CHAPTER EIGHT

SPIRIT, THEOLOGY, AND FILM:
AMOS YONG AND THE ENGAGEMENT OF CONTEMPORARY CULTURE

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A creative restlessness, pioneering imagination and passion for extending dialogical boundaries pervades the scholarship of Amos Yong. It is in keeping with this entrepreneurial spirit that his work will be explored in relation to film and more broadly to the field of theology and contemporary visual culture. The particular goal of this chapter is to investigate ways in which resources within Yong’s work, as have been outlined throughout this volume, may enrich, challenge and develop the “emerging” discipline of theology and film. In turn, resources within this discipline are also examined as to how they may contribute toward Yong’s work and subsequent engagements with film. It is hoped that by engaging Yong in relation to cinema, fresh thinking will be stimulated among Christians and particularly Pentecostals that will enrich theological interactions with film and other visual arts within an increasingly digital era.

The grounds for engagement have been selected in correspondence with some of the major themes of Yong’s corpus so far, namely pneumatology, theological method, hermeneutics and interreligious praxis. Yong’s ideas are correspondingly explored in conjunction with three key dialogue partners who have considered similar themes in relation to film: (1) Craig Detweiler on the grounds of foundational pneumatology and cinema, (2) Robert K. Johnston concerning the hermeneutics of theological engagement with film and (3) Gaye Williams Ortiz regarding world cinema and interreligious practices. Considering theology and film’s future prospects Johnston asks, “how might our interdisciplinary conversation be deepened by using the resources of theology and its rich tradition?” It is in this light that Yong’s Pentecostal work is brought into relationship with the visual elements of contemporary culture. Each section first explores the premises of the respective proposal and then offers

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1 Part of the subtitle for R.K. Johnston (ed), Reframing Theology and Film: New Focus on an Emerging Discipline (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007).
2 Johnston, Reframing Theology and Film, p. 17.
resources from Yong’s work in response. The chapter concludes with a general evaluation of Yong’s cultural engagement in the realm of film and theology.

1. Craig Detweiler: Pneumatology “Into the Dark”

Craig Detweiler’s central theological work regarding film, *Into the Dark: Seeing the Sacred in the Top Films of the 21st Century*, may be seen as an attempt to unite his bi-vocation as both film practitioner and theologian. His primary thesis in the work states that film functions as a genuine, Spirit-inspired source of general revelation capable of facilitating both individual and communal transformation. Detweiler, who expounds his thesis in examination of forty-five of IMDb’s top 250 movies, concludes that cinema is a “locus theologicus, a place for divine revelation.” Whether categorised as “general” or “special,” genuine revelation for Detweiler is directly attributable to the foundational presence and activity of the Spirit. However, while he affirms the importance of Spirit-inspired general revelation in the lives of film audiences, he maintains this revelation to be nonetheless non-salvific; “Christ remains our only saving grace, but movies can provide moments of grace as well.” *Into the Dark* acts as an example of what Detweiler in accord with numerous other theology and film authors deems a “visual faith.” Proceeding from film to theology, Detweiler draws resources from Hans Urs von Balthasar’s theological aesthetics. Starting with revelatory beauty within film (aesthetics), he proceeds to goodness, considering the implications for individual and communal life (ethics), and finally to truth, considering the theological value and its implications (theology).

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4 Detweiler, *Into the Dark*, pp. 7–19, 30–31, 42.

5 Ibid., pp. 37, 47, 42.

6 Ibid., p. 261.

7 Ibid., p. 31.


9 Detweiler, *Into the Dark*, pp. 17, 40–42.