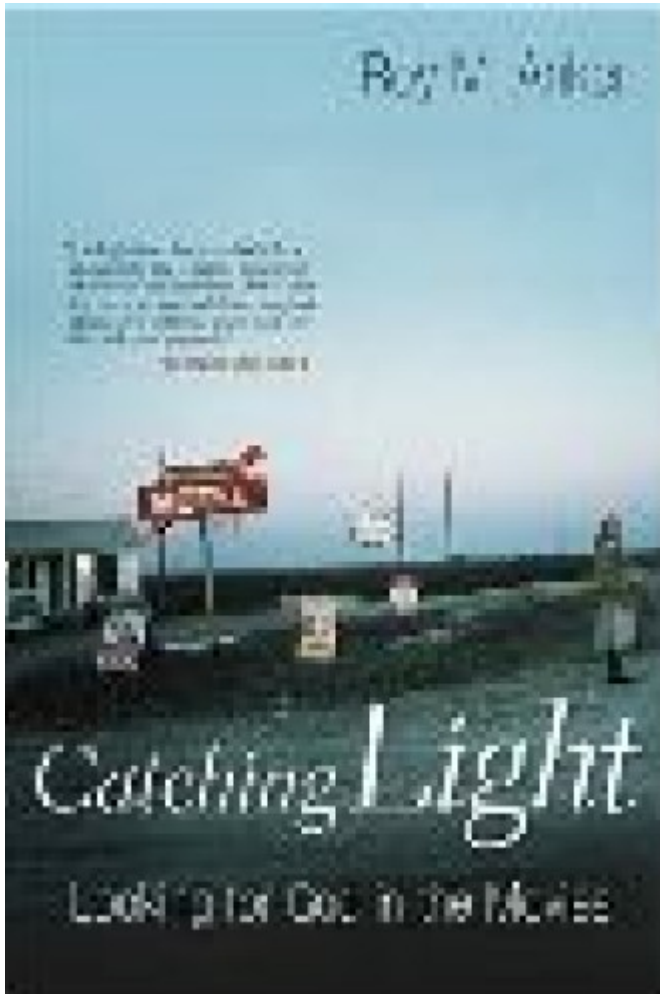# Catching Light

reviewed by [William D. Romanowski](#) in the [June 14, 2005](#) issue

In Review

Catching Light: Looking for God in the Movies

Roy M. Anker
Eerdmans

If the increasing number of book titles and Web sites devoted to the subject is any indication, discourse about religion and film has grown markedly in recent years.

Many conservative church folk remain suspicious of Hollywood, saving their applause for the occasional epic on the life of Jesus. But a growing number, it seems, are interested in understanding film in terms of their faith.

In a superb new book, Calvin College English professor Roy M. Anker shows that while filmmakers "have usually taken up residence in a pretty thoroughly secular universe, a whole host of films, past and present, have tried to illuminate the inescapable big questions about the possibility of Light." Perceptive and lucid, *Catching Light*: *Looking for God in the Movies* treats filmmakers as storytellers who shed light on the world they seek to portray—from the intergalactic space journey in *Star Wars* to the mundane existence of working-class folks in *Tender Mercies*. The title is a clever metaphor linking cinematic art with the universal human quest for the transcendent.

Catching Light is an impressive examination of 19 movies that Anker selected in large part for their cinematic excellence and categorical representation. Every method of critiquing movies tends to favor certain kinds of films over others. The approach employed here, which is a rich avenue for film analysis, works best on movies that are thematically and aesthetically dense. And yet this book is all the more remarkable because of the range of films it includes.

The films are organized into four categories (the first three of which are adapted from the work of Frederick Buechner). "Darkness Visible" discusses three tales of darkness—the *Godfather* saga, *Chinatown* and *The Deer Hunter*. "Light Shines in the Darkness" is about Christian grace in *Tender Mercies*, *Places in the Heart*, *The Mission* and *Babette's Feast*. "Fables of Light" treats as contemporary fairy tales the *Star Wars* series, *Superman* and three Steven Spielberg films about lost boys. In the final part, titled "Found," Anker considers *Grand Canyon*, *American Beauty* and Krzysztof Kieslowski's *Three Colors*: *Blue* as movies with characters in a secular setting who are found in their lostness.

The author takes each film on its own terms, embraces its power, and then uncovers its meaning using literary and theological frameworks. Each chapter weaves together narrative and analysis. Anker's vivid and sometimes lengthy rendering of the most salient scenes is best characterized as "thick description." He looks at these films carefully, shot by shot, scene by scene, piecing together story, character, dialogue, images, set design, costuming, music, lighting and editing—the stuff of filmic art. That is what I like best about this book; the author understands film as film

and takes into account not just theme and lines of dialogue but all the tools of the cinema as a storytelling medium.

In his treatment of the *Godfather* series, for example, Anker describes how the contrast in lighting for father and son Vito and Michael Corleone signifies differences in their personal temperament and moral vision. Director Francis Ford Coppola's stylization of violence, Anker explains, conveys the opposition of such violent acts to the goodness of life and to redemptive purposes. In a careful look at the closing shot in *The Godfather*: *Part II*, Anker reveals the ways in which the camera captures in a single moment the self-deception, guilt and isolation that now ironically haunt the central character, Michael Corleone.

Some readers might find it a stretch to think of *E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial* or *Superman* as dramatizations of the Jesus story. But Anker is not making a trivial identification of Christ-figures here. Instead, he casts these kinds of films as fables and understands their intertextual biblical allusions as indications that biblical themes and imagery are familiar to filmmakers and audiences alike as part of "the experiential wellspring that gave rise to the core of Western cultural values and dreams in the first place."

This search for God in the movies, then, is not a narrow one limited by doctrinal or sectarian concerns. Rather, Anker approaches these films as religious in a broad sense, contending that as a group they recognize "the actuality of a loving divine presence that aids people in peril, confusion, and general lostness." He is particularly adept at explicating those moments in movies when "grace befalls unlikely and unsuspecting people in surprising and unforeseeable ways that are quite beyond human prediction, conception or charting."

Roy Anker's passion is for uncovering the metaphysical in movies, the "display of divine Light" in human affairs. And he's a master at it. *Catching Light* is a splendid and creative book filled with rich insights. It is indispensable reading for anyone interested in film and religion.