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The Wages of Cinema
A Christian Aesthetic of Film in Conversation with Dorothy L. Sayers

May 27, 2025 | \$29.00, 256 pages, paperback | 978-1-5140-0880-5

Crystal L. Downing (PhD, University of California, Santa Barbara), an award-winning author, has published five books, including *Subversive: Christ, Culture, and the Shocking Dorothy L. Sayers*, which received a *Publishers Weekly* starred review, and *Salvation from Cinema: The Medium Is the Message*.

Truth, Beauty, and Goodness

The cultural power of narrative cinema has long captured the attention of priests, pastors, and professors who write books assessing film through the lens of Christian faith. Extracting spiritual insight from secular films as well as Jesus movies, many celebrate the revelatory truths or moments of transcendence generated in and by cinema. Their inspirational books have done a service for Christendom.

The Wages of Cinema offers a different kind of service. Unlike most books by Christians, it emphasizes the history of film as well as the development of secular theories about the artistry of its form. This is important. Christians who would consider naive any evangelist who proclaims, "I don't care about Christian theology; I just save souls from hell," often display similar naivete when it comes to film, extracting salvation messages from movies while displaying no knowledge of film theory. They seem unaware that, in the early decades of cinema, cineastes (filmmakers as well as lovers of cinema) argued about the essence of the medium just as bishops in the early centuries of Christianity argued about the essence of Jesus as the medium of salvation. Earnest followers of film have long recognized the need to focus on the medium itself rather than merely on their own uplifting experiences as viewers. In full endorsement of Christian orthodoxy, then, *The Wages of Cinema* seeks to reflect, even if on a screen darkly, what theologians study: historical development of doctrine about the medium.

Debates about *how* Christ functioned as the medium of salvation were not resolved until the Fourth Ecumenical Council at Chalcedon in 451 CE. Even then, disagreements continued between the Eastern and Western church, anticipating disagreements centuries later between Protestants and Roman Catholics. The same might be said of scholarly debates about the medium of cinema, debates exacerbated by the development of digital media, such that a "film" is no longer photographed on celluloid *film*. Nevertheless, attentiveness to cinematic techniques displayed on the screen, though never saving us from sin, might save us from obsession with the wages of cinema, which includes judging a movie by how much money it makes or awards it garners, or else by counting the number of sinful scenes and hellish words it contains.

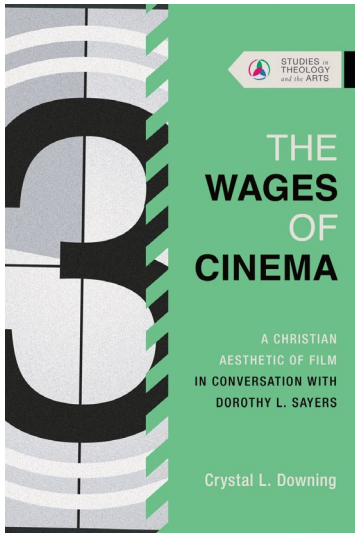
To explain the sins that landed people in hell, Dante Alighieri did something unusual as he began writing the *Inferno* in the early fourteenth century: he inserted a human guide. His *Divine Comedy*, as the completed poem was later called, is still read six hundred years after its composition, largely due to the dynamic between Dante as first-person narrator and his guide through the inferno and purgatorio.

Inspired by the fact that Dante's explicitly Christian work about the wages of sin continues to be studied even at secular universities, *The Wages of Cinema* similarly employs a guide to direct our journey through the complex circles of cinema, including infernal debates among film scholars. Whereas Dante chose as guide Virgil (70–19 BCE), the author of the *Aeneid*, this book invokes an author who translated the *Inferno* and *Purgatorio* into English, Dorothy L. Sayers (1893–1957), whose faith was reignited partially due to an "infernal film," as she called it (Unpublished correspondence, Marion E. Wade Center). The primary difference is that Sayers had much greater acquaintance with the movie industry than Dante's guide had with Christianity, since Virgil died before the birth of Jesus. Nevertheless, as Sayers notes, "The Church of Rome has always held that Virgil . . . was a Prophet of Christ" (*Letters* 1:144). Similarly, this book demonstrates that Sayers is a prophet of cinema, largely due to her Christian aesthetic, which harmonizes with secular film scholarship. Unlike books that tend to extract theological messages while ignoring techniques of the cinematic medium, *The Wages of Cinema* views film through the lens of Sayers's theology of art,



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thus echoing what Christianity preaches, that is, the importance of a medium that entered into and changed history.

Sayers's qualifications as guide are impressive. Not only did she matriculate to Oxford University "having topped the whole country" in a "nationwide test," but her fellow Oxford graduate, C. S. Lewis, later considered her a profound influence on his spiritual life (Francesca Wade, *Square Haunting*). In addition to enjoying Sayers's translations of Dante's *Inferno* and *Purgatorio*, Lewis considered "indispensable" a book Sayers wrote about the relationship between creativity and Christianity, *The Mind of the Maker*—a book that others have found indispensable as well (C. S. Lewis, *Miracles*). Cultural historian and philosopher Jacques Barzun, a contemporary of Lewis, warmly praised what he called Sayers's "aesthetic theology," and eighty years later Christian artist Makoto Fujimura quoted from *The Mind of the Maker* in his Yale University Press book *Art and Faith: A Theology of Making* (2020). And, as will become clear, Fujimura is not the only twenty-first-century Christian to endorse the continued relevance of Sayers to conversations about faith and the arts (Jacques Barzun, "Aesthetic Theology," *Nation* 154).

The Wages of Cinema, of course, narrows the conversation to visual art in the medium of film, beginning with a little-known fact: Sayers literally sought wages from cinema. Before detective fiction provided her a viable income, the cash-strapped twenty-something wrote film scenarios in collaboration with a silent film director. Later, during the height of her fame as the author of bestselling detective novels, a film studio commissioned Sayers to write an original detective story, turning it into a 1935 movie called *The Silent Passenger*. And Sayers's last published novel, *Busman's Honeymoon*, itself sprinkled with allusions to cinema, was transformed into a 1940 film starring Hollywood celebrities. Some scholars might offer these examples to argue against Sayers's interest in cinema, citing the fact that Sayers so abhorred *The Silent Passenger* (the "infernal" movie) that she never again had "anything to do with films," as James Brabazon puts it (*Dorothy L. Sayers: A Biography*). Another biographer, David Coomes, said something similar over a decade later: "Sayers never touched the film world again" (*Dorothy L. Sayers: A Careless Rage for Life*).

Unpublished correspondence proves otherwise. *The Wages of Cinema* demonstrates not only Sayers's continuing interest in movies, but also that her Christian aesthetic reinforces secular theories about film form, much as the non-Christian Virgil illuminated Christian theology for readers of Dante. Perhaps not coincidentally, film theory, as it is called, was initially developed by contemporaries of Sayers who were screening the exact same movies she was.

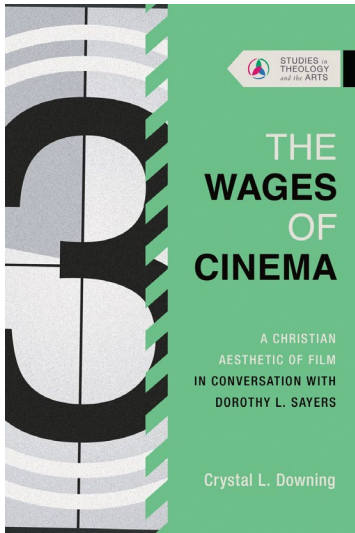
—Taken from the introduction, "Truth, Beauty, and Goodness"



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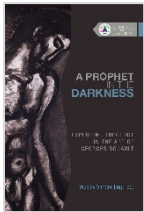
The Wages of Cinema *A Christian Aesthetic of Film in Conversation with Dorothy L. Sayers*

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In a captivating realm where cinematic narratives enchant countless viewers, how can one harmonize their faith with the craft of filmmaking? *The Wages of Cinema* encourages a deep dive into this relationship, drawing upon the significant reflections of Dorothy L. Sayers defending the authenticity of art and truth's manifestation.

Studies in Theology and the Arts

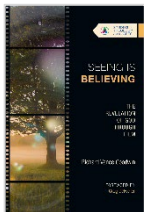
IVP Academic's Studies in Theology and the Arts (STA) series seeks to enable Christians to reflect more deeply upon the relationship between their faith and humanity's artistic and cultural expressions. By drawing on the insights of both academic theologians and artistic practitioners, this series encourages thoughtful engagement with and critical discernment of the full variety of artistic media—including visual art, music, literature, film, theater, and more—which both embody and inform Christian thinking.



A Prophet in the Darkness: Exploring Theology in the Art of Georges Rouault

edited by Wesley Vander Lugt | December 10, 2024 | \$36.99, 192 pages, paperback | 978-1-5140-1105-8

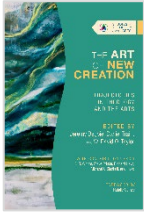
In this collection of essays, a group of theologians, artists, and historians explore Georges Rouault's historical context, personal suffering, and biblical themes, showing how his prophetic creativity continue to inspire artists and thinkers today. Chapters are interspersed with original artistic responses in the form of imagery and poetry.



Seeing Is Believing: The Revelation of God Through Film

by Richard Vance Goodwin | July 19, 2022 | \$33.99, 288 pages, paperback | 978-1-5140-0200-1

In this study in IVP Academic's STA series, theologian Richard Goodwin considers how the images that constitute film might be a conduit of God's revelation. By considering works by Stanley Kubrik, Martin Scorsese, Terrence Malick, and more, Goodwin argues that by inviting emotional responses, film images can be a medium of divine revelation.



The Art of New Creation: Trajectories in Theology and the Arts

edited by Jeremy Begbie, Daniel Train, and W. David O. Taylor | March 29, 2022 | \$31.99, 264 pages, paperback | 978-1-5140-0326-8

Creation and the new creation are inextricably bound, for the God who created the world is the same God who promises a new heaven and a new earth. Bringing together theologians, biblical scholars, and artists, this volume based on the DITA10 conference at Duke Divinity School explores how the relation between creation and the new creation is informed by and reflected in the arts.



Resisting the Marriage Plot: Faith and Female Agency in Austen, Brontë, Gaskell, and Wollstonecraft

by Dalene Joy Fisher | December 21, 2021 | \$31.99, 272 pages, paperback | 978-0-8308-5071-6

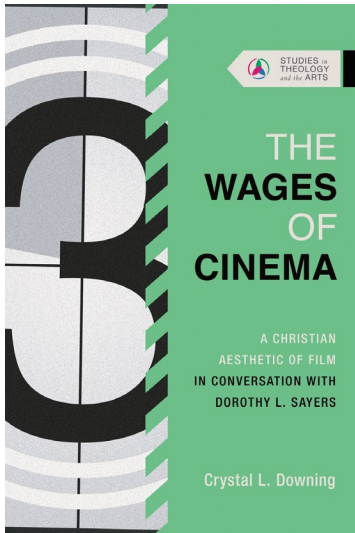
Fiction has long been used to cast vision for social change, but the role of Christian faith in such works has often been overlooked. In this STA volume, Dalene Joy Fisher examines how the works of Jane Austen, Anne Brontë, Elizabeth Gaskell, and Mary Wollstonecraft challenge cultural expectations of women and marriage, exploring how Christianity can be a transformative force of liberation.



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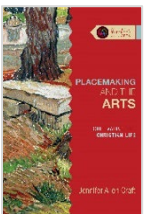
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God in the Modern Wing: Viewing Art with Eyes of Faith

edited by Cameron J. Anderson and G. Walter Hansen | October 12, 2021 | \$31.99, 216 pages, paperback | 978-0-8308-5069-3

Should Christians even bother with modern art? This STA volume gathers the reflections of artists, art historians, and theologians who collectively offer a more complicated narrative of the history of modern art and its place in the Christian life. Readers will find insights on the work and faith of artists like Marc Chagall, Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko, Andy Warhol, and more.



Placemaking and the Arts: Cultivating the Christian Life

by Jennifer Allen Craft | October 30, 2018 | \$33.99, 280 pages, paperback | 978-0-8308-5067-9

What role does place play in the Christian life? In this STA volume, Jennifer Allen Craft gives a practical theology of the arts, contending that the arts place us in time, space, and community in ways that encourage us to be fully and imaginatively present in a variety of contexts: the natural world, our homes, our worshipping communities, and society.



Mariner: A Theological Voyage with Samuel Taylor Coleridge

by Malcolm Guite | February 13, 2018 | \$42.99, 384 pages, paperback | 978-0-8308-5068-6

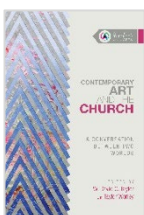
Poet and theologian Malcolm Guite leads readers on a journey with Samuel Taylor Coleridge, whose own life paralleled the experience in his famous poem "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner." On this theological voyage, Guite draws out the continuing relevance of this work and the ability of poetry to communicate the truths of humanity's fallenness, our need for grace, and the possibility of redemption.



A Subversive Gospel: Flannery O'Connor and the Reimagining of Beauty, Goodness, and Truth

by Michael Mears Bruner | October 24, 2017 | \$34.99, 260 pages, paperback | 978-0-8308-5066-2

The good news of Jesus Christ is a subversive gospel, and following Jesus is a subversive act. Exploring the theological aesthetic of American author Flannery O'Connor, Michael Bruner argues that her fiction reveals what discipleship to Jesus Christ entails by subverting the traditional understandings of beauty, truth, and goodness.



Contemporary Art and the Church: A Conversation Between Two Worlds

edited by W. David O. Taylor and Taylor Worley | June 20, 2017 | \$31.99, 246 pages, paperback | 978-0-8308-5065-5

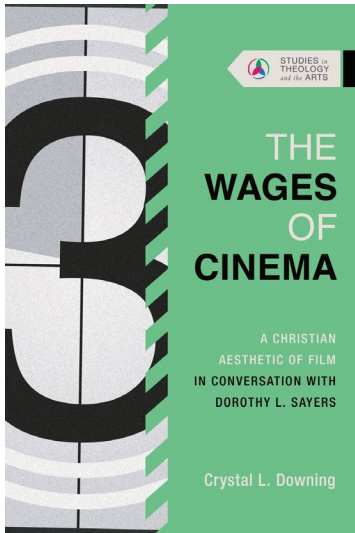
The church and the contemporary art world often find themselves in an uneasy relationship in which misunderstanding and mistrust abound. Drawn from the 2015 biennial CIVA conference, these reflections from theologians, pastors, and practicing artists imagine the possibility of a renewed and mutually fruitful relationship between contemporary art and the church.



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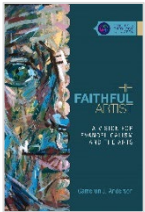


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The Faithful Artist: A Vision for Evangelicalism and the Arts

by Cameron J. Anderson | October 10, 2016 | \$29.99, 283 pages, paperback | 978-0-8308-5064-8

Drawing upon his experiences as both a Christian and an artist, Cameron J. Anderson traces the relationship between the evangelical church and modern art in postwar America. While acknowledging the tensions between faith and visual art, he casts a vision for how Christian artists can faithfully pursue their vocational calling in contemporary culture.



Modern Art and the Life of a Culture: The Religious Impulses

by Jonathan A. Anderson and William A. Dyrness | May 24, 2016 | \$42.99, 376 pages, paperback | 978-0-8308-5135-5

In 1970, Hans Rookmaaker published *Modern Art and the Death of a Culture*, a groundbreaking work that considered the role of the Christian artist in society. This volume responds to his work by bringing together a practicing artist and a theologian who argue that modernist art is underwritten by deeply religious concerns.



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