacons."



Influenced by Schaeffer, Rookmaaker, Dooyeweerd, and Roszak, I offered an analysis of the cultural history from the one Bacon to the other, arguing that the encyclopediast's vision of human enlightenment through the scientific method, echoing across the centuries as it did—the Great Instauration, as he called it—was in large part what his ancestor was screaming out against in his well-known paintings, e.g. the "Heads" of Velazquez's portrait of Pope Innocent X (made famous to me as the cover art of Rookmaaker's *Modern Art and the Death of a Culture*). It was pretty heady stuff, I will admit—but it did seem to matter, to me and to some of my fellow students.

As I read the Bacons, it seemed fair to argue for a connection between the thinking of the first and the artistry of the second. One image I drew on was from the sociologist Theodore Roszak, who in his book *Where the Wasteland Ends: Politics and Transcendence in Post-Industrial Society*, and an essay, "The Monster and the Titan: Science, Knowledge and Gnosis" argued for understanding that the Enlightenment paradigm—the Cartesian objective/subjective dualism—had mandated a way of knowing, a gnosis, that was as if we saw—drawing on the poet William Blake's image—"through a dead man's eyes." Yes, dispassionate, detached, and disconnected from any honest human being or feeling—pure objectivity, and therefore the most trusted knowledge we have, as the story is told.

"Seeing" something of the inhumanity of man in the modern world.

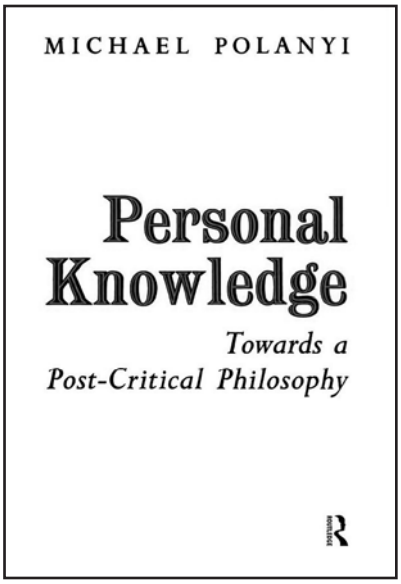
Polanyi and Berry on "Seeing"

If painters and artists of all sorts are "feeling" the world first, touching and sensing where we are all going culturally, then Bacon the painter was "seeing" something of the inhumanity of man in the modern world, perhaps earlier and more starkly than the rest of us. His anguished canvases are painfully painted, even painful to ponder as the "screaming" is so metaphysical and ontological. It is our humanity that is on trial, in some sense.

In fact he was artfully describing what the scientist and philosopher Michael Polanyi was also seeing about the Enlightenment, academically and angrily arguing that it was arrogance to call ourselves "enlightened," after the Holocaust. His work focused upon "knowing" too, with his magnum opus titled, *Personal Knowledge.*

Never another way of speaking of subjective knowing, "personal" for him meant something more truthful, more human. He made a fundamental critique of the Cartesian split between objectivity and subjectivity, and as a world-class chemist argued that "the viewer is always viewing"—we never leave ourselves behind at the door of the laboratory, as scientific "objectivity" promises.

For Polanyi, there had to be a way of knowing that was more truthful to the knowing he had experienced as a scientist; but also that was more attentive to human responsibility, to the responsibility of knowledge, than the facts/values dualism of the modern world, which he saw as substantially responsible for the horrors of the Holocaust. How could we be brilliant and bad at the same time, he wondered?

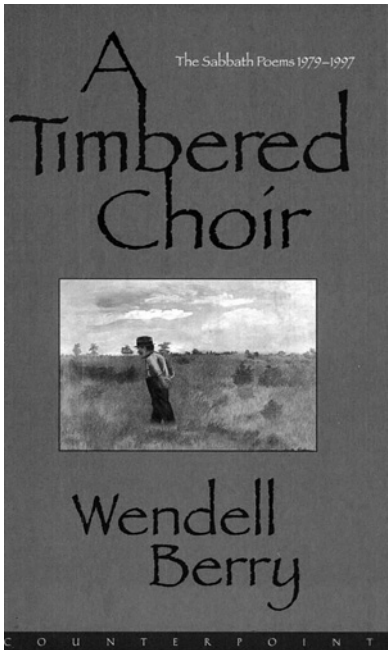


Polanyi's vision relied upon what he called "indwelling," viz. it is not until we indwell our knowing that we come to truly know. To put it another way: it is not until we live into our ideas about the world that we responsibly live in the world; we never truly "know" in the abstract, so for him the idea of an objectivity that promised absolute certainty was fundamentally flawed. The viewer is always viewing; it is a basic human act, and one that is always through-a-glass-darkly. We know in part—but being finite is not a moral problem.

The deeper truth is that one has to step-in, to "indwell" one's convictions and beliefs before they can be truly understood. Yes, a person can "get all A's and still flunk life." Polanyi was saying something profoundly Hebrew and Christian in all of this. Ideas must have legs. Theories must be practiced. Belief must become behavior. Doctrine must develop into discipleship. And words have to made flesh—for us to understand them, at least.

But twined together with his insight about indwelling is his understanding that there is a responsibility built into knowledge; a moral dimension to human knowing. As a Hungarian Jew, he lived through the first half of the 20th-century, for most of 50 years working as a scientist within the Baconian vision of "the great instauration" that would be ours once we mastered the universe. But the Holocaust, and the cultural ruins of Europe post World War II, brought that optimism crashing down on him and Europe at-large. After the war, Polanyi walked away from his Nobel Prize-level of work and spent the rest of life asking, "What does it mean to know? And how do we learn to become responsible for what we know?"

But there is another visionary to draw upon too. Called "the most serious essayist in America," or "the most prophetic writer in America," Wendell Berry has become a great friend to me, and to many, giving the grace of learning to see what he sees. A novelist, a poet, and an essayist—as well as a husband and father and farmer and neighbor—he writes of the responsibility of knowledge in all of his work. He is always exploring the connection of relationship to responsibility, of knowledge to love, viz. now that we know, can we still love? now that we know, we must still love.



While I could offer many windows into his work, take *A Timbered Choir.* A collection of 20 years of "Sabbath Poems," week after week exploring the dynamic rhythm of worship and work, the title is both important and instructive. While musing over a stand of oaks, he wonders why we do not see "the timbered choir" before our eyes? Yes, trees singing to us of the

glory of God; like the heavens that declare that same glory. Why don't we have eyes that see, he wonders. We all should wonder. (And maybe we should all read Lewis and Tolkien again too.)

There is something profoundly sacramental in this kind of seeing, wonderfully and deeply so. Heaven and earth meet here, as sacraments always do. While my ecclesiology keeps me wary of everything becoming a sacrament, it is also true that I ache for the holiness of vision that sees timbered choirs… don't we all? I do want to see the world as God sees it, to hear it as he hears it, to feel it as he feels it.

And Peter Gabriel Too

But what was it about "Avatar" that made me think of Peter Gabriel? I have read some of the critiques of the film, and am as bothered by Cameron's open-hearted apologia for pantheism as anyone else. While it is "a universe next door" for all of us, and therefore a way of seeing with its own internal logic and aesthetic, pantheism is its own dead-end. As one critic put it years ago, after visiting the East, "Like arsenic. In small doses a stimulant, in large a poison."

Yes, it is a promise to "see" more completely, pushing back away from the materialism of the West as it offers a way to see in and through the illusions of our consciousness; the mayas of your life and mine that limit our ability to see the world as it ought to be seen. But it cannot finally deliver, as it is its own idolatry, exchanging one flawed story of reality for another, offering "we are inexplicably connected to all that is around us" for "we are completely disconnected from all that is around us," which was the honest if very sad protest of Bacon the painter.

Several years ago I spent an evening with Gabriel, before a concert here in Washington. A few of us who care about the intersection of politics and culture had dinner with him, asking if we could help with his project to address human rights abuses. By buying video cameras for development workers all over the world, he wanted to record the wrongs of this life and world—and he was passionate about it.

We talked about many things, and he was thoughtful and engaging and kind. Along the way he talked to us about his Buddhism. I have read enough over the years to understand its appeal to worn-out Westerners,

We are longing for something more than a "dead man's eyes."

human beings as we are longing for something more than "a dead man's eyes"—with the alienation from each other and the world around us that is part-and-parcel of that judgment. So I was more sympathetic than most might be—even as I was listening carefully, wondering if there would be a way to engage him more fully in what he believed and why.

At a certain point in the conversation I asked him, "But how do you account for the yearning to believe that some things are right and wrong, good and evil, a human right as against a human wrong—within the framework of your Buddhism? If at the end of the day, there are no final distinctions between anything, that all differences and distinctions are maya and illusory, why is the suffering and torture in Burma last year so important to you? Why does it matter if anyone records it? Why should we protest it? Why not admit our illusions about reality, about life, and get on with it? Why right and wrong, Peter?"

He is a rock star, the world over, but he is also a good man, an honorable man, and it was a good conversation between people who took each other seriously. His work is commendable, and worthy of his time and labor and money—and we honored that.

Bad Films Always Lie...

But *Avatar*? If Cameron argues for us to attend to the richness of Na'vi life, and to see the economic and political ambitions of the military/industrial complex now come to Pandora as morally and historically short-sighted, he also wants us to purchase the pantheism of Pandora. It is Mother Earth he offers, his own form of Gaia, and in the way he portrays their habitation of life it is superior to the earthlings in every possible way. Yes, it is cartoonish at times, and we need to be able to sift, taking the good and leaving the not-so-good.

When the drama begins to be seen for what it will be, with crises abounding, we are drawn into the Na'vi worship of Mother Earth, present in a giant sacred tree. The Na'vi princess at one point says very plainly, "She does not take sides, Jake. She only protects the balance of life." A former Marine now embodying an avatar himself, Jake wonders whether there will be any assistance from the local deity—the pantheistic deity, and therefore somehow someway everywhere in everything—in addressing the "bad guys" that sent him to befriend the Na'vi for the sake of manipulating them and stealing from them.

Well, Walker Percy is perennially right about bad books, and bad films. They lie most of all about the human condition. As he teases out his point, he wonders if anyone has "read a good Buddhist novel lately?" Pushing away at the philosophical anthropology at the heart of pantheisms of all sorts, he wonders how maya can be the basis of a really interesting story? I wondered that too, hearing Cameron speak through Mother Earth. Will she really take no sides? Will the "bad guys" win? Will it not matter to us, maya as it all is?

Well, there is a dramatic conflict between the earthlings and the Na'vi, between the modern world full of folk who live and breathe—even as they see—through a dead man's eyes. Because of the earth-dwellers illusions about what really matters, they cannot "see" that the sacred tree is anything more "just a tree," and therefore are willing to destroy the wonder and beauty and richness of the Na'vi world. Yes, it is offered to us as a battle royal between good and evil; between those who know and those who don't know, between those who see and those who don't see.

And to the gladness of all but the Scrooges among us, the Na'vi win, protecting their way of life against the power and might of the intruders from Earth. And true to all good stories, Mother Earth does take a side! Moral ambiguity does not a good story make. Think most French films. To be drawn in we need a side to be taken; we need resonance with the reality of life as we know it. That is written into our humanness, into the human condition. Nuance is critical, as not all of life is black-and-white—but moral indifference is death to a good story and to a good life. And because Cameron still lives in the world that is really there, creating a story about a world that reflects the reality of the world, with imaginative brilliance he draws us into a battle of good against evil—and we are on the edge of our seats!

Are there criticisms to make? Yes, and I have made some, e.g. the cartoonish caricature of pre-modern vs. modern, of developed vs. non-developed, of Western materialism vs. Eastern pantheism. We must never ever leave our brains at the box-office.

People and Place Do Matter

And yet, granting those critiques and more, I want to argue that there is another sense in which Cameron offers an allusive alternative to the "dead man's eyes" of modernity. In his criticism of the modern world, he is pushing back at the Enlightenment rationalism that has deadened us to things that matter. At the end of

life, things are not the most important things. Relationships with other people, and a relationship to a place that matters is also important; and in fact is more important, over the long years of life. They will nourish us as human beings, truly "enlightening" us as to who we are and ought to be, in ways that the dogged pursuit of becoming "masters of the universe" will not. Tom Wolfe—and many others—were right about that.

As I watched the film, I found myself thinking of Berry. In so many ways, the central theme of his work is this: if we casually walk away from people and place, we lose something crucial to our humanity—so be careful about that. Never a Luddite, not a utopian, he sees something important about the human condition and insists that we "come and see" too, looking over his shoulder and through his heart at the life and times of Port William and its membership, the community over time whose stories he tells. Buried within his pantheistic apologetic, Cameron sees the same thing, and it is a weighty word for us.

Sometimes I wonder why it is that the Church seems more in debt to Enlightenment rationalism, and uncritically so? Why is it that we are not so sure about the sacramental songs of the birds of the field… and the timbered choirs all around us, allowing cultural histories and ideologies that have diminished our connectedness to the creation to hold sway among us? We are placed on the earth as responsible actors in history, called to love what God has made, to care for what God has made, to steward the earth and all that it is, for God's sake and our children's sake—and their children's sake, and on and on, until the new heavens and new earth comes in all its glory.

To press the point: why has evangelical theology allowed itself to be identified with a political vision that is so horribly "un-green," so unresponsive and irresponsible about our place in the world? Clearly there is a generation coming of age now that refutes the logic that conservative politics represents all that true Christians are "for," among many other causes and cares insisting that faithfulness to God means a faithful care of the earth. It is not, of course—and living in Washington for over 20 years makes me sure of this—that the political left is a more faithful weather vane for stewardship of the earth. They are subject to their own ideological shortsightedness, and it is not ours either. We are not the earth's disturbers or destroyers; that is never what the calling to dominion meant. But we are not its worshippers either. Ideologies and idolatries are always inextricably connected. The call of Genesis 1 was to see ourselves as in relationship, "vice-regents" in the earth, stewards of history, and therefore responsible to care for the way the world turned out.

As sons of Adam and daughters of Eve we are to love the earth, its flora and fauna, its birds and bees—which means that we are to "see" our connection to creation, understanding that our flourishing will be fullest when it flourishes. That can mean and should mean cultural development, so we are not primitivists, just as we are not pantheists. But knowing the world means loving the world, even as we explore its possibilities, creating flutes and guitars, bagels and baguettes, chocolate and wine, steel and microchips, planes, trains, and automobiles—and spaceships too, as well as understanding the potential of unobtanium. But we are always neighbors, first. And when human beings forget that, and mostly we do, we suffer. Our neighborhoods suffer, our cities suffer, our society and world suffer. How could it be otherwise?

A Final Word

So for the counter-punch to the (im)moral vision that was born and bred in the Enlightenment, the "through a dead man's eyes" of evolutionary materialism and the social alienation that came with it, understood by Dickens and Marx coincidentally—and more fully developed a century later by Polanyi and Percy—for all of that I am intrigued by the story of *Avatar*, impressed by the artfulness of Cameron as a story-teller and glad for what he tells the truth about, even as I am critical over what he misses.

Like the people of God over the centuries, we are called to "plunder the Egyptians," living in but not of our moment in history, taking in what is valuable and leaving behind what is not. The early Church did that, drawing on the story of the Israelites leaving Egypt and "plundering" the good gifts of Egyptian culture to take with them on their journey to the promised land. And so, discerning as best they could what could be redeemed in the Greco-Roman world, with its philosophies and technologies born of out of paganism, they also knew that some of the cultural images and icons were useful, even beautiful and important; even as they stood against other ideas and practices, knowing that they represented the death of a culture.

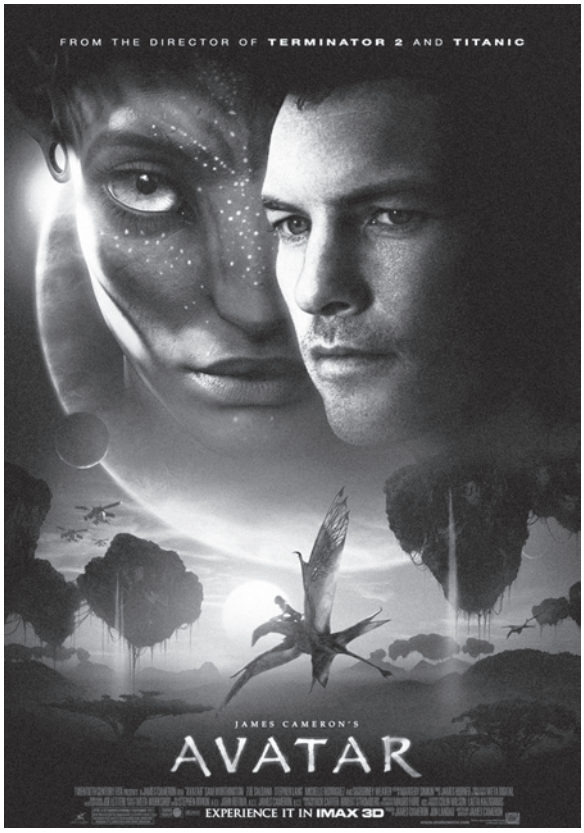
Living as we do in the pluralizing, globalizing 21st-century, we have our own images and ideas to sort through, deciding who we are and how we are going to live. Clay-footed as it is, *Avatar* calls us to see with our hearts, to remember to remember that people matter and places matter. Yes, perhaps even that there are "timbered choirs" all about us—if we have eyes that see and ears that hear. May it be so.

SOURCES

A Rocha, an internal community of Christians committed to stewarding the earth. Steve serves on its national advisory council. [http://www.arocha.org/us-en/index.html]

Flourish magazine, and especially Denis Haack's essay, Wendell Berry's "The Gift of Good Land." [http://flourishonline.org/]

And "Tacit Knowing, Truthful Knowing: The Life and Thought of Michael Polanyi," Mars Hill Audio Journal. Steve was one of those interviewed. [http://www.marshillaudio.org/]



Avatar

Starring:
Sam Worthington (Jake Sully)
Zoe Saldana (Neytiri)
Sigourney Weaver (Dr. Grace Augustine)
Stephen Lang (Colonel Miles Quaritch)
Joel Moor (Norm Spellman)
Giovanni Ribisi (Parker Selfridge)
Laz Alonso (Tsu'tey)
We Studo (Eytukan)

Writer/Director:
James Cameron

Runtime: 162 min

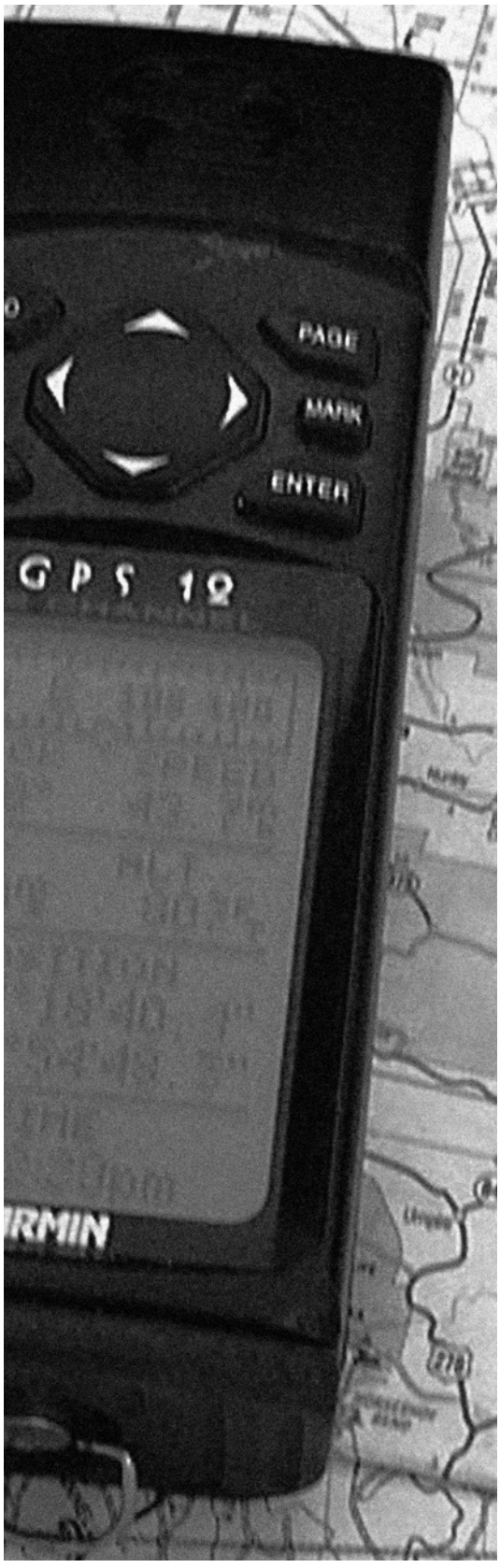
Release: USA; 2009

MPAA Rating: PG-13
(for intense epic battle sequences and warfare, sensuality, language and some smoking)

Steven Garber has been a friend to Ransom Fellowship since it began more than 25 years ago. A teacher to many people in many places, he is the director of The Washington Institute, whose work is always focused on the intersection of faith/vocation/culture.

Text **Denis Haack**

Questions for Lost People



I had a stick of CareFree gum, but it didn't work. I felt pretty good while I was blowing that bubble, but as soon as the gum lost its flavor, I was back to pondering my mortality. —Mitch Hedberg

Being lost is something I understand, having spent my life in that state. We live in a relatively small city (population 100,000) arranged neatly in a grid (we're in the Midwest after all) with numbered avenues running north/south and numbered streets running east/west. We've lived in the same house since 1981. Yet, more frequently than I care to mention a variation on this conversation occurs as I back out of our driveway.

She: Why are you headed this way?
He: Because we are going out to eat.
She: Do you know where you are going?
He: No.
She: We're going to Pescara's.
He: Where's that?
She: Remember the grilled asparagus we ate with Ron the evening before the L'Abri Conference?
He: Oh, that was amazing, lightly grilled, slightly crisp. Delicious.
She: That's where.
He: Where's that?
She: Oh for…

Last year my family bought me a GPS for the car, one of those little screens showing a map and a woman's voice that tells me where to go in an English accent. Her name is Serena.

There is, of course, a far deeper way of being lost. A common enough irritation in daily life, when being lost becomes a metaphor for the state of one's soul the stakes are raised exponentially. Isn't that the dark reality behind the television series, *Lost* (2004-2010) and the funny yet sad confusion that fogs Bill Murray's character in *Lost in Translation* (2003)? Walker Percy, one of the more perceptive novelists of the twentieth century was so convinced that we are *Lost in the Cosmos* that he published a book with that title (1983). Ironically subtitling his book *The last self-help book*, Percy was unimpressed by claims that humankind's progress in technology, medicine, and knowledge had solved the really important questions of life. How is it possible, he asked, "for the man who designed Voyager 19, which arrived at Titania, a satellite of Uranus, three seconds off schedule and a hundred yards off course after a flight of three years, to be one of the most screwed-up creatures in California—or the Cosmos?"

It is not just the mobility of our age that causes so many of us to feel somehow cut off from roots, afflicted with a vague sense of homesickness in a universe that is too silent to be caring and too large to be comforting. We are obviously at home here, being actually made of the stuff of the planet on which we live out our days. How could it be otherwise? And yet, there is also no denying, when we are fully honest, the unsettling pang that causes us to wonder why, if we are at home we feel a bit lost.

Often, Walker Percy says in *Lost in the Cosmos*, the sense of our predicament arrives in pangs of disappointment that stretch across our entire existence. That is, if we stop being distracted long enough to notice.

> Work is disappointing. In spite of all the talk about making work more creative and self-fulfilling, most people hate their jobs, and with good reason. Most work in modern technological societies is intolerably dull and repetitive.
>
> Marriage and family life are disappointing. Even among defenders of traditional family values, e.g., Christians and Jews, a certain dreariness must be inferred, if only from the average time of TV viewing. Dreary as TV is, it is evidently not as dreary as Mom talking to Dad or the kids talking to either.
>
> School is disappointing. If science is exciting and art is exhilarating, the schools and universities have achieved the not inconsiderable feat of rendering both dull. As every scientist and poet knows, one discovers both vocations in spite of, not because of, school. It takes years to recover from the stupor of being taught Shakespeare in English Lit and Wheatstone's bridge in Physics.
>
> Politics is disappointing. Most young people turn their backs on politics, not because of the lack of excitement of politics as it is practiced, but because of the shallowness, venality, and image-making as these are perceived through the media—one of the technology's greatest achievements.
>
> The churches are disappointing, even for most believers. If Christ brings us new life, it is all the more remarkable that the church, the bearer of this good news, should be among the most dispirited institutions of the age. The alternatives to the institutional churches are even more grossly disappointing, from TV evangelists with their blown-dry hairdos to California cults led by prosperous gurus ignored in India but embraced in La Jolla.
>
> Social life is disappointing. The very franticness of attempts to reestablish community and festival, by partying, by groups, by club, by touristy Mardi Gras, is the best evidence of the loss of true community and festival and of the loneliness of self, stranded as it is as an unspeakable consciousness in a world from which it perceives itself as somehow estranged, stranded even within its own body, with which it sees no clear connection.

Two millennia ago Jesus wove together three stories on the subject. He told of a lost sheep, a lost coin, and a lost son, bringing an echo of Trinitarian reality in the trilogy. The first two tales are so brief that they are barely more than a couple of sentences. A shepherd/a woman loses a sheep/a coin, searches

valiantly for it, finds what is lost and is overjoyed. The story of the lost son is more involved, displaying in vivid detail the prodigal proficiency that characterizes divine grace. Being found by God turns out to be transformative, when from being lost I find myself welcomed into a family with God as Father, Jesus as elder brother, with neither ashamed to name me as their own.

The spell-check on my laptop doesn't like the word, lostness, but what other word can we use in its place? To admit to lostness is sometimes attributed to weakness, so that we feel ashamed of the fact but this is a mistake. "The search," Walker Percy wrote in *The Moviegoer*, "is what anyone would undertake if he were not sunk in the everydayness of his own life. To become aware of the possibility of the search is to be onto something. Not to be onto something is to be in despair." It is one thing to be away from home, it is quite another to be away and unable or unwilling to admit it. No reason to complicate lostness with a stupidity spawned in pride.

The story of our lostness stretches back in time to the very beginning. As sons of Adam and daughters of Eve we have heard how our first parents were fully at home but then became lost, bequeathing the befuddlement and wandering to us. Foolishly they preferred finding their own way rather than trusting the word of God, and discovered that autonomy was itself the very definition of being lost, lost in the cosmos that was intended to be home.

Soon after their fateful decision, the God whose word they refused to trust asked them a series of four questions.

> They heard the sound of the Lord God walking in the garden at the time of the evening breeze, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the Lord God among the trees of the garden. But the Lord God called to the man, and said to him, "Where are you?" And he said, "I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked; and I hid myself." He said, "Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten of the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?" The man said, "The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit from the tree, and I ate." Then the Lord God said to the woman, "What is this that you have done?" The woman said, "The serpent tricked me, and I ate."
>
> —Genesis 3:8-13

My friend Ellis Potter says that we should notice the questions God asks here. This is the first encounter, in all of human history, with people who find themselves lost in the cosmos. And it is God doing the asking. The questions are not rhetorical but though simple, probe into hearts and minds and lives in a way that opens us to the possibility of redemption. The four questions God asks are these:

> Where are you?
> Who told you that?
> Have you eaten?
> What difference has it made in your life?

"Where are you?" Where has your pilgrimage in life brought you? Where do you find meaning and for what do you hope? What are your fears and deepest doubts? What is the story in which you are living so far? Have you found the home for which you are longing most deeply?

"Who told you that?" In what or who are you trusting, and why? What or who do you look to as a

final source of truth, morality, and authority? Is it/are they trustworthy? Why do you believe what you do? Why did you choose this particular story to live in? On what basis do you determine what is right and what is wrong? What will happen if you happen to be wrong?

"Have you eaten?" Will you share the hospitality of my life and home? Do you find your deepest heart commitments to be a source of satisfaction? Does your story help you flourish at the deepest levels as a human being?

"What difference does it make in your life?" Is your story so fulfilling that you would recommend it? How does it help you live? In what ways does it make you the sort of person you most want to become? What do you hope for and how does that hope help you in the darkest, most disappointing moments of life?

"Perhaps we should be asking these questions," Ellis suggests, "in trying to engage and bless our neighbors." And it should go without saying that if we are going to pose them to others we must be willing to have them asked of us.

We must also be willing to have our answers challenged. It is as easy to be nonchalant in such matters as it is to bury our yearning for home in distraction, busyness, entertainment, or some sort of addiction. Being certain I have been found isn't the same as feeling found, and if my certainty is primarily self-confidence it may not be worth much in the long run. Jesus saved his most scathing rhetoric for the believers most certain they were God's chosen people, that everyone else wasn't and that they could tell the difference. They based their claims on the Scriptures but Jesus told them their souls reeked of putrefaction. Sadly, most of them apparently didn't take him all that seriously.

John Newton, the slave ship captain who became a pastor and abolitionist, celebrated being found by God. The hymn he wrote in 1772 in the attic room of his home has become one of the most loved and best known in the world:

> Amazing grace! (how sweet the sound)
> That saved a wretch like me!
> I once was lost, but now am found,
> Was blind, but now I see.

"Amazing Grace" flows out of Newton's personal pilgrimage, a witness to his confidence in the grace of God that had taken hold of his life. It is a triumphant song, but is ruined whenever the slightest hint of triumphalism sneaks in. God's grace is real and when we are awakened to its transforming power we share Newton's conviction that it is both amazing and sweet. And we do see, where once blindness kept us in the dark, though our seeing now is still as though through a glass darkly. Seeing fully is still in the future when our redemption is consummated and when even the groaning creation is freed. So it is with being found. No longer lost, we still trek on a narrow path, found but not yet fully home. And just as we occasionally strain to see clearly, the cold shadows of lostness can intrude.

So we ask the questions, and have them asked of us, answering as before the face of God. It is not pride to say we are found, if we have been, by grace and if pride stays out of it. If you wonder what that sounds like there is a simple test. If lost people feel safe with us, we are celebrating God's grace without getting in the way, sharing the hope of being found with fellow travelers lost in the cosmos and yearning for home.

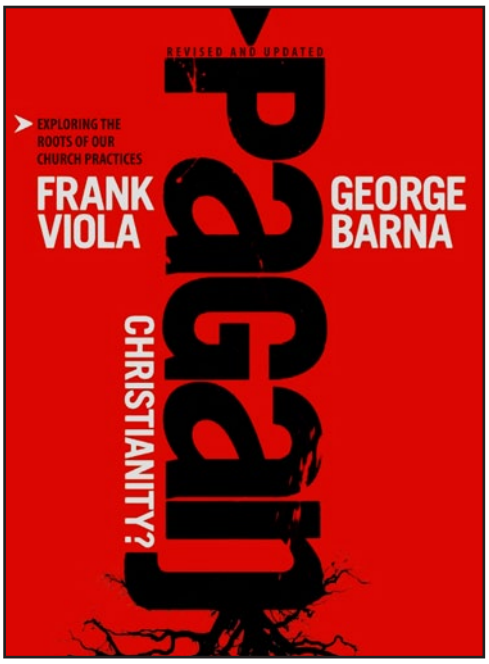
SOURCES

Walker Percy from *Lost in the Cosmos* (New York, NY: Farrar, Straus & Giroux; 1983) p. 1-2, 179-180;

Genesis from the New Revised Standard Version;

Jesus in Matthew 23:27.

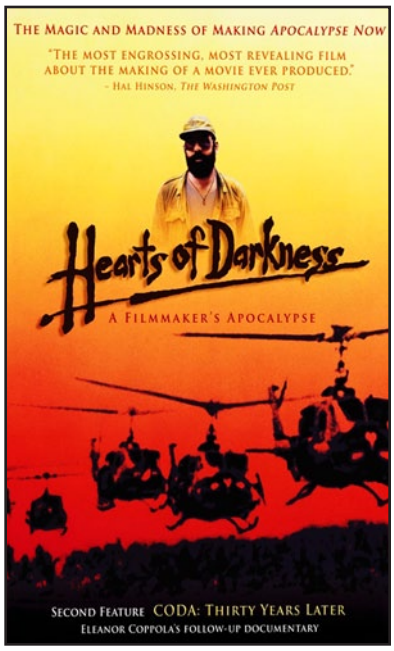
Text **Matthew Hundley**



Thinking About Church

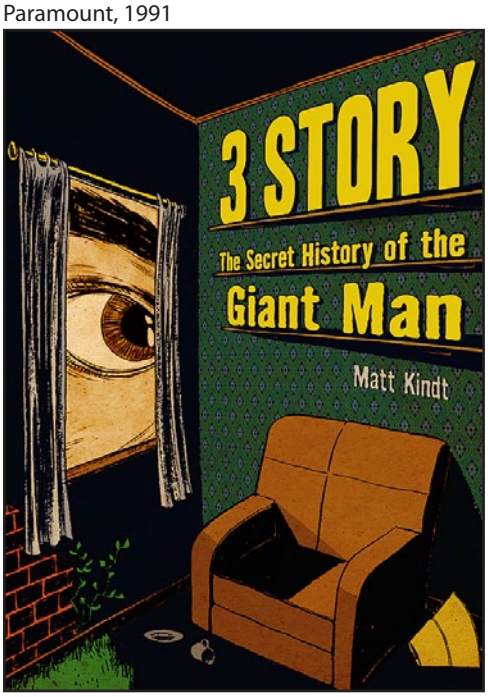
Why do we do church the way we do church? A loaded question, I know; but one that many are trying to answer. Frank Viola and George Barna take an interesting approach examining pagan or wordly influence upon the church over the past two millenia. From the buildings we worship in; to the order of worship; to the music styles we have adapted; to the emphasis on preaching—the influence of the unbelieving world has permeated our Christian traditions. *Pagan Christianity* challenges us to investigate "why" we do what we do as relates to the thing called "church." Such questioning should drive us to Scripture, to early Christian writings, and the wisdom of the church fathers. —*Pagan Christianity: Exploring the Roots of Our Church Practices*, Frank Viola/George Barna, Barna Books, 2008

Coppola's Journey Into...



In Joseph Conrad's book *The Heart of Darkness* a man takes on a mission in the Congo, journeying by boat to find a wanted ivory trader; what he encounters in the process is not some evil nemesis, but a darker version of his own self. This documentary, originally released in 1991 and now available on DVD, presents Francis Ford Coppola's own personal journey into the heart of emotional and spiritual darkness. Coppola takes many hearts along with him on this dark ride into self-introspection: his family, many actors and his crew. What unfolds on the screen is a story which is as compelling as the movie he is seeking to make.

—*Hearts of Darkness: A Filmakers Apocalypse*, Fax Bahr/George Hickenlooper/Eleanor Coppola, Paramount, 1991



Graphic Look At Living Large

I first stumbled upon the work of illustrator Matt Kindt at Subterranean Books in the Delmar Loop in Saint Louis. He is from the area and had on display actual art boards for one of his early *Super Spy* graphic novels. *3 Story: The Secret History of The Giant Man* is his first offering through Darkhorse Comics. The phrase "3 story" carries a dual meaning as we learn about the giant man from three perspectives: his mother, his wife and his daughter. The giant man leads a life that is not how it was meant to be. The life of the giant man is radically impacted by this ongoing mutation which causes him to grow and grow until, as the promo copy states, he is "unable to interact with a fragile world that isn't built to withstand (his) size. To live in a house that doesn't fit (him) anymore, with a wife who doesn't either." An amazing tale in dialogue and pictures.—*3 Story: The Secret History of the Giant Man,* Matt Kindt, Dark Horse Comics, 2009