Today there is a new interest in churches in one of the most vivid forms of communication in our society, popular movies. (One evidence of this interest is a new interactive internet journal, The Journal of Religion and Film (www.unomaha.edu). Why have movies come to be important in churches for everything from sermon illustrations to study groups? Are not movies simply entertainment?

On the contrary, movies are an accessible medium in which competing issues of public and private life in a religiously plural society are formulated and represented for consideration and interpretation. They help us to consider both our intimate relationships and social issues and the inevitable overlapping of intimate and social. Films articulate a range of values, fleshing out these values in characters, and narrating the conflicts that arise as characters endeavor to live out their commitments. They explore what happens, in particular contexts, when one character’s values meet, question, contest, or resist those of another. Moreover, Americans receive our self images and our images of one another, of our social world, and of our relation to the natural world from media communications, billboards, magazines, newspapers, television, and movies. Issues related to race, age, ecology, gender, class, family, education, addiction, foreign policy, and AIDS—to give only a partial list—permeate movies. In order to recognize movies as a format for thinking about ourselves and our world, we need to recognize the power of images, a power that goes well beyond “entertainment.”

The importance of the visual sense to religion has been long recognized. Within historical Christianity, religious images focused and informed piety. However, as a society we do not primarily get our informing images from the walls of churches as historical Christians did; we get them from the media culture in which we live. Contemporary movies can be seen as part of a long tradition in which images have been used to produce emotion, to strengthen attachment, and to encourage imitation. To neglect to analyze these images is to grant them an unexamined role in our attitudes, values, and relationships.

Although religion is hardly a preoccupation of contemporary movies, Hollywood

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films generate and maintain attitudes toward religion that have far-reaching effects in American social and political life. Film criticism from a religious perspective has too often been content with finding themes of forgiveness, conversion, or transformation in movies. The greater task, analysis of how movies communicate values, has barely begun. This task will require examination of particular movies in relation to the social context in which they were produced and had first-run circulation. For a movie is one voice in a highly complex social “conversation.” In order to understand a movie it must be seen in the context of the events, social movements, political issues, and heated interests of its time.

Our public self-representations have a more than casual importance. Who is the “we” in a pluralistic society? Americans need movies that help us picture religious, racial, and cultural diversity as irreducible and delightful, if we are to gather responses to the question, “How should we live?” In a society in which functional illiteracy is high, movie images are an important source of information and socialization.

The philosopher Suzanne Langer said that the function of a society’s art is to educate the emotions, to train people’s sensibilities to a rich range of feeling, and to a perceptual life that misses nothing of importance. To the extent that the arts we live with daily—not those seen occasionally in museums or books—supply stimulation, expression, and perceptive delicacy to our relational lives, we are well served. If, however, we find that the popular arts with which we live are governed by a narrow emotional repertoire, by conventions of representation, and by genre movies with minimal elements of surprise, we are not well served.

However, once their limitations are recognized and acknowledged, movies do some important social tasks well. They identify social problems and issues and present them in concrete situations in particular lives. They represent conflicts of values, inviting and enabling discussion of how we (as a society and as individuals) should live. What movies do best is to articulate the anxieties of a changing society. They do not provide ready-made solutions; indeed, their “endings” or resolutions are not as important as their definition of problems and issues.

Movies are cultural products, deeply informed by the perspectives, values, and aspirations of their makers. They beg for creative discussion, for it is finally the uses to which Hollywood movies are put that determines their role in American society. Movies need to be talked about, not only to explore the emotions they stimulate in diverse viewers, but to examine their message and its influence on our lives in the context of our society and particular historical moment.