Introduction

The motion picture industry has been a constant source of controversy in the debate on morals and values in society. Since its beginnings in the 19th century, artists, politicians and clergy have realized the power of the motion picture to communicate messages and sway public opinion. The power to recreate the events of Scripture provided a special allure for many clergy and as such, the Church appropriated motion picture technology almost immediately. The religiously minded exploited this technology to produce some of the first motion pictures, including *The Passion Play of Oberammergau* (1898) and *From the Manger to the Cross* (1912). At the same time, however, the lack of any government legislation or industry self-regulation resulted in motion pictures that some considered morally offensive. Ironically, among the first motion pictures to arouse controversy were biblical epics directed by Cecil B. DeMille. In *The Ten Commandments* (1923), *The King of Kings* (1927) and *The Sign of the Cross* (1932), DeMille placed scandalous scenes within the context of a religious story. Though successful at the box office, these movies and others like them began to generate public outrage and demands that either the industry or the government address the problem of immorality in movies.

In the 1930s, two developments attempted to address the perceived threat that movies posed to social standards of morality: (1) the motion picture industry created the Production Code, which set up strict guidelines regulating acceptable and unacceptable content, and (2) the Roman Catholic Church founded the Legion of Decency with an express mission to purify cinema. In its preamble, the Production Code recognized the power of movies and their impact on morality:

> Hence, though regarding motion pictures primarily as entertainment without any explicit purpose of teaching or propaganda, [motion picture producers] know that the motion picture within its own field of entertainment may be directly responsible for spiritual or moral progress, for higher types of social life, and for much correct thinking (MPPDA 1980:391).

As its first general principle, the Code avowed, "no picture shall be produced which will lower the moral standards of those who see it" (MPPDA 1980:391). With its ability to guarantee a boycott of any movie that did not meet these requirements of the Code, the Legion of Decency became the enforcement agency for the Code. For nearly two decades, the Code and the Legion policed the morality of motion pictures.

By the 1950s, however, opinions about motion pictures began to change. Rather than being perceived only as entertainment, actors, directors, producers and critics extolled the artistic qualities of motion pictures. Movies gradually gained acceptance as art and as such, the standards of the Code seemed excessively arbitrary and restrictive. Even among members of the Legion, decisions to condemn certain movies were highly divisive issues. Many argued that the artistic qualities of some movies outweighed the impact of any potentially offensive content. In addition, the privatization of faith and secularization of culture in the post-World War II era limited the Legion's power to compel boycotts of condemned movies. The Code and the Legion gradually disintegrated. In its place, the Motion Picture Association of America authored and promoted the Code of Self-Regulation. The new Code reflected the change in perspective on movies, faith, culture and morality. The two declared objectives of the new Code promoted artistic freedom and in the place of censorship, artistic responsibility sensitive to "the standards of the larger society" (MPAA 1980:405). Furthermore, the Code asserted that "parents have the primary responsibility to guide their children in the kind of . . . movies and other entertainment to which they are exposed" (MPAA 1980:405). The motion picture industry claimed that its sole responsibility was to inform the parent of "pertinent information about their pictures which will assist parents to fulfill their responsibilities" (MPAA 1980:405-406). To this end, the new Code introduced the ratings system that is still in use today.

Current Christian Approaches to Movies

Since the promulgation of the Code of Self-Regulation in 1968, Christians have generally accepted one of two leading approaches to motion pictures: (1) the moralistic approach, and (2)

the critical approach. The moralistic approach evaluates movies as entertainment and the critical approach evaluates movies as an art form.

The Moralistic Approach

The moralistic approach assesses the moral value of movies by judging the content on a scale from offensive to uplifting. For many Christians, the ideology reflected in the Production Code and the Legion of Decency motivates this approach to movies. Particularly within the Fundamentalist tradition, movies that depict evil are perceived as participating in and promoting that evil. The ChildCare Action Project (CAP), a non-profit Christian ministry, is one American organization that shares this perspective. This organization reviews movies and catalogues morally offensive content to formulate a CAP score. On its website, CAP declares,

> The CAP Analysis Model makes no scoring allowances for trumped-up "messages" to excuse or for manufacturing of justification for aberrant behavior or imagery, or for camouflaging such ignominy with "redeeming" programming. Disguising sinful behavior in a theme plot does not excuse the sinful behavior of either the one who is drawing pleasure from the sinful display or the practitioners demonstrating the sinful behavior (CAP n.d.:n.p.).

In support of its approach to movies, CAP appeals to Scripture passages such as Psalms 101:3a, Mark 9:47, 1 Corinthians 15:33 and Philippians 4:8 as exhortations it believes condemns the viewing of morally offensive material. Its analyses are supported by Scriptural proof-texts against the immoral behaviors it identifies in reviewed movies. Focus on the Family and Movie Morality Ministries, two high profile Christian organizations, also adopt this approach to movies.

While some reviews do contextualize the portrayal of evil in the movies, the overwhelming tendency of this approach is to condemn most Hollywood produced movies. In addition, the present proliferation of movies with scenes of violence, nudity and irreligious characters is perceived as a threat to the standards of morality in society.[1] In *Variety*, a movie

[1] See especially Medved 1993 for one of the most comprehensive statistical analyses and thematic reviews of this phenomenon. In 2000, 69% of the movies rated by the MPAA received an "R"-rating; 19% received a "PG-13"-rating

industry trade magazine, Paul Karon reports an ongoing judgment that these movies contribute to the moral decay of society:

> Once again, Hollywood is under fire from certain quarters, with worried citizens complaining that irresponsible entertainment is corrupting the nation's moral fiber, showing images that children should not see, encouraging crime, violence, spurring them to commit lewd and unhealthy behavior - even smoking (1997:n.p.).

Similarly, Medved, a PBS movie critic, argues that "tens of millions of Americans now see the entertainment industry as an all-powerful enemy, an alien force that assaults our most cherished values and corrupts our children" (1993:3). The Fundamentalist tradition shares these opinions.

The model for a Christian response to the movies advocated by this approach promotes a cautious judgment of movies according to the type and extent of any morally offensive content. Little, if any, consideration is given to evaluating the artistic or aesthetic qualities of movies. Critical engagement is minimal. Movies are seen primarily as entertainment and carrying only superficial value, particularly in the Christian life. The strength of this model is its puritanical morality. The emphasis it places upon avoiding immorality and the possible temptations inherent in viewing such content are Scriptural ideals. The weakness of this model, however, is that Christians are not equipped to engage the movies and in effect, judgments on the morally offensive content are really only reflections of the toleration levels or perspective of the viewer. Movies are rated acceptable or unacceptable based on arbitrary standards of the extent of the morally offensive content. There are grave inconsistencies in this approach. Why is modest swearing, violence or nudity any more tolerable or acceptable than gratuitous content of the same? Are movies that present idyllic worlds and stories always truthful? Should the highest standard of a Christian movie-going experience be avoiding morally offensive content or should it be experiencing truth? Additionally, this model requires judgments on the comparative "evilness"

(MPAA 2000:n.p.). Since the beginning of the rating system in 1968, 58% of all the movies rated have received an "R"-rating (MPAA 2000:n.p.).

or moral "offensiveness" of onscreen events. In my experience, Christians, working from this model, are far more likely to give license to onscreen violence than onscreen nudity. Is this judgment reasonable? In the end, this model raises more questions for a Christian response to movies than it answers. It is not an adequate model for evaluating movies.

The Critical Approach

The critical approach analyzes movies using critical methods and viewer-response theories and then, judges the content on a continuum from rejection to revelation. While the critical approach is not oblivious to immorality in movies, it does assume that movies are an art form and as such, the portrayal of evil can serve an artistic function in communicating a message. The primary concern is not the portrayal of evil in and of itself but rather, the purpose that the portrayal of evil ultimately serves. Critical apparatuses, therefore, are employed to explicate the messages and worldview of movies, which are then evaluated with respect to biblical messages and a Christian worldview.[2]

The proponents of the critical approach counter the moralistic appeal to Psalms 101:3a, Mark 9:47, 1 Corinthians 15:33 and Philippians 4:8 as an inaccurate, over-simplification of the meaning and intent of these passages. Proponents argue that the portrayal of evil is not in and of itself a negative thing nor is viewing it incongruous to the exhortations in these passages. Howard writes, "the Bible itself gives us many 'images of evil'—deceit, lust, sexual perversion, violence, cruelty, abuse of power, hypocrisy, and a dozen other sins" (1981:111). These "images of evil" are portrayed in diverse literary forms (myth, historiography, fiction, poetry, parable, etc.) and in many cases, no explicit judgment is passed upon these images. They are presented merely as reflections of truthful thoughts or events. On a principle of verisimilitude then, artists

[2] It is important to note that the ability to critically evaluate movies does not obviate a Christian responsibility to guard against temptation. Unlike the moralistic approach, however, the critical approach advocates that the principle of liberty of conscience should be applied to movie viewing. The principle of liberty is most clearly articulated in Romans 14, 1 Corinthians 8 and 10:23-33. As a matter of this principle, the Apostle Paul recognizes and accepts that "each of us will be accountable to God" (Rom 14:12) and it will be our own conscience that either accuses or excuses us (Rom 14:22-23, cf. 2:15). Therefore, each of us can judge individually whether movies, or at least certain types of movies, are a source of temptation to sin. A Christian's only responsibility in making this decision, besides his responsibility to God and his own conscience, is the obligation "never to put a stumbling block or hindrance in the way of another" (Rom 14:13). Viewing movies then should be considered consistent with Christian freedom, provided it is undertaken "for the glory of God" (1 Cor 10:31) with thoughtfulness towards others and a clear conscience. On such matters of conscience, Christians are implored not to "pass judgment on one another" (Rom 14:13).

can, and even should, depict evil and when this depiction of evil is honest, movies will convey the true nature of evil as banal, unrewarding and destructive:

> The argument that a film should be wholesome and unobjectionable must be laid aside. It is illusory and superficial to think that a suitable religious cinema can be fostered in this way; in the past it has been proven that such an approach leads to greater problems. The possibility of portraying reality honestly on the screen must never be denied. If the lost character of modern man is allowed to be covered up, then the relevancy of the gospel largely disappears (Holloway 1977:42-43).

Movies that meet the challenge of "portraying reality honestly" are communicating "whatever is true" in a manner that is excellent and "worthy of praise" (Php 4:8). The immorality of a movie then should not be judged on the type or extent of morally offensive content but instead, it should be assessed on the honesty of its presentation. This subtle difference between the moralistic and critical approaches is extremely significant.

Proponents also point out that movies can elucidate truth when they are engaged through critical method and brought into dialogue with Scripture. Truth is not the exclusive provenance of the Christian community. In Acts 17:16-34, Paul appears before the Athenians and appeals in three cases to the truth he detects in their artistic works. He points to a pagan altar with an inscription to "an unknown god" and identifies that god with God (v.23) and he also quotes two pagan philosophers, Epimenides and Aratus (v.28). By engaging Athenian culture in this way, Paul does not assent to everything represented by the altar or the philosophers with which he draws a connection. In fact, the altar and these philosophers probably represented ideals and beliefs that were antithetical to Paul's convictions. Nevertheless, Paul is able to bring these artists into dialogue with Scripture and in doing so, "some of [the Athenians] joined him and became believers" (v.34). Ironically, 1 Corinthians 15:33 is another case in point when Paul makes use of pagan literature to support his argument. The proverb "bad company ruins good morals" is a quote from the Attic poet Menander. Many other examples exist in Scripture. The

thirty sayings of the *Instruction of Amenemope*, an Egyptian work, are presented as God's wisdom in Proverbs 22:17-24:22. Balaam, a pagan seer, is the source of a blessing for Israel (Num 22-24). The pagan and evil nations of Chaldea, Assyria and Persia are the instrustments of God's wrath, judgment and even salvation for Israel (refs. abound, e.g. Isa 10:5-6, 45:1-3, Jer 25:1-14). It is particularly interesting that in Isa 45:1, the Persian king Cyrus is hailed as God's "messiah" even though God says of Cyrus:

> I arm you, *though you do not know me*, so that they may know, from the rising of the sun and from the west, that is there is no one besides me; I am the Lord, and there is no other. I form light and create darkness, *I make weal and create woe*; I the Lord do all these things (Isa 45:5-7; emphasis mine).

These examples testify that the goodness of God can and is mediated through pagan people and artists. Consequently, though many movies are produced or informed by non-Christian values and portray evil, they are still capable of being vehicles of truth. The Apostle Paul and other biblical writers clearly engaged the pagan arts and culture of their times; Christians should not shy away from engaging the arts and culture of our times.

The preliminary step and underlying basis of a critical approach is an evaluation of the movie on its own terms. This evaluation includes an analysis of the technical and expressive aspects of movies, including cinematography, editing, cinema time, sound, writing, acting, design and directing. Each of these aspects affects the movie experience by creating, among other things, perspective, structure and meaning. If these technical and expressive aspects of movies are poorly executed, then the movie fails and it is pointless to engage the movie on any other level. If, however, these aspects are expertly executed, an analysis of these aspects will provide insight into the messages and worldview of the movie.

Having evaluated the technical and expressive aspects of movies, interdisciplinary critical methods and viewer-response theories can be brought to bear upon the movie to further elucidate messages and worldview. Film criticism evaluates the technical and expressive aspects in relation to other movies. Genre criticism can be employed to identify continuities and

discontinuities between movies that share common forms and structures. Auteur criticism might be applied to movies that are part of an auteur's entire body of work in order to explore the significance of common as well as unique elements in the technical and expressive aspects and themes between movies. The conventions of story, plot, characterization and intertextuality, to name a few, can be explored through narrative criticism. Social-scientific and cultural criticisms analyze the relationship between movies and society, specifically addressing the inter-relationships and mutual impact of social issues as experienced in society and in movies. Other critical methods include the various forms of ideological criticism (feminist, liberation, theological, etc.). While many of these critical methods are best employed by people that are educated to use them, lay people can, and often unconsciously do, employ these criticisms; particularly film and auteur criticisms, which are easily applied by the untrained. The insights these methods offer about movies can then be brought into dialogue with Scripture.

Creating a dialogue between the movies and Scripture essentially involves taking the insights that each source provides on humanity and our universe and comparing them. This dialogue should flow freely, recognizing, however, that Scripture is authoritative and ultimately its messages and worldview judges the veracity of the movie's messages and worldview. As a result of this dialogue, Christians can reject, tolerate, agree and/or appropriate the messages and worldview of a movie—in whole or in part. It is also possible that movies can precipitate a "divine encounter" in which God speaks to us through movies (Johnston 2000:57-58).[3] These options can be expressed on a continuum:

Figure 1: The Christian Viewer's Continuum of Responses

[3] Johnston observes five "theological responses by the church to moviegoing," namely avoidance, caution, dialogue, appropriation and divine encounter (2000:41-58). I disagree with Johnston that there are in fact five approaches. The first two approaches are really both moralistic and the latter three are critical. Nevertheless, I feel that these five approaches do exist, in the slightly modified form of Figure 1, as responses to messages in movies.

Elements of a movie might fall along different points of the continuum than the movie as a whole but as these elements are evaluated on this continuum, they contribute to a sense of the movie's overall worth. These elements raise questions and concerns, challenge preconceptions, reaffirm convictions, "elevate the spirit, deepen compassion for the human situation, and broaden the borders of understanding" (Holloway 1977:42). The Christian viewer should praise movies whose elements most succeed in producing these responses, particularly when those movies also succeed in presenting an authentic depiction of humanity that stimulates dialogue with "the message of the gospel, the message of Christian hope through faith, the message of love and tolerance" (Holloway 2000:42).[4]

Conclusion

A *reel* Christian ethic involves a critical approach to movies. It advocates discernment by bringing movies into dialogue with Scripture. Movies are evaluated as artistic works that are capable of communicating truth in highly relevant ways. Morality in movies should not be judged according to the type and extent of the content but rather, according to the truthfulness of its portrayal. The critical approach, however, requires education. As such, the church must concern itself with this powerful medium and encourage the development of an educated movie-going audience. In this way, the church can connect in a relevant way with an industry that is increasingly important in addressing spiritual needs for disconnected and alienated people. As the great director Martin Scorsese observes, "there's a spirituality in films, even if it's not one which can supplant faith . . . It's as if movies answer an ancient quest for the common unconscious. They fulfil a spiritual need that people have: to share a common memory" (cited in Marsh and Ortiz 1997:n.p.). By exploring movies critically rather than moralistically, Christians can contribute to "a cinema of theological search and discovery" (Holloway 1977:42). Christians can shape and transform the religious dimension of cinema by affirming its efficacious portrayals of reality and

[4] It is easy to identify these movies with "art-house" cinema but pop-culture movies are also capable of meeting these criteria and often do. The *Terminator* series, for instance, should receive high praise from Christians. As Ortiz and Roux state, "To undertake a theological dialog with the *Terminator* films means delving into diverse but complex concepts such as the nature of humanity; the threat or promise of technology; destiny versus free will; the future as apocalypse; and the savior/hero figure" (Marsh and Ortiz 1997:143). See Marsh and Ortiz 1997, Martin and Oswalt 1995, Jewett 1999 and Jewett 1993 for many more examples of the possible dialogue between pop-culture movies and theology.

exposing its fraudulent portrayals. All great movies are vehicles of truth. It is necessary for Christians to identify those truths in relationship to Scripture and by doing so, bring movies into the service of God's glory.

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