The Effect of Contemporary Cinema on American Society

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Introduction

Growing up in a small southern town, my childhood days were spent making forts in the pasture behind our house, throwing stones in the barely trickling creek or attempting to catch the stingy crawfish hiding under the rocks. Not much of my time was spent inside unless the cold winter air forced my siblings and me to huddle around the television arguing about what video we could watch that we would all somewhat enjoy. Whenever my chance came around to choose, the decision was simple. There was only one movie we owned that ever received my full attention. Not only did it captivate my attention, but also it captured my soul in a way I did not understand as a young girl. There was nothing noticeably interesting about this hour-long Strawberry Shortcake cartoon. It merely told the story of one girl's adventure to find herself, which led her to a place where all her dreams came true. Yet every time I watched it, a deep sense of satisfaction and contentment would sweep over me. No matter what the day had previously held, sitting in front of that t.v. screen as a grade school kid, life would suddenly seem sweeter than before, more gratifying and fulfilled. Looking back now, I realize that I would become immersed in the girl's adventure on screen, and when the fairy granted her dreams to come true in the end, my heart would always leap. I can see that as a child my heart also had hopes and dreams that did not always come true, and I was intrigued and captivated to see them fulfilled in someone else's life. I was unconsciously putting myself into a story that was bigger than mine and becoming that young girl on screen, experiencing her own joys and excitement. The experience was captivating and drew me back time after time.

As I have grown older, I have seen how the pull that movie had on me as a young girl was only the beginning of a phenomena that I would be experiencing quite frequently as a member of our largely entertainment-driven society. Neal Gabler wrote a book entitled "Life: The Movie, How Entertainment Conquered Reality" on how our culture has become obsessed with movie stars, and singers, and people who make up our entertainment industry. In doing so, as a culture, we have grown accustomed living vicariously through others. Films only encourage such behavior, by giving us a story which we can wrap ourselves in. As a child I was doing this, and even now I see how easy it is to immerse myself in someone else's story or someone else's life so I can escape my own troubles and issues that I am faced with day to day. Not that entering into another story, in itself, is a bad thing. That is, after all, what entertainment is supposed to be about – being able to just relax and enjoy oneself. And film, just like a good novel, is a piece of art that is supposed to engage our minds and hearts. Yet there are a few problems that have arise in light of this art form and its effect it has on the viewer. One issue that arises is the impact film has on our society, largely because it has become one of the main cultural communicators of our time.

The Effects of Film

Over the past century the dominance of the film industry has become ingrained into our society. Usually there is not just one theater in any given town, but half a dozen or more. Each one showing a new hit movie, that is not contained within the theater walls, but is marketed through t-shirts, posters, Happy Meals, and children's toys. The idea is not just to *see* the movie, but rather *become* the movie. This could be seen recently

with the making of J.R.Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* into a summer blockbuster hit. Web-

site discussion boards sprang up all over the internet, stores were filled with trinkets

bearing some symbolism related to the movie, and people sat through second and third

viewings of the three hour long film. It is amazing to see how this new culture, driven by

entertainment and specifically the contemporary cinema, has developed. One thing can

not be denied in the midst of it. That while movies are becoming more apart of our

culture, they are at the same time inevitably conveying certain beliefs and values that

have been created as a result of this shift in focus. William Romanowski clarifies this by

posing the question in his book, *Eyes Wide Shut,* "Does the entertainment media reflect or

shape society?" He follows with explanation that "to argue that popular arts reflects

society is to oversimplify what is really a complex process. Popular artworks are a

reflection of society insofar as they address contemporary issues and treat them in ways

consistent with current perspectives, but the popular arts are never merely a reflection. In

the course of representing or portraying our lives and culture, the popular arts popularize

and glamorize the ideals, values, attitudes, and beliefs that exist within our culture. In this

way, the popular arts contribute to the power of culture to shape lives. The popular arts

reflect a culture they help to create," (32). Therefore, film, as a main component of the

popular arts, is portraying and reflecting certain values of the culture it was created in,

which can lead to certain dangers. As films engage viewers, these cultural norms are

infiltrating their minds. And while at times it may be obvious, usually this process of

formulating one's worldview by way of the assumptions about life being portrayed in the

movie is being absorbed unconsciously.

The problem is not becoming immersed in a story or film being a cultural communicator, but rather the immediate problem is the danger that arises when the viewers are ignorant or apathetic to the power these films possess in shaping one's own world view and the often distorted values that are being presented to the audience. Inevitably, we will be drawn into the story that is being presented on screen or else it would not be a very enjoyable few hours. But the responsibility of the audience is to be aware that while a movie may allow us the freedom to escape the reality of our own life temporarily, the life we are entering is often idealized and comes with its own set of skewed values and beliefs. These distortions could unconsciously assimilate in our minds and become apart of our way of thinking about reality and life if we do not make the distinction. This is what majority of the culture has fallen into, and that is why Romanowski makes the point to say that popular arts are not just a reflection of society, but rather they are a byproduct of a culture *they* helped create. Some of these distortions include the exaltation of individualism and the powerful, self-sufficient hero who needs no one. Also males and females are stereotyped and cast in specifically designed lights. The male is typically portrayed as being dominant and independent, never developing substantial relationships, while the woman is portrayed as innocent and virginal, and at the same time erotic and experienced. Not only are genders stereotyped, but institutions, such as the family and religion are also defined in stereotypical ways.

In realizing the dangers contemporary cinema could present, Christians might find themselves wondering what their role might be in this arena, if even any. If film is conveying such twisted values and morals, should not Christians run in the opposite direction? Some Christians will think that, which will be noted further on with a look at

the different views of culture and appropriate engagement by Christians. But it seems

clear that Christians not only *can* engage in this part of culture, but Christ calls them to

engage in it. For if films are a reflection of culture and therefore a cultural communicator,

then as stewards of God's creation we are required to be engaged in overseeing and

ruling over that arena of life as well. Our cultural mandate, as given by God in Genesis

1:28, is to rule over the earth. Therefore we can not cast off cinema as being irrelevant or

extraneous in our duties to serve Christ in all areas of life. If film is portraying the

pervasive worldview of our time, we must be able to understand and critique it.

Therefore, as Donald Drew states in his book *Images of Man*, the contemporary cinema

should be examined, "It is my conviction that a Christian, providing that his foundations

are firm, should see films and become involved in the arts and other forms of knowledge.

The Lordship of God in Christ must be seen to extend into all areas of life…a Christian

should enter the cinema with a solid grasp of who man is and what Truth is." Therefore

with the rapid development of the film industry over the past century, it is evident that

film has become a major cultural communicator reflecting values of our entertainment

driven society which presents certain dangers to the viewer, specifically Christian

audiences, which must be critiqued and challenged.

Understanding Culture

Before we can understand how film has become a cultural communicator of our

time, an agreement must first be reached as to what culture actually is. Through the years

there has been discussion about this definition, but overall the agreed upon understanding

of culture seems to be best stated by Graeme Turner, author of *Film as Social Practice*,

"Culture is a dynamic process which produces the behaviors, the practices, the institutions, and the meanings which constitute our social existence. Culture comprises the processes of making sense of our way of life," (52). Therefore culture is not a static development that is decided upon once and for all, but rather it is always changing and growing depending on how the people of that time interact, or perceive meaning. This concept can be abstract, but Romanowski explains further that, "when people belong to a culture they share common ways of understanding and interpreting their experience and guiding their behavior. Culture involves both creating meaning for things and living according to those meanings. It shapes experience and expectations and gives a means of coping with the new and unexpected. A cultural system gives people assurance about themselves and certainty about existence. It brings order, clarity, and direction out of the complexities and value – how we understand God's world," (43). Therefore it can be seen in our society that there are understood beliefs, values, and assumptions about life. If American society were observed, compared to an African tribal society, these norms about life would be more than obvious. Whether it is how members of each society interact among one another, or how each society views money, power, and success, there are commonly agreed upon assumptions about these things. Even in looking at the less obvious norms within our society, such as saying thank you when you purchase an item from a store or staring straight ahead on an elevator, there are agreed upon ways to interact with fellow members of culture. Having these agreed upon understandings gives each member of society a sense of belonging and assurance about who they are in the bigger picture of a society as a whole, as Romanowski describes. The way society comes to a consensus on these norms is by interacting and communicating with one another. If

there was no communication, then there would be no way to perceive what the next person believes or values about life. Therefore the social process of communication is pivotal for society. Within our own society, communication can be observed in many different ways.

Communication through a Common Language

In order to communicate and interact so that an agreed upon outlook of life can be formulated, the need for a common language arises. As Turner states, "Language includes all those systems from which we can select and combine elements in order to communicate…we become members of our culture through language, we acquire our sense of personal identity through language, and we internalize the value systems which structure our lives through language. We cannot step outside language in order to produce a set of our own meanings which are totally independent of the cultural system," (53). In looking at our own society we can see how this is true. In how we dress, where we work, what car we drive, we are communicating to those around us what we value and creating in a sense a common language. If a man is walking down the street with a *Wall Street Journal* under his arm, wearing an Armani suit, headed towards his BMW 740I, though he may not even be aware, he is nonverbally saying something about himself. An unspoken language is woven into our society in numerous ways. And we use it to communicate with one another. This communication then creates agreed upon beliefs and values. For centuries, one of the most influential ways culture was communicated was through the arts. As stated in Romanowski's *Pop Culture Wars*, "The arts have been recognized as giving form and meaning to life, offering a deeper understanding of our

own lives and the lives of others. They have been studied as expressions of the "spirit" of the age or people. They also provide a diversion from cares and concerns of life, and can satisfy desires unfulfilled in our everyday lives," (21). Can this definition of art also be applied to the art of film? This is the question that often arises when looking at the film industry: whether film is actually art, and therefore a cultural communicator, or purely an aesthetic escape.

Traditional Arts Meets Popular Arts

The roles and functions of art historically have included, among other things, transmitting culture and providing social cohesion. Therefore the above definition of art causes us to critically examine how film fits into the category of being a modern art form. A theory developed by Lawerence Levine, in his book, *Highbrow/Lowbrow*, consists of the idea of there being a "cultural hierarchy". This hierarchy separates "high" and "low" culture. Traditional arts -such as drama, literature, poetry, music, paintings- would typically fit into the definition of "high" culture. Contemporary arts – such as movies, popular music, television- would be termed "low" culture. But in defining these two types of culture, there seems to be a disparity between the ways art from the past is defined, and the way art of today is defined. These socially constructed ideas are not objective absolutes, but rather destined to change. For instance, certain acclaimed painters of the past were considered obscene and blasphemous during their time period. The same attitude was shown with certain musical composers who were ignored and discredited as too avant-garde and "showy". But years later these men were regarded as geniuses of their time. It seems to be then, that the definition of "art" must be defined in

regards to the study of contemporary culture. For if arts truly are an "expression of the

spirit of the age or people" as Romanowski stated, then the definition of art must extend

beyond the idea of traditional, "high culture" art. This "expression of the spirit of the age

or people" seems to be clearly portrayed in the contemporary film industry. Film cannot

be excused away as merely entertainment or aesthetic escapism, for just as the theater or

the symphony is entertainment, so also is art. It would seem to follow therefore that art

can be legitimately studied as one of the main cultural communicators of our time.

Film as Cultural Communicator

One way in which the "expression of the spirit of the age" is communicated in the

twenty-first century is through the mass media. James Davison Hunter, a modern

Christian sociologist, wrote about the impact of this new communication style of our

times in his book *Culture Wars*:

> One does not need to endure a thousand bleary-eyed evenings with Dan Rather or
>
> Tom Brokaw to understand how important a role the media of mass
>
> communications plays in our lives. Television, magazines, newspapers…music,
>
> film, popular literature, do much more than passively reflect the social and
>
> political reality of our times…These institutions actively define reality, shape the
>
> times, give meaning to the history we witness and experience as ordinary citizen.
>
> This outcome is avoidable in many ways…These institutions effectively define
>
> which topics are important and which issues are relevant – worthy of public
>
> consideration…The mass media acts as a filter through which our perceptions of
>
> the world around us take shape. Thus, by virtue of the decisions made day to day

and year to year – those who work with in these institutions cumulatively wield

enormous power, (225).

As Hunter noted, the power mass media has, as a shaper of culture, is incredible.

In our entertainment driven society we are bombarded daily with thousands of messages

communicating to us certain values and views on life. Being shaped by our culture is

unavoidable, as Hunter put it. Specifically with films, which have become one of the

most popular avenues for entertainment, we have become accustomed to the lens through

which they view life. Whether we agree with the way life is portrayed or not, it is

undeniable that the language being spoken through films is the language of our times.

Turner notes in his book that film studies were originally approached as a specific

discipline in schools. Currently, with the direct influence it is seen as having on culture, it

"is revealed as not so much a separate discipline as a set of distinct social practices, a set

of languages, and an industry," (49). He goes on to explain how this language of film has

been shaped *by* culture and therefore gives back to society by *shaping* culture as well.

Because we are so immersed in our culture, it is hard to take a step back and realize the

impact mass communication through the media, specifically films, can have on us. This

power, as Hunter stated, is enormous and demands our attention. We must become

specifically aware of the seduction film has on us in both escaping reality and entering

into an idealized reality that can shape our views on life.

The Power of Film

As that young six-year-old girl, I was experiencing something about movies that I

had yet to understand. I was not fully aware of all the intricacies of why I was so

intrigued by that Strawberry Shortcake video, I just knew I loved watching it. I loved

being apart of her adventure. I loved watching her wishes come true. But that was just it,

I loved being apart of *her* story, *her* adventures, and *her* wishes being fulfilled. Why was

that? Why did I care what a cartoon character did? Just like the bedtime stories read to

me as I fell asleep or the sing-along tapes we listened to in the car – I was like any other

child, entranced with these other lives and journeys that seemed so different from mine.

This is not to say that all these things were not perfectly normal and healthy for the

growing, imaginative mind of a young child, but in another sense it seemed to provide a

foretaste of a movement much bigger and more profound that is going on in our society

today. With our entertainment-driven culture, it is easier than ever to wrap ourselves in

the lives of those being portrayed on screen in films and to escape into an idealistic world

that influences us in more ways than we realize.

Escaping into an Idealized World

First, it is important to differentiate between two seemingly closely related, but

distinctly different reactions that accompany entertainment, specifically films. The first

reaction is inevitable and often desired with entertainment: relaxation. The ability to let

oneself become immersed in the story unfolding on screen is not only desired, but

necessary if the viewer wants to fully engage in the distinct experience the director is

trying to achieve. Just like in reading a piece of literature or going to the opera, all other

distractions must be left at the door in order to become completely absorbed in the story

and experience at hand. The same must be done when viewing a film. The danger is not

in immersing oneself in the story, but rather in entering into the story blind and unaware

of the possibly distorted paradigm being expressed through the lives of the characters on screen.

Ted Baehr warns in his book *Hollywood's Reel of Fortune* that "the mass media, especially film and television, are not only the most powerful tools of communication ever devised, but they are the most pervasive in modern society as well. They plant powerful emotional images in our minds, direct our purchases and influence our lifestyles while redirecting our hopes and dreams," (39). He illustrates his point by referring back to 1942, when the Disney movie *Bambi* was released. He notes that the year before the film was released, deer hunting in the States was estimated to be a $9.5 million business. But after the tragic scene in *Bambi* where his mother was shot by hunters, the deer hunting business in the States dropped to $4.1 million. This could seem like a trite example, but it illustrates the power film has on the American public. This power has the ability to shape and define our beliefs and values by the ones being portrayed on screen if we are not aware of those dangers. The power is again seen to come from the viewer's willingness, not only to immerse oneself in the story, but also in the viewer's attempt to escape the demands of life and enter into an idealized life. One that is, more often than not, nothing like the lives the viewers are presently living in.

The problem is not that audiences are addicted to the escapism of movies. This is merely a part of entertainment. But rather, the pressing danger is that by blindly entering into the movie culture, viewers are not only being entertained, but unknowingly escaping into a life that may be portraying distorted lifestyles and values. These idealized lives included romanticized views of love and passion, rationality of violence, and distorted views of oneself and of others. These distorted images will be looked at in more depth

later on, but before discussing those distortions, it is important to first understand that these distortions are not harmless to the viewer. Some may argue that films portray skewed views on life without impacting the audience personally; but such a position demonstrates the very danger that is lurking in our society. When people are unaware of how influenced they are by society's entertainment culture, they are more susceptible to unknowingly succumbing to those idealized beliefs. They are more easily influenced by the portrayed view of "how things should be".

In Garth Jowett's *Film as a Democratic Art* he explains how the movie influence has deeply penetrated the American "collective unconscious". Jowett studied the works of a 1930's sociologist, Paul G. Cressey, who argued that while movies were originally "organized commercially to 'sell' entertainment" they have become a mode through which people learn about themselves and others as members of society and how they are to interact. Cressey stated in research done on "Motion Pictures as Informal Education" that "movies were a prime source of information on realms of life of which the individual did not have any other knowledge; they demonstrated 'countless techniques' for gaining special favors and for interesting the opposite sex; and also provided 'the schemes of life, the aesthetic standards, and the personal ideals and values' which can become a significant part of the life patterns of the movie viewer…the motion-picture industry dispenses a great deal of informal education - general information, patterns and not a little in the way of standards and personal ideals,"(269). While movies are not always presenting knowledge about issues *unknown* to the viewer, they are portraying issues that are not always appropriately defined or even clearly defined in our society, such as gender roles, relationships or success. This thus provides the viewer with the chance to

either be influenced by the values being portrayed or take a stand against them. That is definitely one of the beneficial factors in film watching, to make the viewer think about issues they might not have before and take a stand either for or against them. But in order to do this, the viewer must enter the film culture as not only a fan to be entertained, but a critic of the distorted views that are possibly being portrayed.

The Distortion of Self

When approaching cinema with a critic's eye, the viewer is taking control of their own experience in not allowing themselves to be subtly shaped by certain skewed ideals. They are allowing themselves to enjoy the film, but at the same time be aware of the paradigm through which the director might be presenting his story and the values he inevitably weaves into it through his biases. Since films are a reflection and construction of society, then there are certain 'norms', in regards to beliefs and values, that are being represented in the mainstream film culture. In particular, there are three specific patterns of thought that seem to be portrayed in majority of the mainstream films being produced recently. The first, being gender stereotypes and the roles men and women play, secondly, the idealization of romance and violence, and thirdly, the focus on individualism.

Gender stereotypes

Until recently, there have been very few movies that attempt to go against the ideal conception of men and women that Hollywood has contrived. Most movies polarize men and women, defining them by the stereotypical standards of the film industry. But

these "cookie-cutter" identities seem at the same time to be tainted by ambiguity. For instance, in mainstream movies women are typically seen as the domesticated motherly figures whose emotional stability characteristically depends on a man. Take for instance most romance films, the women remains a wreck throughout the entirety of the film until her true love returns to her and they ride off into the sunset. She cannot function without the comfort and security of a man. Yet on the flip side, there is a darker side to women portrayed in films. And here is where the contradiction lies. While on one hand, women are to be innocent, dependent, and virginal, they are also supposed to be at the same time, dangerous, erotic, and unconstrained. How is this ideal possible? This double standard assumes women to be innocent yet wild, pure yet experienced. This leaves women with an unachievable norm.

While the roles men play out do not hold two extremes, like the role of women, their portrayed image is one that encourages the distorted view of women, and distorts their own identity as a man. The typical action film pulled off the shelf at Blockbuster clearly demonstrates this misrepresentation. Take for instance, *Indiana Jones*. The movie consists of one man's adventure where he is faced with many obstacles that he alone can overcome. On one occasion he encounters a woman who ends up joining him in the adventure. She is weak, frightened and helpless without Indiana to save her. Indiana therefore is shown as being the strong, independent man on a mission. He is portrayed as being emotionally desensitized and only becoming involved with this woman on a superficial level. Indiana Jones is the prototypical Hollywood male. He is the unattached, rugged individual who needs no one and nothing in life, except for an adventure. Since the woman, in Hollywood, is emotionally dependent on men, the portrayal of their

relationship consists of the needy woman attempting to "save" the man from his wild ways. Romanowski briefly touches on this subject in *Eyes Wide Shut*:

> The ideal male in Hollywood films is a virile, strong, unrestrained, and unattached man of action and adventure. His shadow, or opposite, is the 'settled husband/father, dependable but dull.' These are images that associate masculinity with muscles, emotional restraint, dominance, aggression, and the capacity for violence. The ideal woman is to some extent the opposite; a 'wife and mother, mainstay of hearth and home' who stands in contrast to her shadow, the woman who is 'erotic…fascinating but dangerous.' The man is active, the woman passive and submissive, and her identity is largely dependent upon a man. In many portrayals, women exist largely to take part in the man's fantasies and adventures. (126).

He goes on to illustrate his point with certain movies such as *Pretty Woman*, *Rocky,* and the more recent *American Beauty*. In film studies, this idea of women being portrayed on screen and in scripts as purely for the pleasure of men, is known as "scopophilia" and can be seen demonstrated as far back in film history as in the works of Alfred Hitchcock, such as *Rear Window* or *North by Northwest.* These roles Hollywood has created to define both men and women distorts and belittles our identity as image bearers of Christ. Genesis 1: 27 declares that "God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them." Women are not passive objects to be used and lusted after, and men are not independent determiners of their own pleasures and future. But if there is a danger for Christians to be misled by these ideals, how much more so will the general public succumb to these twisted roles of men and women? These

roles are seen to be played out even more so in films through the idealized views of romance and violence as well.

Romance for Pleasure and Violence for Fun

With the common understanding of men typically playing the dominating role and women playing the passive role, we can look at romance and violence in films and see how they serve as a way to exaggerate these "conventional" roles of men and women. To begin with, it is interesting to see how romance in modern cinema has shifted through different stages over the years. Before the 1960's, romance consisted of boy meeting girl, falling in love, separating, then being reunited against all odds in the end. During the 1960's romance was typified by "free love" where boy meets many girls and sleeps with them all, until the right one comes along. After the AIDS scare, romance remained enclosed within sexual relationships, but more than just that, sex became the definition of true love and romance, a symbol of passionate, real love that can conquer anything. This understanding of love and sex is where our film culture stands today. That romance is for one's own pleasure and should be gained in whatever way possible, even if that means breaking commitments and hurting others. With this understanding of love, not only is romance whittled down to being based on sex and personal gain, but the perception of relationships between men and women is damaged.

In Alan MacDonald's book entitled *Movies in Close-Up* he discusses this idea of the modern distortions of love and romance using the example of the 1984 movie *Falling in Love*. The storyline is one that is all too common today. Two married people meet by chance, fall in love, have a passionate sexual encounter, then usually part their separate

ways. The catch is that from the beginning, the director manipulates the audience's

emotions to inevitably cheer for these two "soul-mates" to leave their spouses and find

comfort in each others arms. In *Falling in Love* the director makes the other spouses look

undesirable and distant, which affirms the two lover's affair and makes it all the more

accepted. MacDonald states that "as with other films of the forbidden-affair variety they

present such a shallow romantic view of infidelity; not only does the film gloss over the

effects of the affair on the injured parties – the married partners and the children – it also

manipulates our sympathies toward the lovers in subtle ways," (51). MacDonald goes on

to argue that Hollywood is, in a sense, redesigning a reality to "fit around the needs of an

affair and suggesting that this is the 'happy-ever-after' solution," (52). Romance and real

love are seen to be found not in a commitment or devotion to one other person, as in a

marriage relationship, but rather in whoever presently fulfills one's needs and desires. In

the 1972 movie *Sleuth*, Michael Caine plays a seducing lover attempting to steal the wife

of Laurence Olivier. He coyly states that "sex, sex is the game; marriage is the penalty".

As disgusting as his words appear, this is the general understanding of what modern day

romance is, it is a chance to get one's sexual needs fulfilled.

MacDonald uses another example of the movie *Fatal Attraction* where one man

with the perfect home life has an affair with a disturbed single woman. He enjoys the sex,

but does not want a relationship with the woman, which ends up driving her mad. Once

again, it is demonstrated through this movie that illicit sex outside of marriage is where

true adventure and passion is experienced. In addition the roles of men and women are

again exaggerated where the man cannot be domesticated and will find adventure outside

of his marriage if he perceives that he is tied down. The woman is treated as an object

that gratifies his desires and fulfills his need for change. When she is abandoned and left alone she will inevitably go crazy because she "needs" a man and his love. On the flip side, other movies portray romantic love as being able to defeat all odds and conquer anything in life. In movies such as *Titanic* or *Last of the Mohicans* the love of the main characters allowed them to face even death for the sake of the other person. While this type of love has the potential to be redemptive and demonstrate Christ's love, to the uneducated viewer this makes romantic love, in itself, a savior and means to achieve ultimate fulfillment in life. Without the proper framework to view this love through, the uneducated viewer sees romantic love as life-giving instead of seeing Christ as the only one who demonstrates perfect love and the only one who fulfills man's soul completely.

These two extremes being portrayed in movies also damages the relationship between men and women, because they give a picture of romantic love as being either a selfish pleasurable experience with no emotional ties or the only way to be completely fulfilled in life. Romantic love as portrayed in films is seen as either simply self-centered sexual fulfillment or the force that can conquer all. The idea of sacrificial love and commitment to another is rarely seen. Love is primarily based on emotions and feelings for the person in the present. The fallacy of that type of love is devastating. As Christians we realize feelings change, but because of the love Christ showed for us on the cross, we have an energy that propels us to love, even when the act of loving proves impossible. Christian love is based on commitment and the realization that "We love because he first loved us" (1 John 4:19) not "We love because that person deserves it." The movie industry says to love because the person deserves it or because they have something one needs – be it attention, self-worth, or physical intimacy. When they no longer deserve

your affection or fail to meet your needs, then love will lead you to someone else who can. While there are some exceptions to this portrayal of love and romance, it is obvious in the mainstream movies having been produced in the last decade that notions of romance and love have been tainted by the distortion of what true love and commitment is.

It is interesting to note how romance is twisted into mere pleasure seeking or "savior-fulfilling", and how violence in films takes on the same type of distortions. There is a difference between movies that *depict violence* and movies that *are* violent in and of themselves. Movies that *are* violent usually portray violence as pleasure seeking and the sport of killing. Movies in this category would include the James Bond or *Die Hard* variety where men hunt each other for sport or for the thrill. But while pleasure seeking is one aspect of violence in films, typically violence is used as a "savior", to either bring justice, revenge or to resolve problems. This is where the problems begin to arise. For, as Romanowski stated in his Staley lecture series, "violence is being seen more and more in films as a means of justice and a way of salvation for the community of good people threatened by a bad outside force". Violence has become necessary and the only sufficient solution and resolution to problems. In one recent film *The Count of Monte Cristo* the main character had his life unjustly ripped away from him by his best friend. When he finally escapes from jail and heads back to regain his life, he is consumed with seeking revenge. Even after he has reclaimed a life more wonderful than the one stolen from him, he is still unsatisfied until he can reek havoc on his best friend's own life and gain the justice he deserves. He puts those he loves and the things most precious to him at risk, just so that he can inflict pain and torment on his friend. These violent resolutions

have become normal and assumed in our storylines. In viewing films we expect revenge, not reckoning. We desire to see victims of injustice rise up and crush their enemies. These are natural desires as humans that we have, but they are being shaped and influenced by Hollywood's depiction of resolving conflict and problems. We should instead be critical of violence and how it is portrayed since all humans have an inherent worth because they are created in the image of God. Modern films do not uphold that standard, but rather seek restoration through the destruction of those who have gotten in the way of living a peaceful life. In this film it just took the strength of one man to accomplish not only escape from impossible circumstances, but regaining a lost life, a stolen love, and taking revenge on an unjust enemy. All this was done through his own strength and willpower, a powerful depiction of American ideals and consensus views of succeeding in life.

The Lone Hero

The idea of American individualism has been present since the country was first founded. An overall understanding that whatever you put your mind to you can achieve has shaped the American Dream. Therefore the key to success in believing in *yourself* and pulling yourself up by your bootstraps, not waiting for someone else to help you along. Romanowski describes this distorted view of living as the "Wizard of Oz Syndrome" (114). This humanistic approach to life is demonstrated by "Dorothy and her friends having *within themselves* everything they need to secure their fate; their journey on the Yellow Brick Road brings them to that realization. Ultimately, they have no real need of the Wizard, a God figure whose pyrotechnical visage is unmasked, revealing only

a bumbling old man,". He goes on to say how damaging this is because "instead of portraying the frailty of human experience and the need for a source of redemption outside of ourselves, the classical Hollywood mythology invests humans with everything they need to secure their own destiny and salvation," (114). Take any movie produced in the last few years and it is more typical than not that the achievement reached in that story was done by the strength and endurance of one man. Examples of this would include the lone ministry of the *Apostle,* and the inner passion and strength that defeats armies as in *Braveheart* or *Gladiator.* The journey to victory and justice is usually a solitary one. Rarely are heroes seen asking for the help of another, or strength of fellow sojourners. While friends may come alongside the hero, or wisdom may be given by an older authoritative source, the victory is always achieved due to the drive and strength of one man. Think of such movies as *The Pelican Brief*, *A Few Good Men*, or *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*. Each of these characters went against very influential and esteemed groups and ended up winning their case. All it took was perseverance and one's own intellect to defeat the "bad guys". Through these films Hollywood glorifies the rugged individual and feeds our society's insatiable desire to achieve the American dream. The danger with this type of thinking is that we were not created to live this way, but rather as members of a community. We were created to be in relationship with others and draw strength in our weakness not only from others, but most importantly from Christ.

In becoming aware of the distorted views that are being portrayed, we can enter the film arena with an educated mind and a critic's eye in order to glean a better understanding of who we are as humans as a part of our modern society. And as

Christians who desire to see Christ transform culture we can have a better understanding as to how we can engage this part of our culture.

Christ as the Transformer of Culture

As Christians, it can quickly become overwhelming when looking at the power film has on society and the distorted values that it often presents. As already noted, there are many dangers that are presented by the film industry that have the influence to shape and define one's view on life. Therefore even Christians are split on the approach we, as a body of believers, should take regarding the contemporary cinema. Richard Niebuhr discusses in his book *Christ and Culture* five different views that Christians often take when approaching our modern society and how we are to engage that culture.

To briefly summarize, Niebhur discusses the "enduring problem" of Christians trying to discover what their true position in society should be. On one end of the spectrum are those who believe Christ and culture are in opposition with each other. This would be illustrated by the lives of monks or nuns, who separate themselves completely from society and live their physical, emotional and spiritual lives before God alone. The second approach entails a belief that Christ and culture are essentially in agreement with one another. As Niebhur states this belief assumes that Christ "is a part of culture in the sense that he himself is part of the social heritage that must be transmitted and conserved," (41). He notes that Christianity and Western civilization are thus seen to be in close relation with one another. Christ, therefore is *of* culture, coming from culture.

The third approach is similar to this belief, but it differs in one particular aspect. While it does claim Christ is the "fulfillment of cultural aspirations and the restorer of the institutions of true society" (42), they separate from the idea in that there is not something in Christ that arises from culture itself. Instead Christ is *above* culture and there are certain things only he can present to culture. There are certain enlightened ideas that no human could achieve or attain without Christ supernaturally rearranging culture, and creating new values. The fourth type might be seen in close relation to the first, Christ being against culture, because in the same way they do see Christ as the authority over culture. But they are different in that they also recognize the importance and authority of society. Therefore they feel they are citizens of two worlds that are in opposition to one another. So they cannot label themselves as ultimately living completely under one or the other. Rather they live precariously between the two worlds, holding no true solid beliefs about either.

Lastly, Niehbur discusses a view that I have chosen to defend in opinion of how Christians are called to be apart of this entertainment-driven society. This approach sees Christ, not as separating himself from society, as some Christians long to due in light of the presenting dangers, nor as perilously indulging in society, as does the world and some Christians who disregard the importance of discernment, but rather as a *transformer* of culture. This approach believes, just as the first and fourth groups do, "that human nature is fallen or perverted, and that this perversion not only appears in culture but is transmitted by it," (45). So there is the initial recognition that we are in opposition to this culture we live in, *but* that does not give us the freedom to remove ourselves or simply endure it until Christ returns. Rather we are called to be transformers and "caretakers"

(Genesis 1:28) of the earth, while we are here. As Genesis confirms, everything Christ made was for a purpose and with the Fall there came distortions of the original creational norms. As a result, Christians are called to seek restoration and have faith that Christ has the power to transform our culture. In a booklet presented by the Committee on the Church and Film Arts in 1966, the consensus they came to after studying the cultural mandate of Genesis 1:26 & 28 as it relates to contemporary cinema was that "man's task is a spiritual and cultural imperative…in these words we read the mandate to explore and invent, to do research and to actualize every potential hidden in the riches of God's universe, including the potential of the human race…the main purpose of culture is the bringing to light of all that lay dormant in the human race, and to do this to the honor and praise of God," (19). They further discuss how this "actualizing every potential" includes the film industry and that they as a committee "make clear that it accepts the film arts as a legitimate cultural medium to be used by the Christian in the same way that every cultural medium is to be used," (27). As presented earlier, if we *are* called by God to be caretakers of the earth, as declared in Genesis 1:28, then that means we are called to engage in our culture. Psalms 115:6 say, "The highest heavens belong to the Lord, but the earth he has given to man," implying that we are given stewardship over the entire creation, with the help of the Holy Spirit leading us.

Is the Risk of Engagement too Large?

One might argue that engaging the film industry presents too many dangers and is not applicable to being good stewards of God's creation, like those who side with the Christ against Culture paradigm. They might argue that there is no need to fill one's mind

with the "junk" presented on the screen. It seems easier to completely remove oneself from those dangers or not have to deal with the pain of living in a fallen world by hiding in a Christian bubble and being surrounded by purely Christian forms of art – music, television, film, art. This approach to life *would* be simpler and more secure and comfortable, but is that what the Christian's life is supposed to be about? Aren't we commissioned by God to "go and make disciples of all nations,"? (Matthew 28:19). If we choose to remove ourselves from society and refuse to be educated concerning the present views and beliefs our society is clinging to, how are we ever going to present Christ to an unbelieving world? If we have no conception of how society views life and what they most value, how are we to combat those faulty paradigms and present Christ and the joy of the gospel in a way that is applicable to the general consensus beliefs of our culture?

The Word of God as our Guide to Cultural Engagement

While film is not the only way we can grow in our understanding of society, it *is* a part of our culture and as previously noted, it does reflect a culture that it helped to create. It follows then that contemporary cinema is an important part of society that Christians should be aware of with some level of meaningful engagement. While there are certain dangers that arise due to the faulty values that are often presented, we have a guide that enables us to engage in a fallen culture without debilitating our faith. That guide is the Word of God. If we only see the dangers, then yes, it seems smarter to run away. But if we see the dangers through the filter of what the Bible teaches us about the *truths* of life and men as created in the image of God, then we can study these distortions

through that lens and not through the eyes of fear or unsteadiness. The Bible is a light that guides our footsteps through life, as Psalms 119:105 states, "Your word is a lamp unto my feet, and a light upon my path." It is "living and active; sharper than any double–edged sword, it penetrates even to the dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrows; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart," (Hebrews 4:12). The Bible is our guide to "teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness," (2 Timothy 3:16). God does not leave us alone to determine what the reality of life is, but he gives us his word to lead us and direct us. While some Christians may disagree as to whether we are called to be engaged even in the cultural arena of film, it is my opinion that, as a part of culture, this art form too, should be addressed and reflected upon as believers. And because we have been given a guide for life - the Bible and the Holy Spirit to lead us - we do not have to fear when approaching the tainted views in cinema, but we can become educated critics that study culture through the eyes of film makers and grow in our understanding of culture, learning how to better engage and approach the world around us.

Being a Christian Film Critic

Just because one is a Christian, it does not mean that the person will inevitably critique popular arts in a biblical way. If we are called to be transformers of culture, then becoming an effective and educated film critic is a first step to engaging in the cultural arena of the film industry. Johnson describes film criticism as having "a different goal than simply the negative or positive evaluation of a film." In addition it "seeks to initiate a process of inquiry and reflection in order better to understand a movie…the best film

criticism seeks comprehensively to ask, 'How is it that the movie is (or is not) a meaningful experience?'" (125). Johnson further warns both the amateur and professional Christian film critics that to "avoid reading into movies what is not there, they must learn something of the craft of viewing and reflecting; they must develop their critical skills," (125). In the Staely Lectures, Romanowski described two aspects of film criticism that are necessary for the Christian to grasp before approaching contemporary cinema. First, is an understanding of the role and uses of popular art. Not all art cannot be "christianized" or simplified into a "family-oriented" view. Rather as previously noted, much of popular art is used for transmitting culture, performing social criticism, or contributing to a collective memory. As critics, one cannot always assume art to be presented in a simplified, "easy-to-chew" way. Secondly, the perspective that the film is coming from is usually skewed. The artistic vision of reality is *not* actual reality and therefore the question should be asked "What kind of perspective does this artwork portray and how does it compare to a Christian one?" As Christians then, we must become knowledgeable about discerning art before we can be critical of it. That is apart of being an educated film critic.

Conclusion

In my understanding, becoming viewers that are aware of the dangers of contemporary cinema should not push us away from the film industry, but rather instill in us a desire to engage in this art form of our modern society. Recognizing the distorted views that are being portrayed, we can enter the film arena with an educated mind and a critic's eye in order to glean from this part of our culture a better understanding of who

we are as humans and a part of this culture. As Christian's who desire to see Christ transform culture, we should desire to see all areas of life fall under the Lordship of Christ. Since popular arts, specifically film, are cultural communicators, then the power of film and the distortion of its values, seems influentially seducing. Since is Christ is the transformer of culture, we being his image bearers are called to be aware of the effect of film and actively engage in culture in this way. That could be achieved by simply viewing films through a Christian framework and discussing them with non-believers, or giving us an understanding of our culture that better enables us as well-equipped witnesses, or even entering that industry as a profession in order the use God given skills to bring transformation there. We must ask ourselves, "What does it mean to glorify God in whatever I do, especially as an engager and caretaker of culture?" In whatever way we engage in this part of culture, the call for Christians seems to be the same, that "whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God," (1 Corinthians 10:31). As fellow sojourners with believers and non-believers alike in this fallen world, we can use the gifts God gave us and our uniquely created minds to discern films and critique assumed paradigms films often present to be a light in the midst hopelessness. When our culture propagates values and beliefs that leave us feeling desperate and brutally empty, as believers we can bring to others the good news and the gospel and a sense of hope through Jesus Christ. The pain, empty fulfillment and broken dreams that are blaring in our faces through contemporary cinema, presents us with a unique opportunity to tell the world a different storyline. That because of what Christ did on the cross for us, is our identity –

not what men and women are portrayed as in films. That he is Love, not the frantic, empty romance Hollywood boasts. That he will ultimately bring justice that is more satisfying than the closing thirty minutes of any action movie. And he is our strength. We do not have to face the brokeness of this world alone. We do not have to be heroic individuals, but rather we can be the dependent children were created to be of a Father who will bring sweeter fulfillment, and worth to our souls than any human will, or achievement will, or any "happy-ever-after" ending ever made will. As we grow to understand films more and become refined critics, in our entertainment-driven society, that truth of Christ is the hope we can bring to this despairing, dying world.

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