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Religion at the Cineplex | Alissa Wilkinson

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The Veritas Forum

Alissa Wilkinson (Vox) is a film critic, professor, and cultural commentator, who works at the intersection of art, postmodernism, and theology. On our latest podcast episode, we sit down with Alissa to discuss film, secularism, and why religion keeps showing up in Hollywood.

Transcript

I think, you know, if we're, if we're Adventurous, I'm curious, and all of those things in our movie watching, then we become people who have a broader view of the world. And also, you know, we become people who, who are comfortable enough with seeking out those kinds of experiences, which hopefully in, you know, in our everyday lives then translates into empathy and curiosity about the people around us.

[Music] Alyssa Wilkinson is a staff writer and critic at Vox.com, and a professor at the Kings College in New York City, where she teaches courses on criticism and cultural theory.

Formerly the critic at large at Christianity Today, she works at the intersection of art, postmodernism, and theology. We recently had a chance to sit down with Alyssa to discuss film, secularism, and why religion keeps showing up in Hollywood.

[Music] It's a good place to start, I guess, would be to ask what drew you to film initially in writing about film and maybe pop culture or more at large? Sure, yeah, I didn't really intend to do this.

I studied information technology in my undergrad, and I was working in technology, but after I moved to New York right after college for a job, and I met a guy who was now my husband, and he had gone to film school, and he was working in the industry, so part of what that means is we just went to, you know, say a lot of movies, and I sort of came to understand that movies were more than just sort of dumb entertainment, that there was a lot of interesting things to say and think about when it came to film, and more broadly

to culture, really, and to popular culture, that there's so much that you can kind of learn about a culture at large by looking at what's popular in it. So that's a lot of where I started there, and I took a short class in continuing Ed at NYU, and it was on film criticism, so I sort of got to see that that was a thing, I think that really existed, it's not like I grew up reading film criticism or anything like that. And then I sort of just pitched an article to paste out of that a review, and they took it, and then, you know, if you just keep doing it long enough, it becomes the thing you do.

It's just your thing. Yeah, so I don't think, I mean, I haven't always intended to just write about film, and in fact I don't write just about film, but it is the major thing that I write about. It's the thing I enjoy writing about, and so that's been a big, you know, sort of part of my career by now, but it wasn't intentional.

I know a lot of my students say, "Oh, I've always wanted to be a film critic, how do you do it?" And I'm like, "I don't really know." Maybe the path is just to not want to be a film critic, and then you find yourself doing it. That's probably not the best way to go about it. No, I mean, a lot of people I know who are film critics didn't really intend to do it either.

It's just that they happen to be, you know, good at it. So, yeah, so I guess, you know, I think what's really appealing about film, maybe even in contrast to some other types of things that I've written about, is that it's very self-contained, or, you know, when we're not talking about Marvel, it's very self-contained, so in many ways. It's like writing about a book or something like that, where you can really evaluate it and think about what it's doing end to end instead of, you know, television, which is very time consuming to write about.

I find it very difficult even when it's fun or music, which is just a nightmare. I have no idea how to write about music. So those kinds, yeah, there's something very appealing about writing about film.

Yeah, I know that makes a lot of sense. Well, maybe let's talk about what film is doing. You talked about how you kind of came into it with maybe an initial impression that I think a lot of people have that film is just pure escapism.

It's something you do on a Saturday just to forget about your life. But it seems to be something, if we take a look at it more critically, it seems to be something more formative. How have you come to understand what film is doing to us as like a good film in particular? Yeah, I think it does a couple of things.

I mean, it kind of fulfills a couple of purposes in our culture. One is it's space for being contemplative together. So there's not a lot of those left in our culture, and especially when we're in the theater, you know, we're kind of forced to slow down or stop sort of doing things at our own pace and work at the pace of the filmmaker.

And good filmmakers are very good at making us do that. And sort of enthralling us with a story as well. But film is a visual medium first and foremost, not a narrative medium.

And so a great film is one that I think gives us some space to contemplate life or the things that we experience together. And film is also a medium where we experience it with others most often. I mean, I certainly watch a lot of movies by myself, but even then I'm in a theater with other people.

You know, only if we're watching a movie alone at home, are we really doing it alone? So there's something cool and community based about that that I don't think this common with some other mediums. It's certainly not common for, say, books. So that's really exciting.

And then Roger Ebert used to say that a film is a empathy generating machine. And I think there's something to that. I don't think that's the only thing it does, but good films usually bring us into someone else's experience, whether it's experience of the character or experience of the filmmaker or experiences of people who aren't like us.

And help us understand them and hopefully then generate empathy for them. So, and those are things that can happen in other mediums, but there's something about the immersiveness of a movie, the way it brings together so many of our senses that I think really can bring us into that space. Yeah, absolutely.

I have very distinct memories of leaving really profound films with that sense of wonder or even empathy like you're describing the ability to be kind of immersed in that world and to feel like you were able to kind of try that person's perspective on. I don't know. That's a kind of a crude way of putting it.

And that something that seems to stick with you, even if as you wake up the next day and go about your life. Yeah, and then when you encounter other people, sometimes you have a new reference frame for them that you didn't have maybe before you saw the film. Well, at Veritas, we're very interested in the big questions and the big questions of religion in particular.

And this is something that the film world has attempted to tackle in many different ways. You recently just published an article about "God's Not Dead 3", which is, there's three of who knows how many. I'm tired of, I was a philosophy major in college, and so I'm tired of hearing about people comparing my experience to that because it wasn't like that at all.

But this is a film that's at least in theory trying to be about that, like bringing the questions of faith to the cinematic world. But you've been very critical of it. Why is this a movie that's maybe not addressing those questions in a meaningful or, I guess, maybe helpful way? Yeah, I mean, they don't adjust questions at all is the thing.

There's three movies in this series. They're all kind of about how persecuted suburban white Christians are. I mean, that's essentially the theme of all three movies that they're persecuted for their beliefs.

And it's, you know, I mean, sure, but it doesn't have a sort of a big perspective on the world at all and on the things that truly constitute persecution. And that maybe someone disagreeing with you isn't persecution. So that's very frustrating to me.

And I, you know, they're movies that sort of have settled answers going in. There's no question. I mean, it's right there in the title that God is not dead.

Okay, well, great. Because that is the question, right? And the movie is never really attempt to answer that. Instead, God's not dead is a sort of a rallying cry or a mantra or a chance to say, you know, therefore Christians win.

And it's, you know, that's so antithetical in my mind to what you see in scripture, which is a living God, meaning something in people's lives that, you know, that calls them to sacrifice and to, you know, esteem others above themselves and things like that. And the sort of smugness, I think, of the whole franchise is very discouraging to me. And it's very transparently on Christian, even to people who aren't Christians.

I mean, you know, I don't know how many people who aren't Christians are actually watching these films, but I do know, you know, film critics have to. You know, they're kind of disgusted by the whole thing, knowing that even that the Christians that they know who they respect don't, you know, don't think or feel this way. But yeah, there's, there's sort of a complete blindness to what real persecution looks like.

So for instance, the first film in particular has very, very kind of offensive setup of a Muslim character. And there's not really any, any attempt in the movies to think about what do what are Muslims in America experiencing and, you know, what's a Christian's place in all of that or there's a brief moment in the third film where a black pastor sort of be rights very briefly the the main character of the movie who's a white suburban southern pastor for saying that, you know, oh, you might feel differently if your church was under attack and he says, you know, who do you think you're talking to? Right. Yeah.

People been throwing rocks through my windows, you know, my whole life, basically. And it for a second, you know, the pastor looks like he's taken back and then it just just goes on. There's no acknowledgement that like actually, you know, black Christians have been suffering, you know, from actual persecution for much longer than most white Christians can possibly imagine.

And so it's like there's there's sort of a blindness that they have to maintain in order to be successful. Yeah. And, yeah, and I think, I think at the end of the day, the pandering

to the audience, the sort of assumption that the audience doesn't care about that, you know, about those other issues is it might be what made them successful, but I think it's also what makes them really, really troubling to a lot of people.

I think it's, you know, art is all about questions and all about empathy and all about experience and not about sermons. And the movies like *God's Not Dead*, and often other movies in the sort of faith-based genre are sermon illustrations at best. The glaring example of this I often remember, I remember watching in high school the movie *To Save a Life*.

And the pitfall of that, it tends to solve every single problem a teenager has ever had in about an hour and a half with just kind of the answer of, you know, it's all going to be fine because God's, basically God's not dead in a sense. I think there was, it's the star like basketball players dating the head cheerleader, she gets pregnant, his parents get divorced, his best friend commit suicide in front of them in school. Like, it's like all happens in one fell swoop and, and at the, it's like, well, here are all the problems that we could possibly have.

And then here's a nice answer at the end. And it just, it just leaves you so disappointed that we've kind of hijacked art for that kind of purpose. Yeah, they're much more like skits than they are like actual stories.

Well, on the, on a more positive note, there are in recent years, there have been a lot of great movies actually attempting to wrestle with that ambiguity and doubt. And, and even the, the, the felt absence of God. I'm thinking of like Martin Scorsese's *Silence* last days in the desert among, among others.

What do you think about, what do those movies do well that maybe in comparison to like a *God's not dead* trilogy? Yeah, I mean, it's, it's probably not totally accidental that those movies are made by people who would probably not identify themselves as, as Christians. So, I mean, Scorsese, I, I don't, at least he wouldn't identify with the group that, that flocks to the *God's not dead* movie. Right.

And I, you know, I know also like I'm thinking about the movie *Calvary* that came out a few years ago, which is an, Oh, yeah, it was great. And it's, you know, that's a remarkably, I would call that a remarkably Christian movie. It's, it's modeled on the, the, you know, Christ passion.

It's funny. It's, it's dark. It's very dark.

And it's about a priest who has to decide whether he's going to sacrifice for his parishioners. Even for one who wants to kill him. And he kind of goes through a dark night of the soul.

It's, you know, it's a really remarkable film. So, I think those ones, because they're made

by people who don't feel this, this sort of constrict, constricting set of factors that, that a lot of faith based movie seem to have. I think they have the freedom to really kind of live into real lived experience that people actually grapple with.

And they wind up reaching a broader audience for it. I mean, silence, you know, I love it. I have, I'm, you know, I have friends who are atheists who still find it very kind of not just moving on a story level, but actually like extremely thought provoking.

Because, and it's a place that we can kind of meet together on that. So I think those kinds of films do what art is supposed to do, which is to give us space to think about ourselves and our existence and, and what we, you know, experience in the world as humans rather than trying to give us answers. And silence never tries to do an answer.

You know, Scorsese's answer to the questions is in there, but it's clearly not definitive. Calvary doesn't give us answers. Last days in the desert really doesn't give us answers.

So all of those things, I think they just make for better art. Yeah, no, absolutely. I'm reminded of Rocha's poem To Live the Questions.

Like it seems like these films like actually can inhabit those questions in a way that isn't just like, well, here are all these questions we'll never know. Oh, well, but like in the wrestling, there is actually something meaningful happening there in a way that like a more moralistic tale, like often the faith based films resort to just don't leave room for that. Yeah.

Well, maybe let's talk a little bit about more broadly how you come to film, you know, informed by your Christian faith. Is that how is that informing me maybe even implicitly when you come and sit down to look at a piece of art? Yeah, I think there's a couple ways. One is that there are films that are religious in nature, like the ones we were just talking about or like a Terence Malick film or, you know, movies like that, or I'm thinking of Darren Arnowski's movie Mother from last year.

The moment I saw the friend that I was there with like turned to me and was like, well, we made a movie for you. It's like, yep. And it was great because I have, you know, especially growing up evangelical, you know, we, well, I shouldn't, I think I'm less convinced of this than I used to be, but the kind of evangelical I was growing up, we knew the Bible, like we read the Bible, we knew how it worked, we knew the passages in the Bible.

I had a very good working knowledge of that kind of thing, and that can be helpful just in reading popular culture because popular culture is full of biblical references, you know, whether it is mother or alien covenant or a blade runner, you know, like they're just, that's, that is one of the ear texts that filmmakers love to draw on when they are making movies. So, so I come to it with, to every film with that kind of knowledge, and

sometimes I can pick up on things that some of my friends who are critics who, you know, grew up in non religious homes or other religions or, or whatever, they just don't have that same working knowledge. So, so that's useful.

It gives me a niche that I can write into that, that is somewhat unusual. That's not what most people wind up writing about. And then sometimes those films, you know, it's helpful for me to come at them with my understanding of the, of what the world is and how the world works.

Yeah. But I'm also of the opinion that basically if a movie is bad for Christians, it's bad for everybody and vice versa. And so I don't want to come into it and say, "pedantic things about a film." You know, I kind of want to take it on its own terms.

So I'm not there to most of the time to sit around and judge its moral content. I want to take it on, on the terms that the filmmaker gave us. But then I also have to think about, okay, well, what do I believe about the nature of humans and the nature of the world? And how does that inform, you know, how I look at this film? So a good example of this would be Ready Player One, which is a perfectly fun film.

And I enjoyed watching it, but you know, about three-quarters of the way through, I started to feel really uncomfortable. And at some point I realized it was because it was a film that basically devalues the real world, like the big thing that makes us human, which are like bodies and lived experience in the embodied world. And the film actually doesn't seem to recognize that it's doing that.

Like it actually thinks that the virtual world is the most important thing. And the real world is secondary at best. And I, you know, this was very uncomfortable to me.

And then I wrote about it from that perspective. And I had some people who sort of wanted to argue and say, well, why couldn't the virtual world, you know, be a fine substitute for the real world if the real world is broken? I just thought, well, you know, at base we just have different assumptions about what it is to be human. And I think mine comes very much from, you know, my belief that God made the world the way he did for a reason and that Christ was, you know, came to earth and was incarnated in a human body for a reason.

And I think that's something that definitely stems from how I see the world as a Christian. And it doesn't mean that there aren't people who, you know, who agree with me, who don't come from that perspective, but that definitely is where that sort of perspective comes from. So that's really how I think about it.

Yeah, no, that sounds like, I mean, it requires a wrestling because it's like not resorting to the like, I'm going to plug my formula of theology into this art. But also there is going to be some points where like that does, like you're saying, obviously, like, contradictory,

like, I don't think, I think this has value, this world has value in for these reasons. And it's something else, like someone else could affirm whether or not they're a Christian, but maybe for different reasons altogether.

You mentioned it a little bit, but I think it's a really interesting idea, the idea of going to like the movie theater as like a church-like experience. Almost like maybe a liturgical experience, like it's shaping us in a certain way. How do you see maybe current films like as like shaping us towards being a certain kind of person? Yeah.

You know, the way we get shaped is through the things we do, and especially the things we do habitually. So, so I think, you know, hopefully what they're, what a movie is doing, what movies are doing is helping us to be shaped into people who, well, first of all, can sit still for two hours, which is, you know, never a given thing anymore. But also who can engage with a story that isn't about us.

Maybe even is about someone else. Wild, but true. And that's crazy outside of us.

You know, and that we can engage with it in a way that we want to understand their experience. And so I think doing that over and over can be the kind of thing that shapes us into more empathetic people. I don't think it does that for everyone because, you know, there is, there is a kind of watching of movies that is purely for me, and then there's a kind that is not.

And so the movies we choose to watch habitually matters, just purely watching movies that, you know, there's obviously there's, there's nothing wrong at all with superhero movies or comedies or things like that. But if our whole diet is just that kind of thing, then I think that, you know, it may not really have much of an effect on shaping us into people of virtue in any particular way. Not, and again, not that there's anything wrong with those sorts of things.

But I think, you know, if we're, if we're adventurous and curious and all of those things in our movie watching, then we become people who have a broader view of the world and are capable of entertaining, entertaining the idea that the world is bigger than what we know about it. And is bigger than our like little conception of it. And also, you know, we become people who are comfortable enough with seeking out those kinds of experiences, which hopefully in, you know, in our everyday lives then translates into empathy and curiosity about the people around us.

[MUSIC] If someone who is maybe watching too many rom-coms is feeling guilty about that, where are some resources for them to start, like looking more critically at good film? Or, where could they like maybe broaden their diet, as you said? Yeah, I mean, I had to do this myself because I really didn't have any working knowledge whatsoever of movies. Really, when I started doing this, everything I had was translated over from books. So, you know, in a lot of ways, the best thing to do is just go find a list of great

movies.

You know, AFI keeps one, you know, most critics have the list out there. It's not hard to find. And then just start watching them.

You know, there, where you live in a world now where there's almost no excuse because you can get access to practically any movie you want, you know, through streaming or, you know, preparatory houses, those kinds of things. Like, for instance, most people with a library card have access to a thing called Canopy, which has a huge, huge, amazing library of streaming films. You know, classic films, stuff from the Criterion Collection, Foreign Films, Indies, you know, stuff that may not have come to like your local multiplex, which is, you know, sad, but a pretty common experience for most people who aren't in a major metropolitan area.

But, you know, you can just sit down and start, like, start with Citizen Kane and then just keep going. It should be the tagline, "Start with Citizen Kane" and just keep going. Yeah, honestly.

I mean, and then, you know, you will never see everything, but you can see a lot of things. So, going and seeing, you know, okay, what movie won best picture at the Oscars every year? Like, that won't give you a perfect view of what was going on in film every year, but it'll give you a little bit of a view, and most of those movies are pretty good. And so you can start through, you know, working your way through that list.

Or you can do what I kind of wound up doing, which was, you know, pick a critic or two. You know, Roger Ebert is a great one to start with, and read their backlog of reviews, which most of which are just available on the Internet. Ebert's entire, everything he ever wrote is on his website.

And watch the stuff that they liked, or even the stuff they didn't like, and then read their reviews, and then read a couple of other reviews, so that you start to understand how people, different people think about these films. And that sort of gives you the vocabulary to understand, like, maybe why, you know, audiences love this movie, critics hated it. Well, why is that? It's not because critics hate movies.

So, you know, what is it that they're seeing in it that maybe your average person might not have picked up on? And that's how you kind of learn to be more critically engaged with film. It's basically just by watching it and reading about it, and then the third piece is by talking about it with people. So, I definitely know people who have, you know, sort of set up groups where they watch a film periodically.

I had a period of time a couple years ago where I realized there were a bunch of movies I had never seen that I really needed to have seen. And instead of throwing up my hands, I decided to, I had about a year where we invited a couple friends over every other week

and watched one of those movies. And then we talked about it afterwards, and then I would write a piece about it.

So, in that way, I was able to catch up on stuff like Dr. Strange Love, which I had just never seen and, you know, was so, so press and hilarious. I had never seen ET. Like, I don't know why I'd never seen ET.

And I was like, I should probably watch ET. And then you watch it, you know, and as soon as you watch it, then every sci-fi movie you watch or stranger things or any of these things, you start to see how they're drawing on these films that are classics. And that's a really good way to expand your horizons.

And then I think the one other piece of this is that a lot of people are really scared by foreign films. Like, they think they're all these, like, super esoteric movies that they're not going to understand. But the, like, you know, people are just people.

So, yeah, I mean, there definitely is like a Polish style of film. And there definitely is a Chinese style of film. But you can, you know, and sometimes they're very much not made for American taste.

So, they might be slower or whatever. But, you know, you can hack it. You're grown up.

So... Exactly. And watch something that people recommend. And I think most people would be very surprised by how much they resonate with movies, you know, about people in other countries or from other ethnicities or religions.

But you start to see that, like, just people are people everywhere. And they, you know, at the Acco, we all have the same sorts of stories that we want to tell. Hmm.

That's beautiful. And we're not worried. Like, if you start watching foreign films, you're not going to become pretentious.

Like, well, we won't judge you. Like, just, if you just watch it, you don't even have to tell anyone you watched it. You could just, like, learn from it.

Mm-hmm. Yep. Yeah.

Just don't, I mean, if you start wearing a fedora in public, then, like, that's what you know you've gone to. Yes. Yeah, don't do that.

Yeah. But you can be into it. That's great.

Well, I think that's it. On my end, thank you so much for spending some time to talk. I know you're, like, teaching, writing movies, doing a ridiculous amount of things.

So, really appreciate you taking some time out of your schedule to talk to us. Absolutely.

I'm glad I could do it.

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