

Thomas Brandon
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A Christian Response to Film

History is a story. Throughout every culture and tribe, stories are told, be they myth or anecdote. People love to tell, and listen to others tell, stories. In fact, all art could conceivably be considered the telling of stories. Sometimes the stories are as complexly woven as an epic poem or as simply moving as a singular emotion captured in the strokes of a brush. People love art because art tells them a story; people love stories because stories convey life. The greatest stories, therefore, are the ones you experience first-hand; they are the ones seared into your memory, a part of your life. It should come as no surprise then, that the greatest mode of storytelling would be the art that most closely resembles life, that most effectively extends an invitation for the audience to experience the story. The greatest mode of storytelling known to man is film. Since no area of life is sectioned off from the sovereignty of God, movies, as part of creation, exist to glorify God. Christians have a responsibility to approach film, arguably the most powerful and popular of all the arts, as they do all of life. Through the lens of the Christian worldview, the followers of Christ should interact with film for the ultimate purpose of glorifying God. Christians have not properly applied their worldview to films in the past, and in so doing, have been poor stewards of a modern wonder. In dialoguing with the movies, Christians should consider not only the content of the film, but also the form, the moments of revelation, and the opportunity to become involved in the filmmaking process.

The Christian Worldview

The Christian worldview, a wholistic approach to life, demands that the arts (and film) not be shunted off into some dark corner. Christians “should take their worldview with them when they attend and comment on any film” (Kappelman 3). One of the central tenants of this

worldview is that all creation exists to glorify God. The Apostle Paul exhorts the Corinthian church to “do all to the glory of God” in whatever they do (I Cor. 10:31). There is no area of life exempt from this commandment. “The Lordship of Christ over the whole of life means that there are no platonic areas in Christianity, no dichotomy or hierarchy between the soul and the body” (Schaeffer 7). Christians cannot rightly divide their lives into “sacred” and “secular”, as if “un-religious” life were a necessary evil. If Christianity is true, then it is true in the whole of life and in the whole of man (Schaeffer 9). Nothing should be excused or rejected on the basis that it is not religious; “in **all** things, God may be glorified” (I Pet.4:11 *emphasis mine*). We cannot condemn a film for not being explicitly religious. All a film needs in order to “have resonance with Christians” is “truth” (Fraser and Neal 35), “rooted in life itself” (Johnston 120). All truth is God’s truth. In fact, according to van der Leeuw, there “is no Christian art. . . only art which has stood before the Holy” (Johnston 58); in other words, only the true may stand before the Holy and live.

Another central tenant of the Christian worldview is the progression of creation, fall, and redemption. Sin has scarred the creation, and any art must reflect the true nature of this world, a “world fallen and in need of grace” (Fraser and Neal 34). Art does not “lift us out of the radical nature of our history, but plunges us into it” (Wolterstorff 84). But Christ has died so that we may live: we live and die with hope. Film should also present the hope of redemption. The body of an artist’s work must reflect not only the joys of creation, but also the horror of evil and the hope of glory. I say “the body” of an artist’s work because some works of art dwell on the beauty of life, some on tragic absurdity, some on attaining peace. Very rarely does one art work (or film) portray all three states of being. Simply because a striking film such as *Chinatown* (1974) ends with the evil men still in power and the hero left without a hope does not make it incompatible with Christianity. Exaggeration or hyperbole is used for emphasis. Sometimes the bad guys win: showing this in a film should make the audience remember the effects of sin upon the world. After all, even Jesus used hyperbole to make a point (“seventy times seven”).

Movies have “the potential of helping us to hear God as God’s story and our stories intersect” (Johnston 85). Film is not only compatible with Christianity, they complement each other very well.

Past Approaches

Modern and past Christian approaches to the movies have been, and are, unsatisfactory. The three overarching thoughts toward film in the religious community can be summarized as indignation, ignorance, and sloth. Some Christians may balk at the flagrant amorality of the Hollywood culture and products, their closed-minded approach (quite possibly a product of the dichotomy mentioned above) leading them to prohibition and abstinence. They object indignantly to the content of movies they have often not even seen. These are also the people who sneer at “secular” music because the songs do not mention Jesus. If we followed their logic, however, no one’s Bible would contain the book of Esther, which makes no mention of God, Christ, or divine intervention in the outcome. Their blanket condemnation of the movies contradicts the notion of an artistic, creative God. After all, the “arts too are supposed to be under the Lordship of Christ” (Schaeffer 9).

Another, more popular view is the ignorant acceptance of whatever is put before our eyes. On a popular Christian film discussion site, a contributor named Donna gave her support to *Frailty* (2002), a film which promotes the image of a malevolent Creator, on the basis that while the film is “theologically wrong”, it is just “fiction.” This school of thought propagates the saying, “It’s only a movie.” But why should film be exempt from the hand of a jealous God? In fact, film “has unique possibilities for conveying theological truth” (Johnston 97). To simply accept what is given to you is neither Christ-like nor very smart. Yes, there are times when the cinema is purely entertainment, but a completely neutral film has yet to be made. Any film contains “hints of the worldview of the moviemaker” (119). Good stewardship of life demands critical thinking, even at the movies.

The third and most subtly disturbing of the modern views is a utilitarian “dialogue” with film that borders on slothful. Unfortunately, the attitude that Christians can pick and choose what they would like to apply to their lives from a film is *in vogue*. Of course, we can learn something from anything, and God delights in using the simple to confound the wise. But too often, Christians take films out of context or improperly interpret them solely for propaganda purposes. It is all too easy and common to make film “say” what we want them to in relation to the Gospel. Christian authors are quick to label Jack Nicholson’s character in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest* (1975) as a Christ-figure. Even though the promiscuous criminal does refuse to leave his friends at the cost of his life, perhaps Jesus parallels are not accurate enough an interpretation. What most Christians who hold this view are doing is not correct interpretation, but cheap abridgments. They are trying to ram a message home. Instead of viewing film as another opportunity to express truth and glorify God, many Christians see the movies as a way to “keep up with the world” or “get the message out” with all the subtlety of a camouflaged sledgehammer. Philosophy, however, is not “the end of film style”, although “film finds its zenith in becoming philosophy” (Frampton 3).

Film must be approached first of all as a film. To better understand the appropriate approach to film, we must first consider its nature.

The Nature and Power of Film

Film is the composite of nearly all the other arts. The movies contain the impact of sight and sound, of drama and music, but film is primarily told through images. Thousand of still images make up a movie reel, but when they are projected, two optical illusions known as “persistence of vision” and the “phi phenomenon” convince us that what we are seeing is a moving picture. It is only flickering so fast that we do not notice the gaps. In fact, “half of the time we spend watching a film, the screen is blank” (Mast 9).

These images are not singular and isolated, however; film tells its story by the succession of juxtaposed images. For example, we see a shot of a man boarding a train and then see a shot

of a train traveling through the countryside. The juxtaposition of these two images “moves the story forward in the mind of the audience” (Mamet 2). But the connection between these two images is unique: if we stopped to consider it, maybe the story has not advanced at all. Perhaps what we saw was a man get on a train followed by a shot of another train somewhere else. The possibilities are mind-bending. This is why we do not consciously examine the relationship between two images: it is a subconscious task. The mind subconsciously connects the train carrying the man with the train streaking across the scenery.

Because film utilizes the subconscious, the “mechanical working of the film is just like the mechanism of a dream” (Mamet 6). Just as the unconscious images of a dream are connected by an active subconscious mind, film functions on an almost internal level. Whereas writing is “refined thinking” (King 131), and music could be called captured emotions, film is dream. This explains why it is so effective at portraying dream sequences and giving the feeling of a nightmare. After countless centuries, man has found a way to express his dreams. No wonder film is not only so popular, but so powerful. Movies become etched on our souls with the hopes and fears we dare not speak.

This presents a unique problem and a moving impact. On the one hand, Christians should be very careful what they watch. As Peter Fraser puts it, always “take care when spending time with strangers in the dark” (71). Movies are not for everyone: “viewer discrimination is obviously necessary for Christians of all ages” (Johnston 46). Maturity is called for, as is absolute dependence on God for “every good and perfect gift” (James 1:17).

The dream images of cinema, however, present a reward beyond compare in the arts. Dream images “afford [the audience] an interpretation of life” (Nietzsche 34). Images “touch hearts and awaken imaginations”; in fact, most people learn better through “imagery and symbolism” than doctrine and dogma (Manning 95). People have been moved by the images of film throughout the last hundred years to imitate what they see on the silver screen. Of course, just because someone sees something does not mean they will act accordingly; “to assume that

everyone will imitate what they see is practically to deny free will, spiritual discernment, or moral courage” (Billingsley 21).

Film is the most lifelike of all the arts, and therefore, the closest thing to actually experiencing stories. The great irony, however, is that “whereas the final product appears more natural and lifelike than any other form that artists can produce, it is perhaps the most contrived and illusory” (Fraser and Neal 40). How odd that something illusory might teach us truth. Central to this paradox is the lone figure of Christ, teaching His disciples not in straight-forward maxims, but archaic parables, illusions intended to open eyes. Perhaps this is the result of seeing from a new perspective; perhaps God is being playful. Regardless, as Picasso once said, “All art is a lie that enables us to realize the truth.” Both the nature and impact of film speak volumes of importance and mystery. In light of this, Christians would do well to understand the criteria for judging film as well as the components that make up film, and learn to respond to film based on its artistic merit, integrity, and impact.

Form

The form of a film determines its artistic quality. In fact, the form (or presentation) of an object determines “whether something is beautiful or not” (Kant 44). An artistically excellent film can be rightly called **beautiful**. The form of a film can be broken down into infinite categories. Since brevity demands a shallow analysis, for now, let us consider images, structure (story), and subtlety.

As previously noted, a film tells its story through images. The composition of the images is paramount, therefore, to the form of the film. Good film composition shows us where to look; it accents the powerful and amazes us. The creation of images, the “incarnation of creative insight and/or ideas [out-space] even the artist’s awareness or ability to articulate” (Johnston 94). A striking visual image, such as the evocative landscapes in *Lawrence of Arabia* (1962) or the surreal colors of *City of Lost Children* (1995), communicate moods, emotions, and tones without a single line of dialogue. In fact, Alfred Hitchcock believed a good story would be able to be

told in complete silence without losing any impact. Images should be composed with the care of a great photographer attempting to capture as much as possible in one shot. Without these visceral images, film becomes a taped stage play.

Another key component is a film's story. In this, I include not only the plot, but also the characters, atmosphere and tone. The story will be primarily concerned with one of the four elements (Johnston 106). Films that focus on the characters feel spontaneous and more life-like: for example, Todd Field's disturbing *In the Bedroom* (2001). Films can also focus on developing an enveloping atmosphere, a unique tone, or a complex plot. Structure is the ringmaster of the images: the story corrals the varying evocative images and juxtaposes them together to form a progression. In order for cinematic excellence, the story must be interesting—"both surprising and inevitable" (Mamet 95).

Finally, great film displays subtlety. Nothing worth anything comes easily, and great art is no different. Sentimentality, once called a cheap abridgment of the truth, and a "didactic purpose make for poor drama" (Billingsley 144). Above all, the acting, music, and presentation of a film should communicate respect for the audience. When something is explicit, no mystery is involved, and nothing stirs humanity to action more than mystery. We "cannot separate beauty" (artistic quality) "from its mystery" (Navone vii). Film should suggest and lead but never beat over the head. When the "conclusion are too easy", they "lead us toward self-righteousness, not understanding" (Fraser and Neal 82).

The above paragraphs serve as a basis for determining the artistic merit of a film. It is should be pointed out now that the artistic worth of a film does not rest on the film's content (or integrity). Unfortunately, in a sin-infested world, the beautiful and the good are not always the same thing. The naked human form, for example, is beautiful because it is God's handiwork. It is not good, however, for someone to view just anyone else's form—there is a proper context for that. Something can be considered beautiful without an attachment to it being good (Kant 49), and the truth of a worldview "presented by an artist must be judged on separate grounds than

artistic greatness” (Schaeffer 41). Christians should be able to recognize and appreciate the artistic quality of a film even if they cannot embrace the meaning.

Christians need to be able to make this distinction because our God is an excellent God who wants us to “approve the things that are excellent” (Rom.2:18). Films of poor quality “should offend [Christians] on some level, regardless of who produces it or what it is about” (Fraser and Neal 32). Believers should always be in search of the Beautiful, because it reflects some of the Giver of Beauty, and “in striving for excellence[,] comes a way to praise God” (Schaeffer 25). Since God cares about craftsmanship, so should the Christian moviegoer. Perhaps the final word on artistic merit comes from Dan Buck, a regular contributor to the Christian film-discussion site www.thefilmforum.com. Dan ends all his posts on the site by describing himself as a firm believer “that Jesus weeps more at the writing on *Baywatch* than at the scantily clad women.”

Content

The most troublesome aspect of film for most Christians is the content, or more specifically, the depiction of immoral acts. The most common objection to cinema is that a Christian can become defiled simply by watching. This objection usually centers around depictions of sexuality. I will deal with this specifically later; first allow me to discuss content and meaning in general.

No film is neutral. Even films that claim no moral claims are reflecting the worldview of the writer, director, and producer; “the seeming absence of ideology is itself ideological” (Smith 2). For this reason, Christians should approach films carefully, knowing that the film’s assertions will probably not fully line up with all of their beliefs. But this does not mean that we cannot learn something. After all, every film, “no matter how technically traditional or avant-garde, reflects some human attitude” (McGuire 3). Every film is saying something. Christians

should also approach films with an open mind, remembering that no one has complete and perfect understanding yet.

But the main purpose of film should be to glorify God, should it not? How can a film that does not advocate the existence of God glorify Him? Christians often get trapped into thinking that only prayer and praise choruses glorify God. But what about love, and joy, and peace, and kindness, and *truth*? When people demonstrate these qualities—when people tell the truth, is God not glorified? When a movie is truthful, God is glorified, because all truth is God’s truth. When a film like *The Princess Bride* (1987) encourages you to love unconditionally, God is glorified, because He is the author of love. When a film like *The Philadelphia Story* (1940) reminds us we all need grace, God is glorified. Films may be called “good” if they “encourage us toward the good” (Fraser and Neal 76). A film need not be religious to communicate truth. After all, we can learn from truth no matter how it is presented; the “recognition of [truth] tells us something about ourselves”(Sayers 87), about the world around us, and sometimes about who He is.

On the other hand, there are films that do not seem to encourage us toward any good: they are discouraging us from the bad. Here lies the objections of most Christians, who often balk not at the message of a film, but at the depictions in it. I cannot say with any certainty the exact relationship between watching something and having your behavior changed by it. I can say, however, that our God is faithful to renew our minds (Romans 12:2). Therefore, our first response should be to determine “how and why” objectionable material is “played out” like it is (Fraser and Neal 67). We should ask not “what” is being portrayed, but “how.” What is the filmmaker saying about this particular act? A good question to ask along these lines would be, “Is the filmmaker glorifying this?” Depiction does not equal approval. After all, the Bible details despicable acts (Judges 20), but it does not approve of or glorify them. For example, the initial battle scenes in *Saving Private Ryan* (1998) are a visceral, disturbing thing to watch, the most violent war images ever re-created. But this film far from glorifies war. In fact, the horror of this film discourages us from giddy or happy feelings about the taking of another life, even the

lives of enemies. Through a negative portrayal of an “immoral act” (such as murder or adultery), the audience can learn to be better people. Even though Christians can feel the “downward pull” of a world worse than our own (Fraser and Neal 73), this distortion (exaggeration) helps us see exactly how desperate we are for a savior.

Another good question to ask when ascertaining the filmmaker’s point of view is the matter of consequences. Do the immoral acts bring consequences? For a film to tell its story with integrity, the story should incorporate not only the cause, but the effects. A good example would be Steven Soderberg’s *Out of Sight* (1997), in which a lovable bank robber falls for a beautiful cop (and visa versa). Even though the central character is a nice guy, he is still a thief, and the film ends with him captured by the woman he loves. Beyond romance, justice prevails. Of course, filmmakers can go beyond what is necessary to accentuate a point. Just as filmmakers should exercise discretion and remember that suggesting something is often more effective than showing it (Mamet 87), viewers should be discerning and realize when, in making a point, a film has done more harm than good. Every film is different, as is every viewer. You do not need my help in this department—the Holy Spirit can be of much more use to you.

Now, the case of depictions of sexuality seems to pose a special problem. Christians viewers can and should interpret films that contain sexual images correctly. First they should examine what the film is saying about the act, and then, the consequences of the act. This approach will suffice in most cases where the act is suggested or only shown partially. But what of explicit material? Does the good of learning truth outweigh the temptation or defilement of seeing sexual images? Billy Graham once said that if you see a girl sunbathing when you drive by, it is only a sin if you drive by a second time. The main issue here is lust, which means “to desire.” A Christian film-viewer should ask him/herself whether s/he allowing the image to cause him to desire something lustful. Jesus exhorts the crowds in Matthew 18:9 to pluck out their eye if it causes them to sin. Obviously, it is not a foregone conclusion that viewing a sexual image will make one sin, but the opposite is also true—no one has promised that an image will not always make you sin. Once again, each viewer’s personal relationship with the Holy Spirit

should be the guide. Every Christian should follow their conscience and trust others to do the same.

Regardless of personal convictions, Philippians 4:8 speaks to all Christians:

Whatever things are true, whatever things are noble, whatever things are just, whatever things are pure, whatever things are lovely, whatever things are of good report, if there is any virtue and if there is anything praiseworthy— meditate on these things.
(NKJV)

Some may interpret this verse to mean that less than perfect art does not deserve contemplation. But a proper reading shows we should “promote and dwell on art’s positives” (Fraser and Neal 67). We should appreciate whatever is true or good or beautiful, and a film with a true meaning that glorifies God can be rightly called **good**. Our focus and meditation should not be on art’s negatives or a film’s “sins.” As Oscar Wilde put it, “The greatest harm [good people] do is that they make badness of such extraordinary importance” (45).

Revelation

Great films are artistically stunning; they are beautiful. They also contain truthful meaning—they are good. But great films contain something more, something almost intangible. Great films contain revelation, an imparting of something eternal, an *impact*. A Christian may go to the movies for a good laugh or an escape, but s/he could be surprised with so much more. Expecting to hear a contrasting worldview, when the lights go out Christians may “discover that they are hearing God as well” (Johnston 72). For reasons known only to the Holy One, images, even though illusory, can have a greater impact than straight-forward truth. Who has not watched a particular moment in a film and felt it was “bigger and more real than the real-life action that it represents” (Sayers 82)? Film presents viewers with a chance to experience the

rebirth of myths (Ford 8), glimpse unspoken mysteries, and even find God. God's grace abounds in "contemporary movies"; if God cannot be found "in the whirlwind, He may be in a Woody Allen film" (Manning 95). God is in the sanctuary, but He is also in the simple faith of the convicts in *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* (2000) and the courageous desperation of the rookie senator in *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* (1939). Because film, like our dreams, is made up of both what we do and *do not* understand, it invites us to dialogue with it, all the while bringing us to a hushed silence.

One great advantage of film's revelation is its ability to help us understand each other's point of view. Film, as a medium, can "create and echo the human condition itself" (McGuire 4). When we go to the theater, we have the opportunity to learn about the way others see the world, because great film can be "a source of revelation about ourselves and the world" (Stone 4). Even mediocre or simply entertaining films all contain the "beliefs, aspirations, fears, [and] neuroses" of mankind (Queenan 100). By watching films, Christians can better understand themselves and those around them. In fact, every once in a while, for just a flicker of a moment, something can be revealed to you that you cannot even explain, and you have learned something about Him.

Conclusion - The Christian Viewer and Filmmaker

All things can glorify God, and as Christians, good stewardship demands that we glorify God through the most powerful modern art form: film. As noted above, past Christian approaches to film have misinterpreted either the Christian or filmmaker's worldview. The proper context for viewing film is within the whollistic Christian worldview, careful, however, to humbly keep an open mind. Christians would do well to understand the nature and impact of film, as well as the unique opportunities film contains. Film should be approached as art, not as a propaganda piece. In that respect, film should be evaluated based upon its artistic, moral, and revelational integrity. Film should strive for excellence, and Christians should appreciate that beauty. Film should be truthful, accurately displaying the nuances and horror of life; Christians

should interpret films carefully, making sure to consider the content thoroughly before terming it good or bad. Finally, film needs to be revelational; Christians should keep open their eyes for opportunities to not only learn, but experience life from others' and (sometimes) God's point of view.

Some Christians are destined to be involved in the filmmaking process. The world is waiting for a generation of thinking, compassionate Christians to begin treating the arts less like tools and more like gifts. Christians filmmakers, however, do not get an automatic "pass" just because they are Christians; the followers of Christ have an even greater call to responsible action (Wolterstorff 74). Christian filmmakers should strive to glorify God in all they do, to be excellent craftsmen, to create a truthful world, and to, hopefully, reveal the heart of God to a desperate and dying world.

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