MOVING PICTURES: THEOLOGIZING AT THE MOVIES

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After I go to a movie, I usually "debrief" myself, asking what the film was about, what I enjoyed, what I didn't, etc. Sometimes my debriefing occurs in conversation with others, but often I simply sit down at the computer and type up my own review of the film, seeking to put into words my response to the experience.

I gathered some of my reviews together, with some introductory essays, to present to my students at Westminster Theological Seminary for a course called "The Modern Mind," a critical survey of modern thought and culture. In order to teach such a course, one must have some source of regular first-hand exposure to cultural trends, and I have found that for myself films are the best means of gaining that exposure. Although I love music, I confess I find modern avant-garde music, both popular and "serious," very hard to listen to. I have little taste for, or understanding of, modern art. Novels take too long to read; plays are too expensive. I used to watch a lot of TV but now that we have children in the house, I don't want them to become addicted. I do read modern philosophy and theology, but I also need exposure to something more universally popular, to see how academic philosophical and religious ideas are reflected and anticipated in the general culture. For that purpose, film has become my medium of choice.

Movie reviews are a dime a dozen; why do I add mine to the pile? Well, reviewers differ greatly in their emphasis. Most are concerned with aesthetic or technical matters, or with judgments of entertainment value. Christian reviewers tend to focus also on the moral tone in films, some actually counting the instances of sex, violence or foul language. A few reviewers offer unique perspectives. Jim Jordan, for example, brings to his reviews a rich background in literary symbolism, and he suggests patterns of symbolism in film that have subtle but profound bearing on the content of the film. All these approaches have their usefulness.

I do not have Jordan's sensitivity to symbolism. I do have thoughts about aesthetic, technical and entertainment values, which I will express from time to time in my reviews. I am obviously interested also in the moral aspects of film, though I have neither the head nor the heart for counting dirty words.

Though I have no degree in film or drama, I do have some knowledge of the history of film, having enjoyed movies and discussions of movies from childhood. I believe that my musical experience of being a classically trained pianist also gives me some appreciation for dramatic structure: ebb, flow and climax. But others certainly have stronger qualifications than mine for expressing opinions on these matters.

What I do bring to the reviews is, in a word, theology. For theology is my main life work. It is Jordan's too, and Harvie Conn's. But perhaps because I am less knowledgeable than they about matters of
cinematic detail, I tend to focus more than they on the larger picture. I see the "messages" of the films less in the context of film as such than in the context of the general culture and of those great cultural debates which are at bottom theological. My approach is to stand back from each film and ask, what is it trying to tell me? What is its world-view, its law, its gospel?

The world-view is the most important issue in film. That is the element that is most culturally influential (often in a destructive way), and it is often most central to the filmmaker's purpose.

One of the old film moguls (Sam Goldwyn's name comes to mind, but it may have been someone else) is often quoted as saying "If you want to send a message, call Western Union." Many filmmakers have made this sort of claim, that their work has nothing to do with messages, with theology or philosophy, that it is nothing other than "Art for art's sake," or, at least, "entertainment for entertainment's sake."

I would not want to claim that art could be reduced to theology or philosophy. Art tends to be particular and concrete, while philosophy, and theology to a lesser extent, tends to be general and abstract. Art strives to entertain; theology and philosophy generally do not, although the difference here too is a matter of degree. (Plato, Nietzsche, and Kierkegaard are entertaining in a way that Aristotle, Kant and Tillich are not. That fact is not irrelevant to the proper evaluation of their work.) Art does have dimensions that delight or disturb us, quite apart from any ideological content. Much of what art communicates is the ingeniousness of its own design: its colors, its musical harmonies, the juxtapositions of its scenes. In film, much of the product's quality comes from the sheer interest of the camera angles, the harsh or soft focus, the direction of the light, the short pauses in the actors' speech, the vast range of artistically formed detail.

Having said all of that, I must add that it is simply false to claim that art has nothing to do with "messages." Indeed, we are living in a time in which the messages of art are becoming more and more explicit. Oliver Stone, for example, is quite explicit about the political content of his films. He is not at all embarrassed by claims that he has an axe to grind. So much the better. In the film community, directors and actors are praised on all sides for participating in films (even, often, mediocre films) that take "controversial" positions on moral/political issues. That is, they are praised when those controversial positions are the ones that are popular in the film community and in the national media.

The "art for art's sake" rhetoric tends to appear when these controversial projects receive criticism from conservative or Christian viewers. To such criticism, the standard reply is, "Art is not philosophy and should not be judged as such. Art is above politics and religion. Art communicates only itself, not ideology." But that reply is disingenuous. Everyone knows that it simply isn't true.

Even such concepts as beauty and form are not religiously neutral. What is beautiful to a non-Christian may very well be ugly to a Christian: homosexual romance, for instance, or the demonic simulations in Disney's "Fantasia." Some techniques, of course, like the use of hand-held cameras, can be used by Christians or non-Christians. A dim level of lighting in a scene does not necessarily distinguish Christian from non-Christian filmmaking. On the other hand, such dim lighting can be used to make a value judgment. A director's choice to use dim lighting in a room for the scene of a meeting might in some contexts convey that director's view that the characters at that meeting are fairly unsavory. That doesn't mean that dim lighting always indicates the presence of evil; but granted other elements of the drama, it may indicate that. And of course Christians and non-Christians tend to disagree as to where evil is to be found.
Message, then, is not all there is to art, but it is an important element of it, one that is especially important to Christians who are concerned about the impact of films on their families and upon society. From one "perspective," it is the whole: for when we ask about "message," we are simply asking what the art as a whole is communicating to us. The message may not always be easily expressed in words, or in the terms of philosophy or theology. But attempting to express it in words is a worthy goal for a reviewer. Nor is the message of a film to be obtained in the same way we obtain the message of a philosophical treatise. Films, even Oliver Stone's, do not simply teach or preach. But no one should have any objection to analysis of a director's artistic decisions to see what he (or she) reveals about his vision of life.

It is usually not hard to answer the question, "What does the director want us to think (about the characters, the events, the setting, the atmosphere):" It is usually pretty clear who are the basically sympathetic characters, who are the villains. In films as in real life there is, of course, moral ambiguity. There is good in the worst, bad in the best. But even to make such comments we must be able to use moral terms; we must be able to distinguish good from bad. The chief approach of my theological analysis of the films will be simply to ask "What does the film consider good, and what bad?"

So my reviews try to sum up the "message" of each film: its ideology, its values, its world-view, its philosophy, its theology. I will comment on other elements of the film as they seem especially relevant to formulating that message. In the process I try to observe proper distinctions between art and philosophy, especially to recognize the particularism of a film's focus. But particularism is of no interest unless it is in some measure universal, unless it reminds its viewers of what they, too, have observed.

Such is the program underlying my reviews. I hope that readers and viewers will find them in some measure edifying. May God use them in some small or large way to strengthen the Christian presence in the contemporary world.

One word of warning: since my reviews attempt to be serious analysis rather than "viewing guides," I will not avoid discussions of endings. Obviously, one could not meaningfully discuss "Hamlet" or "Death of a Salesman" without saying something about the endings of these dramas. The same is true about significant films. Those who can't bear to know the ending of a film before seeing it should proceed with appropriate caution.

My thanks and appreciation go to those Christian authors who have entered this arena before me, who have endured the scorn of the world by developing a Christian interpretation of film and who have often endured the scorn of Christians because they have dared to go to movies. I have learned much from the contributions of Donald Drew, Harvie Conn, Jim Jordan, and Keith Billingsley. Much should be said also for the work of an observant Jew, Michael Medved, who has exposed the moral antagonism between Hollywood and "traditional American values." Whether he recognizes it or not, those values he cherishes are, by and large, the values taught and advanced by the Christian gospel.