

## Responding Personally to Films

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The primary response to a film is inevitably personal. Any movie will impact on me in very particular ways because of the kind of person I am, the interests I have, the knowledge I have accumulated and the experiences I have had. Other people will not respond in the same way. A strong sense of connection with the film can make viewers more open to the ideas within it and more sympathetic to the values it portrays. Conversely, a lack of connection can make viewers feel very hostile to a film's ideas and values – and the lack of connection may be because of a worldview clash. A strong atheist is likely to have a deep-seated resistance to the worldview and perhaps even the story of *The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* (Andrew Adamson, 2005), for example.

Since this book is about worldviews in films, much of what we have considered has been at the largely intellectual and moral levels of beliefs and values. But it is important to realise that our personal response to a movie must also take place at a number of levels, some of which impact us more strongly than others. Some viewers are caught up in the plot and need to work hard to notice the details of characterization or *Mise-en-scène*. Others, amazingly, do not even seem to care about plot. Two filmgoers interviewed in a study of audience responses to *Judge Dredd* (Danny Cannon, 1995) just wanted 'lots of blood', explosions, impressive effects and dead bodies. They were utterly dismissive of watching a film for its story: 'We don't watch it for that! We watch it for the Action, well I do, anyway.'<sup>3</sup> For some people, the dialogue is what holds their attention – perhaps because they are generally very people-oriented. Others are very visual and respond most strongly to the aesthetic beauty of the cinematography. Christians can sometimes get completely caught up on the morality of a film. If we really want to engage well with films, it is important that we learn to respond to films at a variety of levels – including the aesthetic and emotional dimensions of the movie. We should neither be like some film theorists who have a solely academic approach to films, nor like those movie critics who only think about a film's entertainment value. Our engagement with any aspect of our culture should not be either entirely intellectual or entirely non-intellectual. Rather, as Christians who understand what it means to be God's image-bearers, we should respond holistically since film impacts us at different levels of our being. Let me summarise some of the levels at which we need to respond:

### The aesthetic level

The aesthetic dimension is immensely important to life – more so, I am convinced, than we often allow for. Within the church (at least, within the Protestant tradition from which I come) we have sometimes seen it as an optional extra. It might not be stated quite so baldly, but there has at times been a tendency to take a rather functional approach to life. This is largely a result of the false division of life into the sacred and the secular. Creativity expressed within the 'sacred' dimension – church music, religious poetry, explicitly Christian art – is all well and good, but any form of art outside the sacred sphere is dismissed as secular. It is regarded at best as neutral; often as worldly and corrupting. This means that certain expressions of creativity and the appreciation of beauty have not always been given the place they deserve in our theology or in our worldview. Entire modes of creative expression have been written off at times in church history: dancing, popular music and cinema have been especially disparaged.

But the aesthetic dimension is an integral part of God's creation. Genesis 2:9 notes that trees were 'pleasing to the eye' (NIV) as well as having their more functional role of providing food. Later in

the chapter, when describing the location of Eden, our attention is drawn to the gold, aromatic resin and onyx present there (v. 12). It is significant that these three substances are valued for their beauty rather than for their usefulness.<sup>4</sup> Our human creativity is a reflection of God's creativity – whether it is used for supposedly sacred or secular purposes. John Calvin insisted that 'all truth is God's truth', but we could equally say that all beauty is God's beauty. Just as any genuine truth which we discover must be consistent with God and his nature, so too any beauty is either created by God, or is a product of God's image and likeness manifesting itself in the artist. The purpose to which beauty is put is another matter – a matter of truth, integrity and morality, but we can and must value that which is beautiful.

Our aesthetic appreciation works at a deep, instinctive, visceral level and we cannot always clearly articulate how something impacts on us. When Andy Dufresne (Tim Robbins) plays Mozart's 'Canzonetta sull'aria' from *The Marriage of Figaro* over the prison tannoy in *The Shawshank Redemption* (Frank Darabont, 1994), our hearts soar with the music, and when Morgan Freeman's voiceover tells that, 'at that moment every man in Shawshank [Prison] felt free,' we know exactly what he means.<sup>5</sup> When we see Jackie Elliot weeping with the emotion of seeing the ballet *Swan Lake* in *Billy Elliot* (Stephen Daldry, 2000), and then see Billy's extraordinarily majestic, graceful leap into the air when he makes his entrance as principal dancer, we too weep with joy. This is what Billy (Jamie Bell) started working towards years before. He has triumphed over his social background and over prejudice, and that wonderful leap to Tchaikovsky's stirring music sums it all up. When we see the beauty of the Irish countryside *The Wind that Shakes the Barley* (Ken Loach, 2006), we are stirred by its wild beauty and tranquillity, and it forms an important counterpoint to the violent events portrayed.

We feel these moments deep down inside; we are moved emotionally. These are transcendent experiences, not intellectual ones, and many non-religious people regard the experience of great beauty as a spiritual thing. This is why I have come to feel that the experience of beauty is somehow associated with the experience of hope. The beauty takes us beyond ourselves, pointing to something greater. Even Billy Elliot's dance of rage, to the soundtrack of The Jam's 'A Town Called Malice', shouts at us that there is more to life than his father realises, and makes us feel the injustice of stopping this boy from developing his exceptional gifts. Despite the fact that Billy ultimately crashes into a corrugated iron gate at the end of the road – an obvious metaphor for the constraints on Billy – we still feel that such talent must eventually triumph over the circumstances.

There is a wider sense to this aesthetic level of response, though. Identifying the aesthetic dimension exclusively with superficial, obvious beauty is too narrow. It also includes order, coherence, diversity and rightness (something being right for its context – which can be related to the functional dimension), truth and other aspects which are not obviously 'beautiful'. Jeremy Begbie argues that a Christian understanding of beauty should be grounded in 'the transformation of the disorder of creation in the history of Jesus Christ.'<sup>6</sup> That is, a central aspect of redemption through Christ is the undoing of disorder resulting from the Fall – both within individual lives and within creation as a whole. *The Lake House* (Alejandro Agresti, 2006) is not a great film, but it does celebrate the architecture of Chicago and reminds us what extraordinarily wonderful things humans can do with their environments, even in cities. It reminds us that the best architecture needs to work sympathetically with the natural light, and connect with the natural surroundings. For many people, a glass and steel skyscraper is hardly beautiful, yet it can still be aesthetically satisfying. The scenes of the D-Day invasion in *Saving Private Ryan* (Steven Spielberg, 1998) were not beautiful, but they were aesthetically powerful. Responding aesthetically, then, is not simply about looking for moving examples of beauty within films, but includes recognising other aesthetic values. In particular, in the case of films, it includes the recognition of excellence in every aspect of the film-making and writing. *Fight Club* (David Fincher, 1999), for example, is harsh and disturbing but it is extremely cleverly written, powerfully acted and brilliantly directed.

## The emotional level

Movies like Steven Spielberg's *Schindler's List* (1993) and *Munich* (2005) have little *beauty* within them, but they are powerful stories and (for many viewers) excellent films. They are at times disturbing, even harrowing, depictions of traumatic moments from the last century, and their excellence as films arises in part from the honesty with which they handle the events within them.<sup>7</sup> Such powerful films cannot help but affect us emotionally and it is right that they do so; if we approach them dispassionately and clinically (in our concern to analyse worldviews, perhaps), then we do not allow the film to communicate with us as the director intended. One of the difficulties here is that some viewers regard the emotionally intense moments of such films as being manipulative. Spielberg in particular is frequently criticized for playing with the emotions of the audience, manufacturing a lump in the throat rather than seriously engaging with the issues. Others, though, see the creation of emotion experiences as a vital element of films. If Spielberg causes viewers to feel in a certain way, he is enabling us to feel like he does at that point. Whether or not we agree with him when we further reflect on the film is not the point: as a film-maker he has enabled us (legitimately) to identify with his perspective for a while.

Regardless of whether or not emotional manipulation is at work, we *ought* to come away from a viewing of *Schindler's List* or *Hotel Rwanda* (Terry George, 2004) overwhelmed with grief at the horror of man's inhumanity, and profoundly moved at the courage of people like Oskar Schindler (Liam Neeson) and Paul Rusesabagina (Don Cheadle) to do what they can in the face of it. We should weep with anguished joy at the irrepressibly enthusiastic way in which Guido (Roberto Benigni) makes concentration camp life bearable for his son, in *Life is Beautiful* (Benigni, 1997). We ought to feel the agony of the choice facing Justine in *The Good Girl* (Manuel Arteta, 2002): to head off down the open road with her criminal lover Holden for a life of freedom, passion and excitement, or to do the right thing, telling the truth and returning to her husband, despite the lovelessness of her marriage and the dullness of her small-town life. We should ache for Rick (Humphrey Bogart) as he overcomes his feelings for his former lover Ilsa (Ingrid Bergman) and helps her to escape the Nazi authorities with her resistance leader husband (Paul Henreid) in *Casablanca* (Michael Curtiz, 1942). Feeling the emotional power of a story is an important part of our engagement with it, and it may be that sometimes we have to watch a film once to feel its emotional force, and a second time to analyse its worldview.

## The ethical level

Questions of ethics are deeply intertwined with questions of worldview as we have already seen in previous chapters. However, we do need to respond to a film at an explicitly ethical level as opposed to just understanding the ethical dimensions of its worldview. There are four interrelated aspects to this. The most important question to ask is whether or not the film is being truthful. That is, does it deal with the issues of life with integrity? Is the world reflected in the film authentic, in that it shows something of the glory of humanity created in God's image, or of the struggle and difficulty of life in a fallen world?<sup>8</sup> Gordon Matties writes that we should

approach movies 'dialogically,' that is, by recognizing ways in which movies either illuminate our world and our lives with glimmers of transcendence or cast shadows of brokenness and alienation.<sup>9</sup>

*Babette's Feast* (Gabriel Axel, 1987) is both a wonderful celebration of the great gift of food and an indictment of faith that has fossilized into mere religious observance. Peter Fraser discusses the integrity with which *Brief Encounter* (David Lean, 1945) handles the subject of adultery:

. . . the characters face a situation that is quite plausible, and they react to it quite plausibly. . . . That adultery is wrong and that we wished it would never happen and that we hope and pray that we never are tempted in that way is beside the point. The point is that it does happen, even to 'good' people . . . and they suffer as a result. . . . *Brief Encounter* begs us

to feel compassion for human beings in a broken world who want to be happy, but do not have the strength on their own to accomplish that.<sup>10</sup>

In his book *Useless Beauty*,<sup>11</sup> Robert Johnston discusses a number of films which express the brokenness of the world as well as a 'fragile beauty'. One of his examples is *Monster's Ball* (Marc Forster, 2001), which focuses on two profoundly broken people. Hank is a prison officer (Billy Bob Thornton) who is in charge of the death row team. His harsh treatment of his son results in the young man's suicide. Leticia (Halle Berry) is the widow of the executed man. Her grief is compounded when her son is killed by a hit and run driver. Hank's humanity overcomes his racism to help her, and they gradually develop a relationship. They make love desperately, roughly, out of their deep need for connection with another human being. The relationship grows tentatively and increasingly tenderly, offering them – and us – a glimmer of hope, despite Leticia's discovery that Hank had been in charge of her husband's execution. This is not a comfortable film, but it is honest – about the potential difficulties of parent-child relationships, the destructive effects of racism, the impact of crime, the awfulness of capital punishment, the deep need for connection and love, and more besides. Johnston shows how such glimpses of fragile beauty in the midst of a broken, hopeless world echo the themes of Ecclesiastes. They are pointers, as is Ecclesiastes, to the fact that life has intimations of meaning within it, because of the way God has made us. They point beyond our circumstances to God himself, since there is only any meaning and any value if God really is there.

Secondly, and closely related to the question of whether or not the film is being truthful, we need to ask, does it raise the right questions? The answers we see on screen may be very inadequate, but it is vitally important to raise honest questions about life, which are often profound in their implications. *Collateral* (Michael Mann, 2004), for example, asks some important ethical questions yet presents little in the way of answers.

The third aspect of the ethical dimension is the obvious question of whether or not the morality we see portrayed on screen is consistent with biblical morality. Fourth, we need to ask what stance the movie is adopting towards the moral behaviour within it. That is, does it ultimately commend or condemn certain behaviour? How does this film suggest I should live? *About a Boy* (Chris and Paul Weitz, 2002), for example, shows Will (Hugh Grant) as a dissolute playboy who is utterly self-centred, rejoicing in his independence. Even his acts of kindness are done solely with the intention of attracting a woman. But by the end of the film he realises that he does, in fact, need real relationships rather than acquaintances and one-night stands. Life, he discovers, is about giving and receiving love. Ultimately, at least some of his immoral behaviour has been undermined.

## The worldview level

Since the bulk of this book has been about understanding movies at the level of worldviews, I need say little more about it at this point, except to reinforce that it is vital that we do work at responding to films in this way.

As we saw in Chapter Two, we need to both celebrate the good and challenge the bad. There are aspects of virtually all films about which we can be positive (which is not to say that we can commend virtually all films). The more positive elements there are, the more sympathetic we are likely to feel to the movie as a whole. It is good to have plenty to be enthusiastic about, but we need to bear in mind that this could make us less alert to the areas of disagreement. We may thus fail to notice or be concerned by some other elements. The positive elements which may win our uncritical admiration for a movie may be nothing to do with the worldview, but may be emotional, born out of its sheer beauty and emotional weight. Think, for instance, of *The English Patient* (Anthony Minghella, 1996). The breathtaking cinematography, moving score and heartfelt emotion can cause us to overlook the immorality of the value system within the film, which includes

infidelity, betrayal, treason and euthanasia. On the other hand, disagreeing with the worldview of a film should not stop us from praising other aspects of it (such as those we have already mentioned in this chapter). The point is to keep our critical faculties alert so that we are neither overly positive nor overly negative in our reactions. As we saw in Chapter One, we always need to allow for both faces of reality – that which reflects God’s image in humanity and that which reflects human rebellion.

It is only fair to point out, though, as I have already intimated, that learning to ‘read’ a film in this way can be hard work at first. But it is only through practice – and preferably by going through the learning experience with others – that it becomes a natural part of one’s viewing. Do not expect to be able to walk straight out of the next movie you see and do a rigorous, in-depth analysis of the worldview. It may be a question of just spotting one or two things in each film to start with, but as you become more experienced, so you will find yourself seeing more. It is something which we can always keep on improving at since the nature of cinema is that we have to contend both with great complexity (even within a single film) as well as great diversity.

## The spiritual level

Just as I reject the distinction between sacred and secular, I also want to reject the notion that some of life is spiritual, while some of it is not. All of life is spiritual in some sense, and all of it is to be done for God’s glory.<sup>12</sup> As the early twentieth century theologian and Dutch Prime Minister Abraham Kuyper once said

No single piece of our mental world is to be hermetically sealed off from the rest, and there is not a square inch in the whole domain of our human existence over which Christ, who is Sovereign over all, does not cry: ‘Mine!’<sup>13</sup>

However, we do also need to think about our spiritual growth in relation to the movies we see. As I have already noted, we are to walk a tightrope between engaging meaningfully with our culture and developing our holiness. It is relatively easy to identify that which is likely to make me fall off on the side of compromise, though it is harder to have the self-discipline not to do so. But spiritual growth is more than just a matter of not falling when we are tempted; it is also a question of being aware of weak points and actively working at developing in every area. Yes, movies can present images and ideas which have a negative effect on me, but they can both help me to see more clearly what I am like and can present images and ideas which can have a very positive impact. We can respond spiritually to films by identifying sinful aspects of ourselves, through seeing them lived out on screen perhaps, and repenting of them. And we can respond spiritually by determining to emulate positive values and characteristics we see on screen.

For example, in *Jerry Maguire* (Cameron Crowe, 1996), it is straightforward to identify the early focus on money. We can sagely shake our heads and say that life for a Christian is not about ‘showing me the money,’ and feel self-satisfied that we have identified and rejected the temptation. But we must recognise that Rod Tidwell (Cuba Gooding Jr.) is concerned to get a good financial deal because he knows he cannot play football for much longer and he needs to provide for his family’s future. Now it is a rather more subtle problem: that of justifying our materialism on the basis of providing for our family. The issues are those of self-justification and self-sufficiency rather than dependence on God, and of believing that we have the right to a standard of living comparable to our friends. Our quick reaction in condemning Rod may blind us to the fact that he has very similar values to us. Or what about Jerry (Tom Cruise) himself? He is hardworking, motivated and principled. But he is completely wrapped up in his work and Dorothy (Renée Zellweger) is neglected. This is not presented in any way in the movie as something which I might *want* to emulate, but it does hold up a mirror to many of us. We are hardworking, motivated, principled, yes. But also neglectful and, therefore, self-absorbed – whatever justifying gloss we may put on it. Dorothy, however, is inspired by what she sees as visionary leadership; she is self-

sacrificing and committed to the work, but, more crucially, she is committed to Jerry himself. Eventually, Jerry is able to recognise just how important this relationship is, and echoes the words of the deaf person in the elevator from early in the film: 'You complete me.' That should in one sense be true of the partners in any marriage. At the same time, it can never be fully true because the function of marriage is to point us beyond human relationships to Jesus the Bridegroom. It is him who can ultimately complete each one of us. If I am responding at a spiritual level to *Jerry Maguire*, I will search my heart to see how self-obsessed I am, and look to work harder at my relationships both with my family and with God.

Another important aspect of responding spiritually to movies is that many films deliberately include religious motifs or ideas, or have examples of self-sacrifice which echo that of Jesus Christ in some way. In *The Iron Giant* (Brad Bird, 1999), the robot sacrifices himself and is miraculously resurrected. In *The Spitfire Grill* (Lee David Zlotoff, 1996), Percy Talbott (Alison Elliott) is an outsider who turns around a community and dies for the sake of someone else. Luke (Paul Newman) in *Cool Hand Luke* (Stuart Rosenberg, 1967) is a very deliberate Christ figure with echoes of his miracles, crucifixion and resurrection. Christ may be echoed in more ways than sacrifice or death, however: the way Ernesto (Ché) Guevara (Gael García Bernal) shakes hands with leprosy patients in *The Motorcycle Diaries* (Walter Salles, 2004) or the care and compassion of Sister Helen Prejean (Susan Sarandon) in *Dead Man Walking* (Tim Robbins, 1995). These ingredients may help us to understand more fully or see more clearly some aspect of Jesus' life and sacrifice, so moving us to be more grateful for our salvation and more determined to live in the light of it.