“It’s OK to Patronize Pro-Atheism Films to Provoke Christians to Action”

Regarding *The Golden Compass*, I agree, age-appropriate viewing along with informed parental guidance is required for the film, but I personally don’t have a problem spending my money on this film. In fact I would pay double the cost to show my teenage children simply for the opportunity of “inoculating” them against the false perceptions of God, the church and sexuality that are pushed in these stories. I actually hope that the other movies are made so that Christians are forced to react INTELLIGENTLY regarding defending the Christian worldview. The war is already won! But we do need to pick up our swords and finish the battles.

But thank you for all your work for the sake of the Gospel of Christ, God bless!!

Thank you for your interest in my *Probe Alert* article. I commend you for your commitment to take advantage of opportunities to equip your children to recognize and respond to contrary worldviews pushed on us in our culture. As you know, I suggested this as one alternative in my article.

However, I don’t agree with the idea that we should encourage more of these movies to be made by supporting them financially (especially, when we can read the books and watch the movies in ways that do not directly benefit the author and producers). Let me summarize several reasons I am taking this position:

> *Most of the children and young adults who would view the movie and/or read the books will not have a parent discuss the worldview implications or issues with them. On the contrary, most of them will strongly identify with the*

> *protagonists in their battle against the authority of God. Without critically evaluating their feelings, this emotional experience can influence how they perceive their relationship with God. As we have witnessed over the last forty years, movies and television have helped move the norms of our society further and further away from holiness and purity.*
>
> *Phillip Pullman openly states his intent is to influence people to view Christianity as misguided and damaging. Providing him with more resources to support this objective does not seem to be a prudent use of the financial resources entrusted to us.*
>
> *Early financial success will lead to more advertising and greater distribution of these books to a largely unchaperoned audience. It will probably also encourage New Line Cinema to take a more anti-Christian approach in the production of the sequels.*

This trilogy and any associated movies are not going to single-handedly convert our culture to atheism. However, they reflect the greater and more public antagonism to religion being espoused in our society. In general, we should not encourage these attacks through our financial support. At the same time, we should not be on the defensive. When these attacks do occur, we can use them as opportunities to share Christ whose position as the Way, the Truth, and the Life is not threatened by the imaginations of those who oppose Him.

Steve,

Well said; I admit my pro-atheism movies position may be a bit naive; I do see the value of your arguments. Maybe I take this extreme view just to provoke my fellow Christians to take up arms and not be afraid of the fight as I find so many from my (reformed) Christian circles tend to take isolationistic approach rather than see logical and reasonable discourse as a legitimate means to answering a fool according to his folly or

casting down every lofty thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God.

Thanks for your reply, I really appreciate the attention to individual concerns, (even though I probably agree with almost everything you said).

I recommend Probe.org, Stand to Reason (str.org) and others to all my friends.

Keep up the good work!!

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12 Films of 2003 – A Christian Reviews Key Movies

Lord of the Rings, *Whale Rider*, and *Winged Migration*

This year the first of twelve films from 2003 that were especially notable is the final installment of Tolkien's trilogy *Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King*, directed by Peter Jackson. The conclusion of the final installment is structured around the hobbits Frodo (Elijah Wood), and Sam (Sean Astin) as they attempt to return the Ring to Mount Doom where it can be destroyed and save Middle Earth from those who would use the Ring for evil.

Gollum, the grotesque creature who was once a hobbit, continues to struggle with his dual nature; he loves both Frodo and the power of the Ring, but can only have one or the other. This is a valuable lesson for all persons who must make

decisions which will affect their lives for eternity. Unlike Gollum, Frodo, Sam, Gandalf, Arwen, and Aragorn are heroes who overcome great difficulties and extraordinary odds to do the right thing. They all simultaneously attempt to avoid the temptation of the Ring, and instead take the long road toward righteousness. Throughout all nine hours of the trilogy, and especially in this last installment, the epic battle in the heart of man and his nature to embrace evil instead of good serves as the thematic backdrop for some of the most amazing visuals in the history of film.

Those who enjoyed the *Lord of the Rings*, should also like *Whale Rider*. *Rider,* directed by Niki Caro, was the winner of audience awards at both the Sundance and Toronto Film Festivals. This film falls into categories of both coming-of-age films, and those which emphasize the triumph of the will. A young New Zealand girl named Pai (Keisha Castle-Hughes) is the surviving twin of a difficult birth which also claimed her mother's life. Koro (Rawiri Paratene) is the tribal chief and grandfather of Pai. Koro is a traditional male in a traditional New Zealand tribe, and Pai is a less than traditional young girl who challenges the accepted way of thinking and dares to believe that she can become the next chief.

Third in a series of extremely good films which can be recommended to all audiences is *Winged Migration*, a documentary about birds directed by Jacques Perrin. The birds in this film are all flying long distances for the winter, either north or south depending upon their hemisphere of origin. The entire picture is like a nature documentary on steroids; it has all of the wildlife footage one would expect, coupled with seamless shots from ultra-light planes and balloons. This is state of the art documentary that allows the viewer to experience the lives of birds as never before seen.

Luther and *Bonhoeffer*

A second group of notable films for 2003 is *Luther*, a dramatic rendering of one of the greatest of the sixteenth-century reformers, and *Bonhoeffer*: *Agent of Grace*, a historical documentary style drama about the German theologian who worked against the Nazis, and posthumously became one of the most important voices in twentieth-century theology.

The film titled simply *Luther* begins with the young reformer bargaining with God and vowing to enter the monastic order if his own life will be spared. He soon become the chief voice standing against the Holy Roman Church's practice of indulgences and overall spiritual blindness. The indulgences are a major form of income for the Catholic church, and Luther (Joseph Fiennes) finds himself in a kind of David and Goliath position. One of Luther's chief opponents was Leo XII (Uwe Ochsenknecht), who took the young monk's teachings and sermons to be a personal attack upon authority, as well as a financial threat to the empire. Fredrick the Wise (Peter Ustinov), the prince of Augsburg, begins to side with Luther's teaching, and a full scale religious schism erupts.

The film captures Luther's life from his call to become a monk through twenty five years of debate and persecution at the hands of the Roman Catholic Church, and ends with the start of what would become the Protestant Reformation.

Bonhoeffer: Agent Of Grace is a film about the life of Dietrich Bonhoeffer from the late 1930s to his death in Germany at the end of WW II in 1945. Bonhoeffer is in America observing the African-American style of worship when the film opens. America would be a safe place to sit out the war, but Bonhoeffer returns to Germany and begins a rhetorical campaign against Hitler, the Nazi party, and even the leaders of the church for their role in the rise of the Third Reich and of the persecution of the Jews.

Bonhoeffer joins the resistance movement when he returns to Germany, and soon he is being watched by the Gestapo. As the "final solution," the extermination of the Jews during the Holocaust, is implemented, he is arrested after a failed attempt on Hitler's life. Bonhoeffer's prison writings are very pragmatic, but they are also the reflections of a devout Christian who is wrestling with ethical dilemmas arising from the war. During times of war and great political evils, Christians must struggle with how much violence and evil can be used to resist an ultimately evil person or situation. Bonhoeffer was eventually executed in 1945 at the age of thirty-nine believing that there is a difference between the "cheap" grace we lavish on ourselves, and the more "costly" grace which may demand a man's life.

Master and Commander: The Far Side of the World and *The Station Agent*

Our list of notable films from 2003 continues with *Master and Commander*, an epic sea adventure set in 1805 when the British boasted that the sun never set on their empire. The film is based on the novels of Patrick O'Brian, and does for the early nineteenth century what *Saving Private Ryan* did for WW II; the film really makes viewers feel as though they are sailing the high seas in search of adventure.

Set on the *HMS Surprise*, the plot line follows the *Acheron*, a French warship, as it tries to catch the *Surprise* which is commanded by Capt. Jack Aubrey (Russell Crowe). Aubrey is contrasted with his friend, Stephen Maturin, the ship's surgeon. Capt. Aubrey is a pragmatist who pursues noble adventure and a life of war upon the sea. Maturin is a very introspective intellectual who travels with the British warship so he can collect animal and biological specimens. The contrast is highly textured and extremely well developed, affording the viewer a rare insight into the psyche of two

very different, if not totally opposite, men. All of this and high sea adventure involving very violent war scenes make for a thoroughly delightful film.

Another fairly accessible film, but not one recommended for those under seventeen, is Thomas McCarthy's film, *The Station Agent*, which is centered around a dwarf named Finbar McBride (Peter Dinklage). McBride has a passion for trains, and uses that passion to protect himself from those who would mock and pester him. His devotion to all things relating to trains is fully realized when he inherits an old run-down train station in the town of Newfoundland, New Jersey when his only friend in the world, Henry Styles (Paul Benjamin), dies. Finbar moves into the train station seeking peace and solitude from a world that has a hard time understanding someone who appears to be so different, but who is actually more human than those people who intentionally and unintentionally persecute him.

Finbar's hope for solitude is first interrupted by Joe Oramas (Bobby Cannavale), who drives a coffee truck and is always willing to give unsolicited advice to others. Finbar's solitude is further disrupted by Olivia Harris (Patricia Clarkson), a divorced woman who is working through the death of a child. Olivia almost hits Finbar with her car as he is coming and going from a nearby convenience store, presumably to emphasize his near invisibility to others. Like a good Flannery O'Connor short story, *The Station Agent* closes with a scene that will cause all viewers to examine their attitudes toward people who are different.

Elephant and *Thirteen*

Two films from 2003 that deal with teenagers are *Elephant*, from Gus Van Zant, and *Thirteen*, directed by Catherine Hardwicke.

Elephant's title comes from the familiar reference to an

elephant being in the room, and everyone pretending that it is not there. The film is a chronicle of one day in a Columbine-like high school, and the complete inability of those involved, as well as those viewing the film, to comprehend what is happening. The camera simply tracks the activities of the killers and their victims in the hours that lead up to the massacre. Then the viewer gets a front row seat to the killings that any reporter would love to have for a spot on the evening news. Van Zant is uses violence to protest violence, presumably believing that much of the violence we have in this country is due to not understanding how pervasive and real such violence is, or that it could happen to anyone.

The killers laugh and carry on in such an unconcerned manner that the viewer cannot believe they would strike out against their world by shooting their classmates. Christian viewers, however, should be able to watch the film knowing that the explanation for such behavior rests in the doctrine of original sin and man's fall from grace. It can also remind people that things happen that do not always follow our expectations.

In *Thirteen,* another film dealing with teenagers, the emphasis is on the difficulties faced by many adolescent girls. Evie (Nikki Reed) is a wild child who loves to flirt with danger, and is exactly the kind of girl you would not want your daughter to have as a friend. She is popular, sexually experienced, and lives without shame or worry. Evie's character is a sharp contrast with that of Tracy (Evan Rachel Wood), the good and unassuming girl who just wants to be cool and hang out with a more popular crowd. Evie begins to relate stories of sexual conquests and shoplifting sprees that are particularly impressive to Tracy. It seems as though Evie wants to clone herself as many times as possible.

Melanie (Holly Hunter), Tracy's mother, is a divorcée and recovering alcoholic who can barely make ends meet. She is a little naïve concerning her daughter's behavior, but begins to

have suspicions when Evie comes to live with them. Evie's behavior goes from bad to worse until a culminating scene where her lies are exposed, and Tracy begins to see the wisdom of her mother's advice.

Both *Elephant* and *Thirteen* are films which should be approached with caution. And while they are not for everyone, some people will find them to be among of the best examples of teen angst in recent years.

Mystic River, *Stone Reader*, and *Finding Nemo*

The last three films recommended as notable features from 2003 are *Mystic River*, *Stone Reader*, and *Finding Nemo*. *Mystic River* is Clint Eastwood's twenty-fourth film, and one of the handful he has directed but not also starred in. The story is centered around the lives of three boyhood friends who grow up, get married, and live normal if not boring lives.

The three friends, Jimmy, Dave and Sean (played by Sean Penn, Tim Robins and Kevin Beacon respectively), have tried to forget the time when one of them was molested by a man in their Boston neighborhood. The emotional trauma the young boys suffered is revisited when Katie, Jimmy's daughter, is brutally beaten to death. The two main suspects are Brendon, Katie's boyfriend, and Dave, who came home mumbling about beating up a mugger and was covered in blood.

Jimmy takes the law into his own hands when he believes he has discovered Katie's murderer. There is a connection between the revenge Jimmy executes and the molestation the men witnessed when they were young. There is a "mystic river" that flows in a man's life, and rarely is the destination reached the same as the one hoped for. *Mystic River* finishes as a meditation on time, growing old, and the way in which the past continually affects the future.

Stone Reader, a documentary by filmmaker Mark Moskowitz, opens with a search for Dow Mossman, an author who wrote a single novel only to "retire" and disappear into obscurity. There are plenty of films based on books, and others with authors as major or minor characters, but there are very few films so purely about books, authors, editors, and the difficult task of seeing even a single novel through to publication.

Editors and publishers provide some of the most interesting dialogue, discussing everything from the difficulties of publishing, to the classic, but real, anxiety of the author, and the plight of the one-novel wonder.

The documentary is also a quest and road film. It is a kind of odyssey for anyone who has loved a particular novel or its author, and wondered what became of them years later.

Finally, no list of notable films from 2003 would be complete without *Finding Nemo*, the animated film from Pixar, the studio responsible for *Toy Story*. In *Nemo,* the action is centered around an overprotective father and his son who are both fish. As in *Toy Story,* where the world of toys were brought to life, the Pixar people take viewers into the highly colorful world of the ocean. The viewer will be rooting for little Nemo as he is caught by a diver and is pursued by a loving father.

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Film and the Christian

How should a Christian view films? Todd Kappelman, a longtime film critic, calls us to exercise discernment in distinguishing between art and mere entertainment, without

damaging our spiritual vitality.

The Convergence of High and Low Culture

An examination of the history of our century will reveal the importance of viewing and studying film for any individuals who wish to understand themselves and their time and place. Film is essential because the distinction so many make between so called “high” and “low” culture has in fact disappeared (if it ever existed in the first place).

Approximately one hundred years ago the dawn of electronic technology, beginning with the invention of the radio, gave birth to mass media and communications. The increase in leisure time and wealth fostered the birth and development of an entertainment industry. The decline in the quality of education and the explosion in the popularity of television sealed the union between what was traditionally considered “high” art and popular culture. Western society is now defined more strictly by the image, the sound, and the moving picture than by the written word, which defined previous centuries. Seldom does anyone ask, “What have you read lately?” One is much more likely to hear the question, “What have you seen lately.” We have become, for better or worse, a visually oriented society. Because literature is no longer the dominant form of expression, scriptwriters, directors, and actors do more to shape the culture which we live in than do the giants of literature or philosophy. We may be at the point in the development of Western culture that the Great Books series needs to be supplemented by a Great Films series.

The church as a body has a long standing and somewhat understandable tradition of suspicion concerning narrative fiction, the concepts of which apply here to our discussion of film. A brief examination of positions held by some Christians from the past regarding written fictional narratives may help us to understand the concern some have with involvement in fictional narratives as recorded on film.

Alcuin, an influential Christian leader of the ninth century was extremely concerned about the worldliness he saw in the church. One of the things that troubled him the most was the monks' fondness for fictional literature and stories about heroes such as Beowulf and Ingeld. Writing to Higbald, Alcuin said: "Let the words of God be read aloud at the table in your refractory. The reader should be heard there, not the flute player; the Fathers of the Church, not the songs of the heathen. . . . What has Ingeld to do with Christ?"{1}

Tertullian, the father of Latin theology, writing six centuries earlier voiced a similar concern about Christians involved in secular matters when he said: "What has Athens to do with Jerusalem?"{2} Specifically, Tertullian believed that the study of pagan philosophers was detrimental to the Christian faith and should be avoided at all costs.

Paul, the apostle, writing to the Church at Corinth, said: "What partnership does righteousness have with iniquity? Or what fellowship has light with darkness? What accord has Christ with Belial?"{3}

Conclusion: The objections raised against the arts, both past and present, do have merit and should not be dismissed too quickly. Christians have a right and a responsibility to make sure that entertainment and art are not used in a manner that is damaging to their spiritual welfare. It is often a difficult call. For example, many Christians objected to the work of Federico Fellini and Ingmar Bergman in the fifties and sixties, yet men such as Francis Schaeffer thought that it was necessary to pay attention to what these individuals were saying and why.

The Nature of Film and the Opportunity for Christians

Properly understood film is a narrative medium, a kind of "visual book" with a beginning, middle, and ending that

contains some degree of resolution. All film is not created equal; some movies are made with the express purpose of providing diversionary entertainment, while others represent the sincere efforts of artists to make works of art that reflect human emotions and call people to a more reflective existence. This second category of film should be considered an art form and is therefore worthy of the same attention that any other art such as the ballet, sculpture, or painting receives.

Art is the embodiment of man's response to reality and his attempt to order his experience of that reality.{4} Man has always and will continue to express his hope and excitement, as well as his fears and reservations about life, death, and what it means to be human through the arts. He will seek to express his world through all available means, and presently that includes film. Schindler's List, a recent film by Steven Spielberg, is an excellent example of film's ability to express man's hopes and fears.

As a picture of reality, film is able to convey an enormous range of human experiences and emotions. The people one encounters in films are frequently like us whether they are Christian or not. Often the people we see in the better films are struggling with some of the most important questions in life. They are attempting to find meaning in what often appears to be a meaningless universe. These people are often a vehicle used by a director, producer, or writer to prompt us to ask the larger questions of ourselves.

Film is not and should not be required to be "uplifting" or "inspiring." Christians should remember that non-Christians also have struggles and wrestle with the meaning of life and their place and purpose in the universe. Christians and non-Christians will not and should not be expected to come to the same conclusions to the problems they face in the fictional universe of film. The Scriptures indicate that Christians and non-Christians are different, and this should be a point of

celebration, not alarm, for the Christian audience.

T. S. Eliot, speaking about literature, but with much that can be applied to film, had this advice for the Christian:

> Literary criticism should be completed from a definite ethical and theological standpoint…. It is necessary for Christian readers [and film goers by extension], to scrutinize their reading, [again film by extension], especially of works of imagination, with explicit ethical and theological standards.{5}

Therefore, Christians should take their worldview with them when they attend and comment on any film. They should be cautious about pronouncing a film that does not conform with Christian beliefs or their particular notion of orthodoxy as unfit for consumption or undeserving of a right to exist as art.

Conclusion: The need for participation in film arises from not only the diversity of material with which the medium deals, but also from the plurality of possible interpretations concerning a given film. Christians have an opportunity to influence their culture by entering the arena of dialogue provided by film and contending for their positions and voicing their objections with sophistication, generosity, and a willingness to hear from those of opposing beliefs.

Some Concerns about Christian Participation in Cinema{6}

Christians are often concerned about the content of certain films and the appropriateness of viewing particular pieces. This is a valid concern that should not be dismissed too quickly and certainly deserves a response from those who do view objectionable material. The two primary areas of concern leveled by the many detractors of contemporary culture as it pertains to film are found in the categories of gratuitous sex

and violence. It is crucial that Christians understand the exact nature of sex and violence, gratuitous and otherwise, and how it may be employed in art. Taking only violence as the representative issue of these two concerns, we must ask ourselves what, if any, redeeming value does it have, and can it be used and viewed under some circumstances?

We might turn to the use of gratuitous violence in literature in order to better understand the role of violence in film. If the former is understood and embraced (albeit with reservation), the latter may also be understood and embraced (again with caution) as a means of expression employed by a new image-driven culture.

The image of gratuitous violence in modernity has one of its first and most important articulations in *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, by Samuel Taylor Coleridge. Recall that in the poem the sailor shoots an albatross for absolutely no reason and is condemned by his fellow sailors, who believed the bird was a good omen, to wear the dead body around his neck. The ship is ravaged by plague, and only the cursed mariner survives. After many days of soul searching on the ghost ship, the mariner pronounces a blessing upon all of creation and atones for his wrongs. A sister ship saves the man, and he begins to evangelistically tell his story to anyone who will listen.

Every time this poem is read in a class or other group there is invariably some person who is fixated on the act of violence and emphasizes it to the point of losing the meaning of the entire poem. The story is about a mariner who realizes the errors of his ways, repents, and comes to a restored relationship with creation and other men. For Coleridge, the act of violence thus becomes the vehicle for the turning of the character’s soul from an infernal orientation to the paradisal. Other authors have used similar methods. Dante, for example, repeats a similar pattern when he explored the spiritual realms in his poetic chronicle *The Divine Comedy*.

First, he takes his readers through the harshness, pain, and misery of the Inferno before moving into Purgatory and finally into the bliss and joy of Paradise. Dostoyevsky composed four novels that begin with the heinous crime of Raskolnikov and develop to the salvation of the Karamazov brothers.

Conclusion: The writers mentioned here and many serious, contemporary film makers often explore the darkness of the human condition. They don't do it simply to posture or exploit, but to see deeply and lay bare the problems and tensions. But, they also do it to look for answers, even the light of salvation/Salvation. The picture is not always pretty, and the very ugliness of the scene is often necessary to accurately portray the degree of depravity and the miracle of salvific turns in fiction. By virtue of their full acquaintance with the dark side of the human condition, when they propose solutions, these solutions appear to be viable and realistic.

Biblical Examples of Gratuitous Violence

The prohibition against and objections to the use of violence in film may be understood better through an examination of the use of violence in the Bible.

One example found in Scriptures is in the thirteenth chapter of the book of Isaiah. In verses fifteen and sixteen the prophet is forecasting the particulars of the future Assyrian military invasion and the conditions the people of Israel and the surrounding countries will experience. He writes:

> Whoever is captured will be thrust through; all who are caught will fall by the sword. Their infants will be dashed to pieces before their eyes; their houses will be looted and their wives ravished (Isaiah 13:15-16).

The prophet is talking about the impaling of men by the conquering armies, the willful smashing of infants upon the

rocks, and the raping of women. In an oral and textual based society, those who heard the words of Isaiah would have been able to imagine the horrors he described and would have made mental images of the scenes.

In an image-driven society if this scene were to be part of a movie, a scriptwriter and director would have actors and actresses play the parts, and the violence would be obvious to all. Recall the scene in The Ten Commandments where the Egyptian armies attempted to follow Moses across the Red Sea. One sees horses and soldiers trapped under tons of water. Their bodies go limp before they can get to the surface. And those who can make it to the top face certain death trying to swim back to shore. In spite of these, and other horrific scenes, this movie is often held to be a "Christian classic" and deemed to be a good family film by many.

A second and even more disturbing example of gratuitous violence in the Bible is found in the twentieth chapter of Judges. Here a Levite and his concubine enter the house of an old man from the hill country of Ephraim to spend the night. While they are there, some wicked men in the city want to have homosexual relations with the Levite traveler and demand that the old man hand them over. The evil men take the man's concubine, rape and kill her, leaving her dead body in the doorway. The traveler is so distraught that he cuts his concubine into twelve pieces and sends the body parts back to his fellow Israelites. The Israelites then form a revenge party and go into battle with the Benjamites who will not turn over the evil men for punishment.

Again, if this story were to be translated into a visual medium the scenes of rape and later dismemberment of a body, even if they were filmed in standards from the forties or fifties, would be very disturbing.

Conclusion: The purpose of the violence in these examples may be that the details in each passage provide information which

serves as a reason for a latter action. Or, the information provided shows us something about the nature of God and the way He deals with sin. If both these examples show a difficult, but necessary use of violence in telling a story, then perhaps violence may be used (portrayed) for redemptive purposes in fictional mediums such as film. This is not an airtight argument, rather the issue is raised as a matter for consideration while keeping in mind that Christians should always avoid living a vicariously sinful life through any artistic medium.

Weaker Brother Considerations in Viewing Film

Paul's great teaching concerning meat sacrificed to idols and the relationship of the stronger and weaker brothers to one another is laid out in 1 Corinthians 8. We should remember that Paul clearly puts the burden of responsibility on the stronger brother. It is this person who should have the interest of the weaker brother in mind.

Persons who exercise rampant Christian freedom when watching films that are objectionable to some others does not necessarily mean that they are strong Christians. It could indicate that these people are too weak to control their passions and are hiding behind the argument that they are a stronger brother. Do not urge others to participate in something that you, as a Christian, feel comfortable doing if they have reservations. You may inadvertently cause the other person to sin.

There are basically three positions related to Christians viewing film.

The first of these three is prohibition. This is the belief that films, and often television and other forms of entertainment, are inherently evil and detrimental to the Christian's spiritual well being. Persons who maintain this

position avoid all film, regardless of the rating or reputed benefits, and urge others to do the same.

Abstinence is the second position. This is the belief that it is permissible for Christians to view films, but for personal reasons this person does not choose to do so. This may be for reasons ranging from a concern for the use of time or no real desire to watch film, to avoidance because it may cause them or someone they are concerned about to stumble. Willingly abstaining from some or all films does not automatically make one a weaker brother, and this charge should be avoided! One should avoid labeling a fellow Christian "weaker" for choosing to abstain from participation in some behavior due to matters of conscience.

Moderation is the final position. This is the belief that it is permissible to watch films and that one may do so within a certain framework of moderation. This person willingly views some films but considers others to be inappropriate for Christians. There is a great deal of disagreement here about what a Christian can or cannot and should or should not watch. Although some of these disagreements are matters of principle and not of taste, Christian charity should be practiced whenever one is uncertain.

Conclusion: There is a valid history of concern about Christian involvement in the arts and fictional and imaginative literature. This issue extends to the medium of film and manifests similar concerns about film and Christians who view film. However, because film is one of the dominant mediums of cultural expression, film criticism is necessary. If Christians do not make their voices heard then others, often non-Christians, will dominate the discussion. All films contain the philosophical persuasions of the persons who contribute to their development, and it is the job of the Christian who participates in these arts to make insightful, fair, and well-informed evaluations of the work. Not everyone feels comfortable in viewing some (or any) films and the

Christian should be especially mindful of the beliefs of others and always have the interest of fellow believers as well as non-believers in mind. While “film,” the artistic expression of the cinematic medium has been the focus and not “movies,” the entertainment based expression, much of what has been said of the former is applicable to the later.

Appendix

Christians should be aware that the freedoms exercised in participation in the film arts are privileges and should not be practiced to the point of vicarious living through escape into fictitious worlds. In 1 Corinthians 10: 23-31 (and 6:12) the Apostle Paul writes that “everything is permissible, but not everything is constructive.”

He is addressing the issue of meat sacrificed to idols in chapter 10 and sexual purity in chapter 6. This may serve as a guide for Christians who are concerned about their involvement in film and a caution against construing what is written here as a license to watch anything and everything. The Apostle is very careful to distinguish between that which is permissible and that which is constructive, or expedient. What Paul means is that, in Christ, believers have freedoms which extend to all areas of life, but these freedoms have the potential to be exercised carelessly or without regard for others, and thus become sin. The guiding rule here is that Christians should seek the good of others and not their own desires. This would mean that anyone who is participating in film that is objectionable should have the interests of others, both believers and non-believers, in mind. We live in a fallen world and almost everything we touch we affect with our fallen nature, the arts notwithstanding. If we are to be active in redeeming the culture for the glory of God, then by necessity we must participate in the culture and be salt and light to a very dark and unsavory world. It is imperative that Christians who are active in their culture and interested in participating in the ever growing “culture wars,” remember

Paul's admonition in Philippians that we "work out our salvation daily with fear and trembling." Anything less would be flirting with spiritual disaster and would not bring glory to God.

Parents concerned for the spiritual and psychological welfare of their children would do well to offer more than a list of prohibitions against what films can be viewed. As with anything that involves issues of Christian freedom, maturity in individual matters must be taken into account. The example of a young child's first BB gun may serve as an illustration. In some instances a child may be ready for the first air rifle at age twelve or thirteen. Other children may not be ready until they are eighteen, and some may best served if they never possess the gun in question. Parents should realize that film is a narrative medium which often contains complex philosophical ideas. To continue to absorb films at the current rate and not offer thoughtful criticism on what we are watching is equivalent to visiting museums and announcing that the Picasso or Rembrandt retrospective is "cool" or "stupid." If we are concerned parents, and wish to gain the respect of our children, we can and must do better than this.

Notes

1. "Letter to Higbald," as quoted in Eleanor S. Duckett, *Alcuin, Friend of Charlemagne* (New York:Macmillan, 1951), 209.
2. Tertullian, *On the Against Heretics*, chap. 7.
3. Paul, 2 Corinthians 6:14-15.
4. John Dixon, Jr., *Nature and Grace in Art,* as quoted in Leland Ryken's *The Liberated Imagination*, p.23.
5. T. S. Eliot, *Religion and Literature.*
6. Much of the material for this section was first articulated by Jeff Hanson, my co-editor, in the March/April issue of *The Antithesis,* vol. 1, no. 2, 1995.

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