

“Wickedness and the Grotesque in Film”

“Welcome those who are weak in faith, but not for purposes of quarrelling over opinions. . . . We do not live to ourselves, and we do not die to ourselves. If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord; so then, whether we live or die, we are the Lord’s. For to this end Christ died and lived again, so that he might be the lord of both the living and the dead. Why do you pass judgment on your brother? Or you, why do you despise your brother? For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God. . . . Let us therefore no longer pass judgment on one another, but resolve instead never to put a stumbling block or hindrance in the way of another. . . . The faith that you have, have as your own conviction before God. Blessed are those that have no reason to condemn themselves because of what they approve. But those who have doubts are condemned if they eat, because they do not act from faith; for whatever does not proceed from faith is sin.”—Romans 14:1, 7-10, 13, 22-25

“All things are lawful,’ but not all things are beneficial; ‘All things are lawful,’ but not all things build up. Do not seek your own advantage, but that of the other. . . . So whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do for the glory of God.”—I Corinthians 10: 23-24, 31

I. Vulgarity in the Arts: Profanity, Scatology, Violence, and Sexual Content.

Paul’s teaching on matters of conscience is as important for 21st-century Christians, as it was for his original audience. An issue of concern to many, if not all, Christians when encountering film (or literature, visual art, or theater and dance) is how to respond to the presence of profanity, the portrayal of violence, the display of partial or full nudity, as well as the details of scatology or sexual activity. These are by no means the only sins that the arts portray, nor are they the only sins when portrayed wrongly can tempt us. Material riches, pride and vanity, casual cruelty and cynicism, and hatred are all sins that media can celebrate rather than condemn. Nonetheless, for reasons doubtlessly strong and weak, the portrayal of certain sins has taken on a kind of litmus test for some believers. This leads us to focus, then, on these questions: How much explicit detail should a portrayal of sin offer to be artistically effective or avoid to save being destructive to an audience?

First, a word about my own practice as a professor: It may seem too simple to say that the kind, medium, or intensity of these things differs per person—and it is. However, at the college level where students should be expected to take a certain degree of ethical responsibility, I think it best to risk trusting my students, whereas with my own children, I think some measure of judgment upon their behalf is necessary from birth until they reach young adulthood. (Even there, I fail as a parent if they reach adulthood and have not matured in discernment and moral and aesthetic awareness.) As a professor of intellectual history and literature and as a Christian too aware of my own sins, I do make a solid attempt to choose selections that are not salacious or simply gratuitous in content, but ones which I believe that my students are ethically and hopefully spiritually ready to tackle. This is sometimes a difficult judgment call, for who can know what is in the heart and mind of another? My goal is that students would be discerning enough to examine complexly with a critical eye, and that ultimately that they might be encouraged to engage all that they engage for the glory of God. I am careful to test myself in what I read and view, and I am careful to look away, walk away, or close whatever I sense to be a danger for myself, especially what I suspect is trying to corrupt me. Likewise, I also leave open the invitation to students that if they believe a selection is causing them to sin, I will work to reassign them something else because I can’t always predict what will be a hindrance (or even a help) to another. This means I need to take seriously the growth and struggle of my students in character, discernment, and integrity of life and calling. As Paul reminds me, who am I to judge or hinder God’s servants?

John Milton in his famous treatise against censorship, *Areopagitica*, argued that books are expressions of rationality and, therefore, of the *imago dei*, and what he has to say about a book can also apply to a painting, sculpture, dance, or film: “[A]s good almost kill a man as kill a good book: who kills a reasonable creature, God’s image; but he who destroys a good book kills reason itself, kills the image of, as it were, in the eye. Many a man lives a burden to the earth; but a good book is the precious lifeblood of a master spirit embalmed and treasured up on purpose to a life beyond life.” For Milton, politically to censor a work is akin to the murder of ideas, even of some aspect of a person. We forget to accord to works of art their value as human creations when we treat them as objects that can be easily destroyed. Milton’s point reminds us that there are reasons to oppose censorship that need not be based on modern ideals of pure individualism or on unfettered consumption. Self-censorship may be necessary at times to protect ourselves because not every work of art is beneficial for every person. Parental censorship has similar grounds, as I’ve suggested above. (Nor do I think this entirely closes off the issue of communal and national censorship on grounds of obscenity.) What I would like to suggest is one should have a clear, biblical response to matters of content and display in the arts, rather than a simple checklist, such as the old Hollywood Production Code sought to practice. As such, we should continue our examination with a study of what scripture has to say. The following two passages from the writings of Paul warn against speech that destroys and corrupts:

Do not let any *unwholesome talk (sapro)* come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen. And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you. Be imitators of God, therefore, as dearly loved children and live a life of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God. But among you there must not be even a hint of sexual immorality, or of any kind of impurity, or of greed, because these are improper for God’s holy people. Nor should there be *obscenity (aischrotes)*, *foolish talk (morologia)* or *coarse joking (eutrapelia)*, which are out of place, but rather thanksgiving. For of this you can be sure: No immoral, impure or greedy person—such a man is an idolater—has any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God. Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of such things God’s wrath comes on those who are disobedient. Therefore do not be partners with them. For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Live as children of light (for the fruit of the light consists in all goodness, righteousness and truth) and find out what pleases the Lord. Have nothing to do with the fruitless deeds of darkness, but rather expose them. For it is shameful even to mention what the disobedient do in secret. But everything exposed by the light becomes visible, for it is light that makes everything visible.
(Ephesians 4:29-5:14a)

But now you must rid yourselves of all such things as these: anger, rage, malice, slander, and *filthy language (aischrologia)* from your lips. Do not lie to each other, since you have taken off your old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator. (Colossians 3:8-9)

Paul wants to draw clear life distinctions between the practices of the old self, which are associated with spiritual darkness and worldliness, and those of the new self, which are an expression of God’s holy people and Christ’s kingdom. He is particularly concerned that believers in the churches in Ephesus and Colossae do not use their freedom in Christ as an excuse for a destructive lifestyle. He is zealous that they should be free of rage, malice, or sexual impurity, and as such, he warns them against acts of the body, including acts of speech. In the Greek text, he uses five different words that are of particular interest to our concerns:

1. *Sapros*: a word denoting corruption, the decay associated with plants, the crumbling of brickwork, or the stale taste of old food. The word used implies destructive or corrupt speech. Some translations have understood the word to be used in the sense of Eph 5:4, but it is also likely that Paul uses it in a more overarching sense—any speech that corrupts or destroys a life of holiness.
2. *Aischrotes*: a word closely related to a number of other Greek words implying shame or indecency; the word is used of shameful or indecent speech, as well as ugly or wicked language.
3. *Morologia*: foolish talking. The word likely refers to the wisdom tradition's concern with the fool (see more below).
4. *Eutrapelia*: a difficult word to translate in part because it is only used this one time in the New Testament. Outside the New Testament, the word is most often used in a positive way to describe the dexterous or ready reply, wit, or jesting. When it is used negatively, it tends to apply to dishonest trickery or ribald joking. A few have suggested that Paul may be using the word to condemn double entendre. Also of interest: in Aristotle, *eutrapelia* is used of the one who does such things to smooth business or political deals.
5. *Aischrologia*: Another word used only once in the New Testament; however, its meaning is more clear, related to words involving shame. It is used alternately of filthy speech or abusive language.

Paul's concern here gives us a few tests to begin with:

- Is the speech I am using corruptive of myself or of others? Does it weaken a life characterized by Christ-centered peace, holiness, and thanksgiving?
- Alternately, is my speech characterized by the building of shalom, a striving after holy living, and a spirit of thanksgiving?
- Does the speech I am using approve of things that are shameful or indecent?
- Does my speech abuse or destroy others?
- Is my speech foolish?

(The wisdom tradition understands a "fool" to be involved in some of the following: chattering, unrestrained speech; a lack of discernment of what is fitting; dissension, gossip, slander, mockery—all which destroy a community; the creating of division and quarreling; words that are disloyal; self-boasting; a lack of sound-teaching; a lack of concern for economic justice.)

How, then, should this standard in oral speech apply to artistic works in print, paint, or film? Paul in his epistle to the Ephesians also addresses the way one engages knowledge of corrupt matters. He stresses that evil deeds exposed to the light are properly named. He notes that "it is shameful even to mention what the disobedient do in secret." Some have read this verse as a warning against even discussing evil matters. Of course, in context, Paul is telling us that evil actions will be exposed and made known for what they really are. Eugene Peterson's translation *The Message* offers verse 12 in this way: "It's a scandal when people waste their lives on things they must do in the darkness where no one will see." Paul's concern here is that we do not forget or confuse the nature of such deeds. They should not be mentioned with approval. I do not believe that Paul is suggesting that Christians should never discuss sinful matters or make references to scatology, violence, the human body, or sex. If this were the case, how does Paul make such a suggestion as the following?

Brothers, if I am still preaching circumcision, why am I still being persecuted? In that case the offense of the cross has been abolished. As for those agitators, I wish they would go the whole way and emasculate themselves! (Gal 5:11-12)

If Paul is willing under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit to offer a taunt about castration, then clearly it is possible that some Christians can be more squeamish than scripture. The same could be said of Elijah's joke at the prophets of Baal's expense: "About noontime Elijah began mocking them. 'You'll have to shout louder,' he scoffed, 'for surely he is a god! Perhaps he is deep in thought, or he is relieving himself. Or maybe he is away on a trip, or he is asleep and needs to be wakened!'" (1 Kings 18:27 NLT). If Elijah is willing to joke about Baal being asleep on the toilet, then perhaps Paul is not making a blanket statement about every reference to human feces. The same can be said of violence. The author of the book of Judges describes the sword of Ehud as "thrust into Eglon's belly; the hilt also went in after the blade, and the fat closed over the blade, for he did not draw the sword out of the belly; and the dirt (i.e. fecal material) came out" (3: 21-22). Such detailed violence is not being used for simple reporting purposes; the author is celebrating the humiliation of the oppressor of Israel. Likewise, the prophet Nahum can thunder, "I am against you," declares the LORD Almighty, "I will lift your skirts over your face. I will show the nations your nakedness and the kingdoms your shame. I will pelt you with filth; I will treat you with contempt and make you a spectacle. All who see you will flee from you and say, 'Nineveh is in ruins--who will mourn for her?' Where can I find anyone to comfort you?" (3:5-7) It is shocking to imagine God as an enraged husband publically stripping an unfaithful woman naked and staining her with her own stool, but this is the symbol the Holy Spirit chose to use. An extreme one to be sure, but sometimes the extreme symbol is needed to awaken the spiritually dead Assyrians.

How, then, do we distinguish those comments that build up what is true, good, and beautiful from those that work to corrupt and defile? Certainly, the above passages are meant to be harsh. To hear them without a sense of their edginess is to rob them of their rhetorical intent. But neither is their reference to these matters meant to have us treat such things as normative. They are describing moments of shame or degradation in order that their audience might flee what is unjust. A response of voyeuristic pleasure is the kind of *eutrapelia* Paul warns Christians against. Gene Veith points out that we should be careful to distinguish four words: obscenity, pornography, vulgarity, and profanity. Obscenity involves that which is "out of scene" or "offstage." The obscene thing is something that crosses the boundaries of decorum and, by doing so, destroys the effectiveness of a drama. (This charge is often made of modern "slasher" horror movies—the fear factor is destroyed by the gore.) Pornography is graphic sexual depiction designed to arouse its reader or viewer towards sexual self-stimulation. Thus, we should keep in mind that while pornography is always obscene, not every simulated obscene act is automatically intended to encourage moral disorder, much less pleasure. The distinction between obscenity and pornography suggests that we should ask two questions about the depiction of violence and sex in literature. One, is this depiction intended to corrupt me sexually, scatologically, or violently? Two, what is the effect of this material upon the dramatic (or presentational) whole? Notice, for example, the use of sexual imagery in the following three biblical passages:

While they were enjoying themselves, some of the wicked men of the city surrounded the house. Pounding on the door, they shouted to the old man who owned the house, "Bring out the man who came to your house so we can have sex with him." The owner of the house went outside and said to them, "No, my friends, don't be so vile. Since this man is my guest, don't do this disgraceful thing. Look, here is my virgin daughter, and his concubine. I will bring them out to you now, and you can use them and do to them whatever you wish. But to this man, don't do such a disgraceful thing." But the men would not listen to him. So the man took his concubine and sent her outside to them, and they raped her and abused her

throughout the night, and at dawn they let her go. At daybreak the woman went back to the house where her master was staying, fell down at the door and lay there until daylight. When her master got up in the morning and opened the door of the house and stepped out to continue on his way, there lay his concubine, fallen in the doorway of the house, with her hands on the threshold. He said to her, "Get up; let's go." But there was no answer. Then the man put her on his donkey and set out for home. When he reached home, he took a knife and cut up his concubine, limb by limb, into twelve parts and sent them into all the areas of Israel. Everyone who saw it said, "Such a thing has never been seen or done, not since the day the Israelites came up out of Egypt. Think about it! Consider it! Tell us what to do! (Judges 19:22-30)

How beautiful you are, my darling!
 Oh, how beautiful!
 Your eyes behind your veil are doves.
 Your hair is like a flock of goats
 descending from Mount Gilead.
 Your teeth are like a flock of sheep just shorn,
 coming up from the washing.
 Each has its twin;
 not one of them is alone.
 Your lips are like a scarlet ribbon;
 your mouth is lovely.
 Your temples behind your veil
 are like the halves of a pomegranate.
 Your neck is like the tower of David,
 built with elegance;
 on it hang a thousand shields,
 all of them shields of warriors.
 Your two breasts are like two fawns,
 like twin fawns of a gazelle
 that browse among the lilies.
 Until the day breaks
 and the shadows flee,
 I will go to the mountain of myrrh
 and to the hill of incense.
 All beautiful you are, my darling;
 there is no flaw in you. (Song of Solomon 4:1-8)

As soon as she saw them, she lusted after them and sent messengers to them in Chaldea. Then the Babylonians came to her, to the bed of love, and in their lust they defiled her. After she had been defiled by them, she turned away from them in disgust. When she carried on her prostitution openly and exposed her nakedness, I turned away from her in disgust, just as I had turned away from her sister. Yet she became more and more promiscuous as she recalled the days of her youth, when she was a prostitute in Egypt. There she lusted after her lovers, whose genitals were like those of donkeys and whose emission was like that of horses. So you longed for the lewdness of your youth, when in Egypt your bosom was caressed and your young breasts fondled. Therefore, Oholibah, this is what the Sovereign LORD says: I will stir up your lovers against you, those you turned away from in disgust, and I will bring them against you from every side—(Ezekiel 23: 16-22)

In each of three biblical passages above, sexual detail is important to the message of the passage. The first, historical in nature, shows us the degradation to which the tribes of Israel had fallen in the time of the Judges. The second passage is a beautiful meditation of a man pondering his wife's bodily beauty, and the third is a prophetic parable showing the grotesque extremes to which the nation is willing to

prostitute itself culturally and religiously. Each of these passages in its own way is frank and certainly detailed, but none is pornographic. In the first and third case, we *should* feel repulsed or disgusted. The author wants us to, to feel more deeply the horror of a time of anarchy or to respond with ridicule to the shameful practices of a nation. A feeling of disgust, even physical nausea, is a necessary response for the biblical passage to have its inspired purpose. To think on a scene of gangbanging and murder should build in us a sense of first filthiness, then outrage, then the resolve to never let such things go. In the case of Ezekiel's candid description, we should be initially bewildered by the outrageous analogy, then forced to contemplate why the prophet would be lead to satirically combine erotic description with nauseating (and perhaps slightly comic) descriptions of animal impregnation. Such feelings are not sinful; they are decidedly moral. Our character is reinforced toward godliness when we recoil with horror, when we understand that a promise of illicit titillation is actually one that should end in retching.

The middle passage above is very different. There, the inspired author is not tempting us to lust, but is offering a clear and frank meditation on pure, sexual stimulus, and this will be accompanied by sexual feelings and thoughts. This is a very important distinction. Unfortunately, we reside in a culture where matters of sex and bodily beauty have become so corrupted that they stand between us and the Word of God. It seems a rather common story in Christian circles to recall little boys who open the Song of Songs for the cheap thrill of reading about a woman's breasts or for the not so subtle imagery of sexual emissions. Perhaps this is understandable. The Jewish rabbis often refused to let young boys read Ezekiel or Song of Solomon for the above reasons. However, we now live in an arrested culture, where young men and women are still too often functioning as overly hormonal adolescents. The biblical book's beautiful (and perhaps somewhat alien) descriptions and their fecund associations are meant to encourage sexual maturity, and here maturity is more than just restraint, it is also proper meditation. We learn to see (and imagine) the beauty of the body, even the sexual body, aright. And we substitute in our mental and emotional store of images the kind of thing Ezekiel decries with what this blessed canticle offers.

With this in mind, Veith's discussion of the other two terms is also helpful. Vulgarity is a lesser form of obscenity, involving what is considered common or base by another class, while profanity is that which "trivializes" the sacred. Something that is considered in bad taste by one group may nonetheless contribute to realist fiction. It may be vulgar in my house to pick up your plate and lick it clean, but it isn't everywhere. Vulgar behavior by characters in many works of art is meant to position them as low class, as comic, or as some kind of foil for the more noble behavior of the lead protagonist. This is what is behind the bumbling sidekick in many westerns and samurai films, for example. The same is true of profanity. It is too simple to make a list of unacceptable words without understanding why they're being used. As Veith points out, we tend to associate profanity with words involving sexual organs or bodily excretions. These may be far less of importance to God than the way people use language to debase what is God's (39). Of course, the last thing I would want to do is end up offering empty excuses that approve of profanity or sexual corruption. I am only too aware of Paul's warning: "Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of such things God's wrath comes on those who are disobedient." However, I am concerned that we tend to judge people by the presence of certain slang words without a sense of their heart. (For example, the phrase "screwed up" in some circles is profane, while in others is just another way of saying "made a mistake.")

This leads be to some conclusions that I think are important for any Christian seeking to engage or create works of art. If scripture is willing to honestly describe sinful behavior, then so should we in the art we create. We produce a dishonest painting, film, drama, fiction, dance, or poetry, if we are unwilling to portray sin. This includes, if Paul and Ezekiel are any indication, with humor. At the same

time, we must be careful that our portrayals do not end up approving of what we should condemn. This can happen in three ways. One is for the artist to begin to approve subtly of what is actually wrong. The others two are for the audience to begin to be corrupted, and this admittedly may happen even with works that the creator intends to condemn wickedness. This can happen because certain media or certain levels of intensity or realism shape a viewer against the overall intent of the creator. This can also happen because of a cognitive and emotive saturation level is reached for readers or viewers. Even if the art's goal is condemn such evil, the sustained amount of the portrayal and/or the combined impact of it with a large number of other works in a similar vein can simulate a kind of deadening in the viewer. This is not a simple case of "garbage in, garbage out." We are, after all, discerning, critiquing rational beings. However, we are also beings capable of self-deception and moral-numbness. To use an extreme example: scripture has many passages such as the ones I examined above, but the Bible is not made up exclusively of them either. A constant intake of the shocking may eventually cease to shock. The shocking must be matched against and set within the normal, the healthy, and the admirable.

But, at this point, as I discussed above, I would place the responsibility on the part of reader or viewer (or in the case of younger persons their parents). Likewise, we should be cautious in deciding what has a negative or positive impact on another believer, yet neither should we be afraid to practice and submit to mutual and community accountability within our congregational life. We need to ask each other honest questions. Seeking to avoid being a stumbling block to another believer does not mean always passing over our differences in silence. This to me is the substance of Paul's counsels on matters of personal conviction. In general, this means that Christian churches need to do a better job in teaching their members how to engage the arts in a critical and knowledgeable manner. After all, a work's ethical and aesthetic impact encompasses far more than a few words or details. Our analysis extends to its total imaginative and dramatic construction. We should absolutely be careful to distinguish that which disturbs us and that which actually corrupts us. The one may be a moral, even ethically reinforcing, response, while the later is clearly what Paul warns us against.

Many Christians feel the same is true of profanity in literature and film. In a crime or war story, for example, such language is reflective of how people actually speak. Does reading, listening to (or as an actor speaking) such language corrupt? Does it qualify as the shameful, filthy, and abusive speech that Paul is concerned with? I must leave it to each Christian to test his or herself. I suspect this also involves not only questions of the kind of words but the amount and their context within a work. Therefore, we may need to be sometimes willing to practice something like censorship for ourselves, not to kill a work, but to save it. We may understand that a work is edifying for another person, but due to whatever pattern of corruption that still resides in our own hearts, it is not safe for us. On the other hand, I think Paul is clear here that Christians should avoid in their everyday speech that which would corrupt or shame others about them, and that implies being sensitive to the consciences of different believers with different backgrounds. Christians engaged in any societal or cultural activity, should examine themselves according to Paul's criteria: has engaging in this work or act caused me to increase in the love of the good and holy? Am I wiser? If so, why? If not, why not?

In the next two sections, I will make some more tentative gestures toward how Christians then should practice a principled engagement with the grotesque and the display of the human body in film.

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II. Cinema and a Theology of the Grotesque

“To be able to recognize a freak, you have to have some conception of the whole man, and in the South the general conception of man is still, in the main, theological. . . . I think it is safe to say that while the South is hardly Christ-centered, it is Christ-haunted. The Southerner, who isn't convinced of it, is very much afraid that he may have been formed in the image and likeness of God. . . . In any case, it is when the freak can be sensed as a figure for our essential displacement that he attains some depth in literature.”—Flannery O'Connor

The grotesque is art that in both form and content, while appearing to be a part of the normal natural, social, or personal world, distorts, exaggerates, or combines the incompatible and strange with the seemingly typical in order to surprise and/or shock the audience. It invokes the bodily, the ugly, and often the "supernatural" in order to intrigue and yet repulse. The grotesque focuses on the use of the bizarre, the absurd, the caricatured, and the revolting. It seems bent on asking us to consider the deformed and abnormal. As such, the grotesque in the hands of many artists is essentially naturalistic and nihilistic. It posits a universe without order. Humanity as a category is emptied of its worth and wisdom. It is perhaps reductive to read Sergio Leone's *Fistful of Dollars* in this manner, for "Joe" (the Man with No Name) does possess some residual humanity, brought to the light with the horrible quandary of Marisol's family. However, the overarching ambiance of the film, brought out in both characterization and use of camera shots, is a world without morality, a world of sadism and depravity. The Rojos, in particular, are presented with lurid, surreal faces that caricature the nature of violent. This does not mean that the film doesn't have something to teach us, but it does mean that *A Fistful of Dollars* and films like it must be subject to a process of active critique and evaluation. They cannot become simple passive entertainment.

Part of the power of the Rojos is that Leone is distorting the ideals of the classic Western—the individualism and self-reliance of the gunslinger, the rugged trust that his manner will nonetheless uphold a moral order. The grotesque, after all, is dependent upon our ability to internalize and at least tacitly conceptualize the normal world. As Wolfgang Kayser has noted: "The Grotesque is the estranged world . . . an expression of an incomprehensible, inexplicable, and impersonal force . . . a play with the absurd" and "an attempt to invoke and subdue the demonic aspects of the world." As such, the grotesque is often present to force us to consider what we often believe that we safely need never encounter. This most often works in films that establish first a world of safety for its audience. In John Ford's *Wagon Master*, the opening scene, even before the credits, with the sadistic Cleggs robbing a bank is meant to startle us into considering a threat we weren't quite ready for, yet the brevity of the scene also increases the scene's ability to threaten. The film quickly follows with numerous symbols of the good and basically decent world of the mythical West. The Cleggs continue to be invading forces from outside the healthy norm. When they next appear they unexpectedly enter, even violate, the celebratory dance of the lead characters, who are being united by common life. When Shiloh Clegg plans to destroy the seed wagon, the Mormon pilgrims only means of survival, we encounter a new level of moral depravity and cruelty. That the elder Clegg can invoke the language of Christian providence and mercy in such contexts only makes him that much more grotesque.

Geoffrey Galt Harpham has pointed out that the grotesque can also serve morally positive lessons, too. Because the grotesque does not "fit our standard categories of identification, "its "confused and incoherent energy and abidance" forces us to see a hidden truth we might otherwise ignore, and thus mediates between the margins and the center of our moral and epistemic awareness. As a result, the grotesque may represent a mythic encounter with "another kind of world." This is often the general impulse behind the defamiliarizing cinema of Tim Burton. Edward Scissorhands is a figure who enters

the “normal” world (itself altered in strange ways by the mise-en-scene that the film offers). He is set apart not only by his goth makeup and hair, but by his absurd and dangerous hands. However, he is really a child of peace, trimming hedges and hair in whimsical ways, and crafting ethereal ice sculptures. It is the normal world who leads him to rage and murder; he hasn't brought this with him. In the end, he must depart from this world to continue on crafting snow and ice. In Burton's vision, unlike Ford's, the grotesque is something to awaken us to our own prejudices and limitations.

In addition, the grotesque can be used to create comic responses that are not, at least on the surface, about making morally complex judgments; they are simply out for the playful guffaw. This is the stock and trade of a thousand children's movies in which booger and flatulence jokes abound. Jim Henson's *Labyrinth* comes to mind, in which the characters must cross the Bog of Eternal Stench, complete with its soundtrack of numerous disgusting sounds. Sometimes when well-conceived, the comic grotesque has the ability to offer a more complete picture of the world than the purely heroic can. Any treatment of Cervantes' *Don Quixote* has to come to terms with this. The grotesque can also offer a world of spiritual realities, good and bad, with which characters must come to terms. Hayao Miyazaki's *Spirited Away* creates a fascinatingly bizarre hotel/amusement park in which the animistic spirits of Japan go to vacation. The scene in which the bloated mud spirit, No Face, vomits out all the trash of accumulated pollution that have destroyed a pristine river is a lesson in ecological awareness, even if playfully and comically done.

The grotesque certainly unmasks the distortion and brokenness of the fallen world. In Akira Kurosawa's *Yojimbo*, the villains are not only morally fallen but they are bizarrely and darkly funny. Unlike Leone's adaption of the film, Kurosawa's original gives us caricatures that are still strangely human. Inokichi looks like a wild boar, but has a stupid respect for Sanjuro's physical prowess. Uno the pistol-welding dandy is almost pathetic in his childish cruelty and pride. Kannuki the giant is actually one of the most normal of the clan. Hansuke the corrupt town mayor is played as a constantly skipping clown. Yet as comic stereotypes, they also are closed off to us. As Wilson Yates points out, the grotesque suggests that there are aspects of the world which we cannot easily comprehend; our experience of the grotesque *should* result in bafflement. It reminds us that the world is mysterious; we cannot ever acquire enough knowledge to render it completely explainable, and thus, the grotesque also reminds us of our limited, if disturbing, creativity in the face of such a world. The ultra-violent showdown at the end with its blood-stained and blood-crazed figures acts a revelation of ourselves that both opens and closes before our investigations. The mystery of evil is not explained, or excused; it is left hanging. Sanjuro's ironic, “See ya!” leaves far more questions than answers.

The grotesque, ironically, may open us to the possibility of liberation, grace, even unity because it suggests that the first step towards these matters comes in confronting, even accepting, our distortedness, brokenness, and suppressed visions of the truth of the world. In O'Connor's sense, the grotesque awakens the reader by its very distortion. It paints one part of humanity in gargantuan and twisted ways. We are caught off-guard, but in being so, we are reminded more deeply of what humanity should be, of what God intended it to be, of what it can be again. The category of the grotesque succeeds only because we have some intuition of what the normal might be, but in its often intensely fleshly bodily preoccupations, that pus-filled, sexually deviant portrait also calls us back to the holy embodiedness that God gave us as his creation. If the grotesque is often carved out from the fragments of minds gone mad, it may also stir up memories in us of what a truly harmonious and holy mind and spirit must be like. The grotesque, to return to O'Connor's language, is always haunted.

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III. The Display of the Human Body in Cinema

“Mordecai had a cousin named Hadassah, whom he had brought up because she had neither father nor mother. This young woman, who was also known as Esther, had a lovely figure and was beautiful. Mordecai had taken her as his own daughter when her father and mother died.” (Esther 2:7)

“You are the most excellent of men
 and your lips have been anointed with grace,
 since God has blessed you forever.
 Gird your sword on your side, you mighty one;
 clothe yourself with splendor and majesty.
 In your majesty ride forth victoriously
 in the cause of truth, humility and justice;
 let your right hand achieve awesome deeds.
 Let your sharp arrows pierce the hearts of the king’s enemies;
 let the nations fall beneath your feet.
 Your throne, O God, will last for ever and ever;
 a scepter of justice will be the scepter of your kingdom.
 You love righteousness and hate wickedness;
 therefore God, your God, has set you above your companions
 by anointing you with the oil of joy.
 All your robes are fragrant with myrrh and aloes and cassia;
 from palaces adorned with ivory
 the music of the strings makes you glad.
 Daughters of kings are among your honored women;
 at your right hand is the royal bride in gold of Ophir.
 Listen, daughter, and pay careful attention:
 Forget your people and your father’s house.
 Let the king be enthralled by your beauty;
 honor him, for he is your lord.
 The city of Tyre will come with a gift,
 people of wealth will seek your favor.
 All glorious is the princess within her chamber;
 her gown is interwoven with gold.
 In embroidered garments she is led to the king;
 her virgin companions follow her—
 those brought to be with her.
 Led in with joy and gladness,
 they enter the palace of the king.” (from Psalm 45)

His sword will be red with blood.
 It will be covered with fat.
 The blood will flow like the blood
 of lambs and goats being sacrificed.
 The fat will be like the fat
 taken from the kidneys of rams.
 That’s because the Lord will offer a sacrifice
 in the city of Bozrah.
 He will kill many people in Edom.
 The people and their leaders will be killed
 like wild oxen and young bulls.

Their land will be wet with their blood.

The dust will be covered with their fat.

That's because the Lord has set aside a day to pay Edom back.

He has set aside a year to pay them back for what they did to the city of Zion. (Isaiah 34:6-8)

Then I saw heaven opened, and behold, a white horse! The one sitting on it is called Faithful and True, and in righteousness he judges and makes war. His eyes are like a flame of fire, and on his head are many diadems, and he has a name written that no one knows but himself. He is clothed in a robe dipped in blood, and the name by which he is called is The Word of God. And the armies of heaven, arrayed in fine linen, white and pure, were following him on white horses. From his mouth comes a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations, and he will rule them with a rod of iron. He will tread the winepress of the fury of the wrath of God the Almighty. On his robe and on his thigh he has a name written, King of kings and Lord of lords. (from Rev 19)

I can think of few topics more contentious or fraught with danger than the way the bodies of actors are utilized in films. At the same time, in our culture we are forced as Christians not only to model a higher standard for human modesty and decency, but also to be able to verbalize and conceptualize better what God's word is for the body and not just the soul, however one conceives the later. Rather than begin with the numerous ways the display of skin or the cutting of clothing can be used to entice and destroy, or with the manner in which make-up artists can mimic the horrors of war and violence done to human bodies, I want to begin by focusing on the larger set of the ways bodies are employed in art, especially film, for aesthetic and thematic truths. We need a larger set of references from which to make principled decisions about the arts and the body.

Psalm 45, for instance, is a beautiful meditation upon the splendor of a king and the glory of his betrothed. The king's character qualities are symbolized by both explicit and implicit bodily stances—girded with his sword, riding forth with determination, seated upon his solid throne and holding the scepter of justice, as well as by a full sensory display—the beauty of his clothing, the fragrance of his robes, the delightfulness of the stringed music, and the taste of anointing oil on his lips. In similar fashion, the beauty of the princess is clothed with gold and embroidery and accompanied by her bridesmaids in pomp and circumstance. The psalmist counts enthrallment with her physical beauty as a positive virtue for her husband. Taken together, this passage suggests the biblically healthy awareness an artist can take in bodily and sensory details.

This awareness extends to depictions of bloodshed. The prophets in both the Old and New Testaments are quite willing to use violent detail to shake our spiritual slumber. I confess I don't often imagine God as a warrior with his sword dripping with the blood and gore of human bodies, but apparently at times, I need to do so. The image of the fat ripped from a body or of blood flowing out of people who are crushed like grapes in a winepress is almost too shattering for the mind to grasp, but it is necessary way to force readers to conceptualize and visualize the high cost of a sinful culture under judgment. Indeed, the lordship and kingship of Jesus himself in the later passage is associated with bloody and terrible judgment.

Classic visual artists pay attention to the positioning of bodies, and these are lessons from which theatre directors, choreographers, and film makers learn. The position of the body in sculpture, for example, can suggest pain, fear, torment, modesty, spiritual ecstasy, peace, repose, languor, sadness, courage, protection, jollity, openness, or closure. (The way the Young Lincoln's leg and foot divide the window scene is only one of numerous examples in any film.) Groups of bodies can also be arranged to heighten these emotions and themes. Bodies placed in opposition can suggest antagonism of a physical, social, or

even spiritual nature. (For example, the way Kurosawa arranges the two opposing gangs in *Yojimbo*.) Bodies arranged in a triangular fashion can suggest stability, but also hierarchical relations. Kurosawa does this in the scene from *Seven Samurai* in which the samurai have learned of the farmers' theft of armor and Kikuchiyo has berated them for their class-based blindness to the farmers' suffering often at samurai hands. The director arranges the actors with Kikuchiyo in the front of the shot looking just to the left of the camera, Kambei recessed slightly on the left, and four of the others all arranged to complete the triangle, no one looking at the other.

The same analysis can be given to more complex arrangements. Because the language of film is visual image and sound moving in time, the composition angles are further shaped by the length of shots and speed of cutting, as well as the relationships between shots and montages. Ford in *How Green Was My Valley* constantly arranges the miners in serpentine and staggered lines to indicate solidarity and diversity, as well as life lived in time and place. In *Red Beard*, Kurosawa has the various patients and locals gather about the dying Sahachi in staggered patterns that draw our visual focus along lines back to the man. This ability to use bodily patterns is also true of various cultural positions that are deeply significant: the Buddha in lotus-position, for example, or closer to home, the patterns of crucifixion and pieta such as we discussed in *How Green Was My Valley* in the death scene of the father, held in Huw's arms and overshadowed by the sheltering and suffering Mr. Gruffydd. This shot is followed by a close-up of the father's dead face cradled in Huw's lap, and so on.

With this in mind how are we to deal with the display of the partially or fully nude body in art? First off again, as Christians we must look at the scriptural treatment of this. Consider the following passages:

Adam and his wife were both naked, and they felt no shame. (Genesis 2:25)

Right away they saw what they had done, and they realized they were naked. Then they sewed fig leaves together to make something to cover themselves. (Genesis 3:7)

My beloved is radiant and ruddy,
distinguished among ten thousand.
His head is the finest gold;
his locks are wavy,
black as a raven.
His eyes are like doves
beside streams of water,
bathed in milk,
sitting beside a full pool.
His cheeks are like beds of spices,
mounds of sweet-smelling herbs.
His lips are lilies,
dripping liquid myrrh.
His arms are rods of gold,
set with jewels.
His body is polished ivory,
bedecked with sapphires.
His legs are alabaster columns,
set on bases of gold.
His appearance is like Lebanon,
choice as the cedars. (Song 5:10-15)

Depart naked and ashamed,
 you people of Shaphir [Beautiful]
 The town of Bethazel mourns
 because no one from Zaanan
 went out to help. (Micah 1:11)

Saul left for Ramah. But as he walked along, the Spirit of God took control of him, and he started prophesying. Then, when he reached Prophets Village, he stripped off his clothes and prophesied in front of Samuel. He dropped to the ground and lay there all day and night. That's how the saying started, "Is Saul now a prophet? (I Samuel 19:23)

I saw you lying there, rolling around in your own blood, and I couldn't let you die. I took care of you, like someone caring for a tender, young plant. You grew up to be a beautiful young woman with perfect breasts and long hair, but you were still naked. When I saw you again, you were old enough to have sex. So I covered your naked body with my own robe. Then I solemnly promised that you would belong to me and that I, the LORD God, would take care of you. (Ezekiel 16:6-8)

As the ark of the Lord came into the city of David, Michal the daughter of Saul looked out of the window and saw King David leaping and dancing before the Lord, and she despised him in her heart. And they brought in the ark of the Lord and set it in its place, inside the tent that David had pitched for it. . . . And David returned to bless his household. But Michal the daughter of Saul came out to meet David and said, "How the king of Israel honored himself today, uncovering himself today before the eyes of his servants' female servants, as one of the vulgar fellows shamelessly uncovers himself!" And David said to Michal, "It was before the Lord, who chose me above your father and above all his house, to appoint me as prince over Israel, the people of the Lord—and I will make merry before the Lord. (from II Samuel 6)

King Sargon of Assyria gave orders for his army commander to capture the city of Ashdod. About this same time the LORD had told me, "Isaiah, take off everything, including your sandals!" I did this and went around naked and barefoot for three years. Then the LORD said: "What Isaiah has done is a warning to Egypt and Ethiopia. Everyone in these two countries will be led away naked and barefoot by the king of Assyria. Young or old, they will be taken prisoner, and Egypt will be disgraced. They will be confused and frustrated, because they depended on Ethiopia and bragged about Egypt. When this happens, the people who live along the coast will say, "Look what happened to them! We ran to them for safety, hoping they would protect us from the king of Assyria. But now, there is no escape for us. (Isaiah 20)

The oceans that you saw the prostitute sitting on are crowds of people from all races and languages. The ten horns and the beast will start hating the shameless woman. They will strip off her clothes and leave her naked. Then they will eat her flesh and throw the rest of her body into a fire. God is the one who made these kings all think alike and decide to give their power to the beast. And they will do this until what God has said comes true. (from Revelation 17)

When we begin with the original creational intent, nakedness was not associated with shame, but was treated as one more aspect of Eden's bliss. The naked beauty of our first parents was an expression of shalom, rather than a symbol of shame. But after the fall, this became much more problematic. The text in Genesis doesn't explain to us why Adam and Eve became ashamed of their bodies, but it is fair to suppose based on other treatments of nudity in the scripture, such as those above, that their unclothed state became an embodiment of their moral poverty and vulnerability. Nakedness, such as in the passages from Micah and Isaiah, can be a condition of being exposed and violated. The publically naked person is without protection and is robbed of dignity. Yet as the passage in Ezekiel reminds us, nakedness can also be a sign of innocence and beauty, in this case to which the act of clothing is to extend protection and shelter. The beauty of the human body has not been entirely lost due to the fall,

as the passage from Song of Solomon models in its meditation upon male physical beauty, yet as we saw in several of the passages discussed above, nakedness can also be an act of exposure in the name of judgment, used by God to punish as well as name clearly that which is unfaithful and debauched.

At times the unclothed (or near unclothed) display of the human body is used in scripture for artistic ends. The dancing of David to celebrate the return of the ark of the covenant involved the uncovering of most of his body in a way that his wife held in contempt as low (i.e. vulgar) behavior. Perhaps more strange for us is that as a sign of Saul's filling with God's spirit, he prophesied unclothed. Nor is this the only instance. The passage from Isaiah 20 is particularly telling because in this instance God commands Isaiah to use his own nakedness in a form of shocking guerilla theatre for three whole years. (Compare this with similar expressions of basic theatre in Ezekiel 4 and 12.)

Now, none of these examples should be distorted to justify the salacious use of partially unclothed or completely unclothed bodies in many films. In too many cases, filmmakers use male, but especially female, bodies to indulge in base voyeurism or cheap arousal to attract viewers on the basis of sinful lust rather than for any aesthetic reasons at all. And certainly, one can sympathize with Christians of good conscience who make a practice of avoiding film with any reference to the naked human form. Indeed, to return to Paul's teaching on conscience, *for a Christian who holds all nudity to be sin to view the parts of a film with its use is to commit sin and to dishonor their Lord and deny him glory*. However, in light of the biblical legitimate display of the human body for celebration, divine warning, and even ecstatic semiotic, and its uses as symbols of innocence, vulnerability, and judgment, Christians should at least pause before concluding that all artists, including filmmakers, use nakedness for only sinful ends. Nor should they assume that fellow Christians who think otherwise are reprobate and in rebellion against God. Indeed, in the Christian European tradition of art, visual artists in the Renaissance and Baroque periods often adapted the classic language of the nude to make Christian and biblical points about Edenic innocence, divine judgment, and the innate value of the human being as the *imago dei*. And this tradition continues to be drawn upon in serious cinema.

Filmmakers can use the naked body (or the implied naked body) to comment on humiliation and shame, such as the emaciated bodies of Holocaust survivors in *Schindler's List*. They can use it to imply the state of brutal nature, the conditions of extreme poverty or vulnerability, or the dehumanization of persons. In Andrej Wajda's *Danton*, the lady of the house, Éléonore Duplay, is forcing the naked young nephew of Robespierre while standing in his bath to memorize lines from the Declaration of the Rights of Man. The irony is thick, for the poor child is vulnerable, humiliated, and his every right being violated as a matter of education. In Robert Bresson's *Au hasard Balthazar* the humiliated farm girl Marie is left naked and huddled with her back turned against the stark wall after the boys shame her by taking her clothes. The grainy film texture, black-and-white stock, and harsh lighting work together to offer a medium shot of profound sorrow and suffering.

Nakedness can also be in positive ways. Directors can use it to imply innocence and value, such as in *Roots* when the warrior Omoro Kinte lifts his naked newborn son to the sky. It can be used to represent fertility, health, and maternity as in John Huston's creation scenes in *The Bible: the Beginning*; honesty and candor as in Jodie Foster's portrayal of Nell, the abandoned innocent, crossing the river in a baptismal-like moment; as well as the spiritual; the state of cleansing, or for ideal beauty. These last three are invoked by Roland Joffe in *The Mission*. Joffe uses the nakedness of the Guarani to symbolize a kind of cultural naturalness, as well as an unguarded state of manner. At the end of the film, he also uses it to suggest a kind of ritual cleansing, perhaps even the remains of spiritual hope, when a few

unclothed children who have survived the massacre of their village, depart in a canoe in the jungle. The cinematography uses light and color to make the scene eerily beautiful.

Often directors will use cinematography as means to distance the presence of partial or full nudity in order to separate the viewer from the subject in question—depth of field, long-range shots, unfocused shots, color filters, grainy texture choices for film stock, dark or expressionist lighting or, in turn, washed out light or white glare, CGI distortions, inversions effects, and so on. There are a number of ways to either to soften or lyricize or to render more harshly and grotesquely human bodies. Nakedness can be used to make gestures of judgment by exposure, the correction of illusions, or the conditions of suffering and torture. It can also be used in ways to comment upon sexual temptation, corruption, or threat that are not intended for sexual arousal. Sometimes directors can keep the horrible or scandalous out of focus by keeping the point of focus near the screen. In *Dead Man Walking*, Tim Robbins mercifully keeps the details of Matthew Poncelet's rape of a teenage girl and the murder of she and her boyfriend far removed in a long-shot, but this somehow increase the utter horror. In Wajda's *Man of Marble*, the camera's point of focus is kept on Agnieszka the reporter and the former party official now turned pornographer rather than the women in the background. Their blurred bodies are an ugly reminder of the corruption of the man that Agnieszka must deal with. In other films, nudity may be in the point of focus, but the cinematography renders their forms ugly, or at least plain and unattractive. In Ingmar Bergman's *The Magician*, Vogler the actor, pretending to be a paranormal mute, is alone facing his mirror without makeup or costume when he beholds his naked wife momentarily. The scene is shot with expressionist lighting that renders her form a vision of his own projected hysteria. In Kurosawa's *Red Beard*, the prideful young doctor, Dr. Noboru Yasumoto, views his first surgery. The young woman's chest is uncovered as the other doctors operate on her abdomen, in a period before anesthesia. Yasumoto stands to the lower left or right in each shot, recoiling in horror as she writhes in agony; his shock is interspersed with short takes of the operation itself. In the later, two cases we are not meant to be comfortable or entertained. Vogler is left alone and forced to come to terms with reality. Yasumoto spends much of the film learning to see the suffering of the poor and pain of those desperately in need, and we are continually forced to see with him.

And at times, directors certainly intend partial or full nudes as embodiments of ideal beauty. A typical figure in Soviet film is the shirtless muscled young man throwing a hammer or working a pile driver. The symbol is to represent the communist worker as healthy and powerful and materially natural. At times, the male or female nude can be posed by directors to invoke the classic nudes of Greece and Rome, and sometimes these are also filmed in ways that create a certain aesthetic distance, rendering them sensual but not necessarily erotic. However, as we all know, more often, the naked body is employed in cynical and destructive ways intended to manipulate and arouse viewers, especially adolescent young men before the age of thirty. I suspect this is where the real potential bombs for our morality lie. Casual brief nudity, but more often ill modest clothing that only covers genitalia or other eroticized regions of the body, is used to create an illusionary world in which everyone is sexually attractive and available and in which the emotional or physical costs for promiscuity are conveniently left unmentioned. It tells a lie in subtle and not so subtle ways, and unfortunately, if a movie does not contain actual nudity, we often let our guard down even through the total effect of the film is to create a data bank of photogenic images that no real person (not even the actors themselves in real life) can match.

One thing that I've not entirely addressed in this discussion is how different media make themselves present or distant to their audiences. It is too simple to suggest that artistic media exist along a continuum of presence: written print-spoken text-painting-sculpture-photography-cinema-live dance-live theatre. However, there is some truth to this. There is considerable distance of immediacy of

presence between the poetic description of beautiful bodies in Song of Solomon or the verbal grotesqueries in Ezekiel or Nahum and having been actually present to witness David's dancing or Isaiah's naked theatre. Some readers who feel comfortable reading about the nakedness of Adam and Eve before the fall will be less comfortable before a painting of the same subject. Other readers who find such a painting thought-provoking may become more uncertain about whether one should see a film about it, or even less a live dance production. Nonetheless, just as a skilled writer can choose different words to describe a scene in prose or poetry, so a visual artist can choose differing perspectives, shades, colors, and lines to picture a similar scene, and so may a director by virtue of cinematography and context find different ways to shape an audience's interactions with that subject. It is important to know this, even if as a Christian one chooses to entirely avoid certain expressions of the filmed body, especially in matters of nudity or violence; one cannot be fair or truthful to the art world if one distorts the motives and techniques of film directors.

Let me end with an anecdote from the desert fathers, those fourth-century athletes of the Christian faith. It is written of Abba Nilus that one day when the harlot Palagia rode naked through the streets of the Antioch that all the clergy about Nilus turned away their faces in shock and disgust, while Nilus simply gazed at her and innocently responded, "Did not the sight of her great beauty delight you? Verily, it greatly delighted me." Those who respond to this story with snorts of incredulity should beware their own hearts. It is a perfectly credible reading of this story to suppose that St. Nilus beheld her not with lust and craving, but with understanding and love. Certainly, the response of the priests was a legitimate, even necessary, one, but we sin the sin of charity if we assume that Nilus's was any less so.