

Ron Austin. *In a New Light: Spirituality and the Media Arts*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007.

As befits Ron Austin's artistic vocation and temperament, *In a New Light* is more provocative than explanatory. In less than 100 pages, it contains much to ponder. Written first for filmmakers seeking to live out their faith in a challenging environment, the book "explores a spiritual foundation for creative work" (viii) and offers much that applies to many of us. Yet its incisive explorations are so laconic that they seem more an outline of a larger work that we wish (hope) Austin will write.

Ron Austin has worked for more than 40 years as a writer and producer in Hollywood, and his experience shows in both his technical expertise and the wisdom that comes from longevity. As he writes, "I'm not a theorist; I'm a survivor" (vii). His spiritual foundations include "three principles, common to all the faith traditions": being in the present moment, affirming the mystery of the other, and transforming conflict (1).

The author references Simone Weil, Martin Buber, Eastern Orthodoxy, Judaism, Islam, and Zen Buddhism, but this is no scholarly treatise. "The best of filmmaking is a kind of revelation made possible by an attentive 'seeing in the moment,'" he says, "but it also requires a willingness of the creative artist to risk and suffer along with the characters" (5). Then he stops.

Austin combines practical advice with underlying principles. For example, in discussing the writing of good, authentic dialogue, he points out that "truthful characterization is doomed by a lack of forgiveness" (8) and that at the heart of dialogue is "the mystery of ourselves as found in the Other" (9). The author explores more fully the third principle, transforming conflict. Yet even here he offers insights with little explication. He writes, "The turning point in the process of transforming conflict into drama is invariably the revelation and acceptance of our own contradictions" (11) and leaves the reader to work out the implications.

Austin also addresses the question of evil and how to portray it in one's creative work. Art "is not a shortcut to virtue or wisdom" (14). In telling stories that confront evil, we should do so "on our knees" (14). He goes on to consider the work of René Girard and Gil Bailie regarding

ritual sacrifice and violence. For the filmmaker or writer there are only two narrative options for resolving conflict. The more popular option, which goes back to ancient sacrifice rituals, is to assign a community's sin to a scapegoat (hundreds of movies illustrate this, from war films and westerns to police dramas and science fiction). The more difficult one is "for us to be made aware of our own complicity in the sinfulness and delusion of the protagonists" (17).

The book's longer middle section presents "a brief spiritual history of film." While admittedly not comprehensive (Austin limits his list of directors to Europeans, plus two Americans), his history includes Dreyer, Chaplin, Renoir, Fellini, Bresson, Bergman, Truffaut, Tarkovsky (*Andrei Rublev*) and Kieslowski (*Red, White, Blue*). Film buffs will appreciate this section, though perhaps arguing about names Austin omits. It also ignores the rich contemporary cinema from around the world. The author lists over 100 20th-century films he recommends. Moviegoers used to popular cinema may feel lost amid the foreign films or wonder how to access them. (From personal experience, Netflix is one way to see most of them.)

In a brief third section, "Spiritual Frontiers," Austin discusses our need for transcendence. The search for the transcendent, for a deeper level of meaning, "mandates [...] changes in the creative process" (73). One such change is making the filmmaking process more collaborative, what he calls "shared attention" (74). He illustrates this in an appendix describing "an experiment in unity" (85) that became a full-length feature, *Blue in Green* ([www.blue-in-green.com](http://www.blue-in-green.com)). This project began with a simple story idea, an all-night party. The actors were encouraged to originate their characters, and the dialogue was wholly improvised. It became "a unique merging of directors, writers, cinematographers, editors, actors – and a poet" (86).

Another appendix includes Austin's personal reflections on faith. He writes, "If we seek in our work to 'enter into the Other' with respect and wonder [...] we will find the Christ dwelling within us" (82). The author offers much wisdom not only for artists but for all of us trying to live out our faith in a world of contradictions. This book leaves us wanting to hear more from him.

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