

Go to the Movies. . . But Don't Turn Off Your Brain!

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How many of you have seen one movie in the past month (on TV or at the theater)? Two movies? Three? Ten? How many of you, like me, see so many movies on a regular basis it's too hard to count? Do you know how many movies are made on average per year in Hollywood? Over the last ten years or so, Hollywood puts out an average of six hundred movies each year. That's almost two a day-many many more if you include Bollywood. Movies are everywhere! They show up in abundance in our culture and in our lives. On that level alone movies are important to think about and discuss in our Christian communities as we try to help one another live more like Christ.

But movies aren't only important because they're prevalent. Movies are important because they communicate ideas about what is true. We've always used art as a way of expressing our beliefs about and experiences of reality: what is true about life and what it means to be a person, why is there evil and how can we be saved from it... "Man has always and will continue to express his hope and excitement, as well as his fears and reservations, about life and what it means to be human through the arts. He will seek to express his world through any and all available mediums, and presently that includes film." {1}

So movies are important not just because they're everywhere, but because they tell us about life and what it means to be human. Normally, in church, when we talk about where our ideas about life and what it means to be a person and how we should live, where do we say those ideas come from? Right, the Bible.

And that's true! But God has given us art too. And we need art and science and nature and each other and the Bible to interpret what is real, what is true. We need all of these things together to help us make sense of life; because life can sometimes be a mess. When your friend betrays you and you don't know why. When your parents divorce. When life isn't bad just uncertain, or confusing... or complicated because two boys like you at the same time or you're not exactly sure where you want to go to college... Now, the Scriptures come first among all informers of reality; but we'll come back to that.

I have to thank my friend and colleague Todd Kappelman; he works with me at Probe and he is a professor of philosophy at Dallas Baptist University. I'll be pulling a lot from his lecture "Perspectives on Film: What's in a movie?" Let me quote Todd:

"A film is able to convey an enormous range of human experience and emotions. A good film maker, script writer, director, producer, or actor can take us to places that we might never be able to see through our everyday experiences."

Can you think of some examples? *Avatar*. *Lord of the Rings*. Even movies like *Saving Private Ryan* or *Braveheart*. And because movies are able to involve us in situations that are outside of our everyday experiences, but that we can relate to, "[movies] may also show us things about our world that would otherwise remain hidden to the untrained eye." For example, *Wall-E*. How many of you have seen *Wall-E*? So basically humanity destroys all oxygen-producing plant life and has to ship

civilization out into outer space. Everyone's on a giant cruise ship in space, lounging in these mobile recliners that take them wherever they want to go and they have these screens that pop up and they can order whatever food they want, and it comes right to them. And they've been living like this in space for years so everyone is super fat. There are a couple of underlying messages in this movie; they're pretty obvious, right? Take care of the Earth our home and discipline yourself in this world of modern convenience. But because these messages are communicated to us, not directly in the world in which we live, but indirectly through a world with robots and space cruise ships, it's a message that's easier to swallow.

The underlying messages of *Wall-E* are pretty obvious; however, many movies have messages which are much more subtle. And unless we know what to look for and how to look for it we will miss it. We will miss what the movie is really saying behind the special effects and witty dialogue. Often movies communicate ideas about life and reality through symbols; it's like code. The movies don't often just come out and say, "This is the message about life from this movie." So we need to learn how to interpret the code.

Movies have ideas and those ideas come from the women and men who make them. Duh. Right, I know. But we don't always think about it. Every person has a worldview and that worldview is always in a person's art.

My colleague Todd gives us five basic questions to ask when watching movies:

1. How important is life to the director/writers, etc? Are tough issues dealt with or avoided? "Christian" movies come to mind when I think of this question. Sometimes these movies are really bad about candy-coating life—everything ends nice and neatly and all the bad stuff about life is kind of skipped over or neatly dealt with. This is a disservice because it isn't true to life.

2. Is there a discernible philosophical position in the film? If so, what is it, and can a case be made for your interpretation? How many of you saw *Avatar*? I saw it twice. It was awesome in 3D. I hear it's even cooler in XD. I'll let you in on a not-so-secret secret. Hollywood's favorite and most popular worldview right now is pantheism. Think about *Avatar* and look at your chart (under Cosmic Humanism). See anything that rings familiar from the movie?

3. Is the subject matter of the film portrayed truthfully? Here the goal is to determine if the subject matter is being dealt with in a way that is in agreement with or contrary to the experiences of daily reality. Let me think here... what comes to mind? Um... romantic comedies. Don't get me wrong, I like many romantic comedies, but I also go to those movies with my brain turned on, watching the screen through my biblical worldview lenses. And it's important we do that because those movies aren't just fun-loving and warm-fuzzy, they also communicate ideas about romance and marriage and dating and sex. And if we go into these movies with our brains turned off, we *will* begin to subconsciously absorb these false ideas. If I'm not filtering the film with my biblical worldview, I can easily begin to expect my love life to be like the movies, which when I say it out loud like that sounds ridiculous. But it happens in subtle ways and more often than we think.

4. Is there a discernible hostility toward particular values and beliefs? Does the film seek to be offensive for the sake of sensationalism alone? I think a case can be made that *The DaVinci Code* fits into this category. But you know, hostility toward

Christianity is all over, not just movies, but TV too. When Christians are portrayed on the show *Criminal Minds* for example, they're often extreme fundamentalists who hate gays and repress women. And you know, that's a legitimate complaint against some who call themselves Christians. But when those are the only types of Christians shown time and time again on TV and in the movies, the whole picture isn't being shown. It's being distorted.

5. Is the film technically well made, written, produced and acted? I confess, *Transformers II* was a major disappointment. It was technically well done; I mean, the special effects were awesome. But the writing... I felt like I was getting dumber sitting there listening to that dialogue. Even the plot had some holes in it, which was disappointing because I like action flicks.

Now as Christian interpreters, we have three more questions to ask ourselves:

1. Does the interpretation of reality in this work conform to or fail to conform to Christian doctrine or ethics? Sometimes a movie will match up pretty solidly with the Creation-Fall-Redemption narrative of Scripture. Sometimes a movie will represent the complete opposite ideas about what life is like and what it means to be human. But most of the time, movies present to us ideas that partly conform to Christian doctrine or ethics. Because movies come out of the ideas in the heart and minds of the women and men who create them, and Romans 2 tells us that God has written his truth on the hearts of all people.

2. If some of the ideas and values are Christian, are they inclusively or exclusively Christian? That is, do these ideas encompass Christianity and other religions or philosophic viewpoints, or do they exclude Christianity from other viewpoints? The case could be made that *The Book of Eli* presents Christian values in an inclusive way. It's subtle, and if you blinked you might have missed it. The movie isn't about preserving the Word of God. It's about preserving the religious books of the world. And it is no mistake that the Bible was placed right next to the Koran in the library at the end.

3. If some of the ideas and values in a work are Christian, are they a relatively complete version of the Christian view, or are they a relatively rudimentary version of Christian belief on a given topic? (Like *Criminal Minds*.)

Finally, a few cautions:

1. Just because a movie depicts unChristian ethics or values doesn't mean it's bad art. Likewise, just because a movie depicts Christian values doesn't mean it's good art.
2. Be careful not to allow your personal perspective to dominate the description of a particular work. Try to understand as many other perspectives as you can.
3. Do not expect a non-Christian to agree with you, arrive at the same conclusions, or completely understand your perspective. At best we can hope to offer a clear and coherent insight into a work and thereby gain an opportunity for a Christian voice to be heard.

Okay. So movies are important. And so is the need for Christian interpretation. So if you like movies

as much as I do, I hope you will go to the movies and keep your brain turned on because movies communicate messages about life and what it means to be human. And if we don't turn *on* our brains, we will unknowingly begin to believe untruths about life and what it means to be human. Movies are also important because they provide a good, nonthreatening way to talk about truth and worldview—ideas about life and what it means to be human—with our friends.

1. Kappelman, Todd, Film and the Christian, bit.ly/LvfUe1

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