

Reading the world by listening to their stories

By Denis Haack

A note from Walt Mueller: From time to time we get to know discerning Christians who are doing some amazing work in our contemporary culture. One of the people I've come to listen to, respect and love is Denis Haack. Denis runs Ransom Fellowship, an organization committed to "developing discernment and deepening discipleship" among God's people (www.ransomfellowship.org). Denis produces "Critique," a publication that helps Christians develop skills in discernment. The following article first appeared there.

"The story does what no theorem can quite do. It may not be 'like real life' in the superficial sense, but it sets before us an image of what reality may well be like at some more central region."

—C. S. Lewis in *On Stories*

I love movies—I enjoy watching them, discussing them, reading about them. The cinema is an art form of great power, grace and liveliness. Like all of human culture, it is a good gift of God, even in a fallen world. Perhaps that should be *especially in a fallen world*, since fallenness sharpens our desperate need for God's gracious gifts. Created in God's image means creativity is essential to who we are, which means that we cannot live fully human lives without the grace of art. Art is not a luxury of questionable value in a lost world but an expression of who we are as God's creatures.

In his *Institutes* Calvin warns the people of God to not be disdainful of truth "wherever it shall appear, unless we wish to dishonor the Spirit of God." That is a very sobering idea. Just as all truth is God's truth, so all expressions of grace, creativity and beauty must be embraced as good gifts of God, even if they arrive in packages that are flawed. All art, like all of life is tainted by the fall. Unless we wish to dishonor the Creator, however, we dare not dismiss art, creativity and culture, even if doing so makes us feel righteous. The movies of Babylon depict Babylonian ideas and values, but because Babylonians are made in God's image, their films and stories also express creativity and insight into life and reality that is molded, in part, by God's common grace. My love of film is increased as my eyes become more attuned to the glimpses of grace and glory that shine out in the art of our post-Christian world.

My love of movies, however, is not the primary reason Ransom emphasizes film. Rather, we emphasize movies because they represent the stories of our postmodern world. Every culture and generation has stories that are told, retold and discussed. Created by the word of God means we were created for story, to be part of The Story that is revealed in Scripture and centered on Jesus, the living word. As Charlie Peacock is fond of saying, we are called to storytelling and storied living. We find well-told stories attractive because we were made for them. Which is why children so often ask for stories to be repeated and books to be reread, over and over again.

Sometimes the stories of a generation are told by parents, or read in books, or told by storytellers as people sit under the stars around a fire—but the stories are always present. Stories that entertain, certainly, but which also do far more. They also both reflect and mold the ideas, hopes and values of those who listen to and identify with them. "Story, in whatever form it takes, is our pilot," novelist Larry Woiwode says. "We are headed somewhere and it's our story that carries us forward in its wake. If I weren't heading toward eternity (as I see it at times), I wouldn't have a story to tell. And you are headed the way you are because your story is bearing you in its direction."

We may not be aware of it, but this story shapes our values, ideas and perception of reality. Christians should find this obvious, given that the Scriptures are not merely an endless list of propositions. The Bible weaves a richly textured narrative of Creation, Fall, Redemption and Consummation, proclaims the good news that this Story can be our story through Christ, and in the process reveals propositions to our minds, hearts and imaginations that are both credible and plausible in the world God has made.

All of which implies an important question for Christians who desire to be faithful in our fast-changing

world: Where can we find the stories that are shaping the imaginations, hearts, lives and minds of the postmodern generation? Finding them matters because it is in and around the stories of a generation where an ongoing conversation about the things that matter most takes place. Now, we live in a pluralistic world, so there may not be one single, simple answer to my question—this generation has lots of stories. On the other hand, the essential answer is not that difficult to discern. *For the postmodern generation, one of the primary places—I would argue the primary place—where their stories are told is in popular culture, especially in the movies.* Which explains why just like children asking for the same story again and again, young adults flock to the movies that resonate within their souls, often watching the same film repeatedly.

If we want to understand our times, our friends and ourselves, we need to listen to the movies. This is our world, whether we like it or not, and as Christians we are called to engage this world, this generation and their stories with the gospel. We do not have the luxury of being blind to the common grace expressed in film (and the rest of popular culture), unless we are content to be deaf to the postmodern generation.

This much seems obvious to me—so obvious, in fact, as to be uncontroversial, if not self-evident. However, whenever I say such things (and I say them often) objections are raised by good people for whom these ideas seem new, or radical, or even dangerous. Since the same objections keep coming up, I thought it might be good to address some of them. And as you will see as we proceed, addressing these objections require us to reflect on far more than merely the cinema. In the process we will have to think about some of the foundational issues of what we believe as Christians.

Objection #1: Hollywood is depraved.

“Hollywood is the prime example of what is wrong with this sick world,” this objection says. “Dedicated to mere entertainment, it churns out lewd movies that celebrate depravity. It’s the sort of moral cesspool that Christians need to avoid.”

A visitor to my church raised this objection as we talked over coffee after the service a few weeks ago. I thought of how G. K. Chesterton was once asked by a magazine to submit an article on “What’s Wrong with the World.” His piece consisted of two words: “I am.” Which is part (alas, only part) of the reason I was tempted to respond with sarcasm. “Hollywood *is* a prime example of what’s wrong with this world,” I was tempted to say, “but then *you* are a good example, too.” (As am I, I would have added, if they were still listening.)

We live in a fallen world, which means the effects of the fall are evident in film. That is no reason to disdain film, however, any more than the sordid existence of pornography requires us to disdain photography as a moral cesspool. There are lewd films that celebrate depravity, as there are businesses that do so, books that do so and people that do so. This reality calls us to a life of discernment, not to an excess of rhetoric that perverts the truth.

Although this objection is raised as a declaration of moral concern, it fails as such for the simple reason that it fails to speak truthfully. This sort of rhetoric may cause social conservatives to cheer, but Christians should be discerning enough to see past the rhetoric to the truth. We must speak truthfully if we expect our listeners to take our message of the Truth seriously. Some films are lewd, but many are not. Many are intelligent, creative, truthful, beautiful works of art. Some even portray Christian faith attractively and with clarity.

In Athens Paul quoted a pagan thinker his audience considered authoritative (Acts 17:28). More than that, Paul agreed with him, since he said something true about God, without launching into rhetorical excess over the fact that the pagan was referring to Zeus. Even many Greeks were distressed at the myths about the gods, since so many were scandalous, showing the gods to be petty and immoral—Zeus included. Yet Paul saw this pagan literature not as a moral cesspool to avoid but as a point of contact to begin a discussion about the things that matter most.

This objection tries to claim the moral high ground, but fails. Sadly, in choosing rhetoric over truth, it is remarkably similar to the shallow entertainment it denounces.

Objection #2: "Why watch sin?"

This objection is similar to the first one. "Just as we don't need to visit a brothel to understand prostitution," it states, "so we don't need to be exposed to other sins to understand they are wrong. Why should we set out to intentionally watch sin being portrayed in the movies?"

What I find interesting about this objection is that I usually hear it raised as a "discussion stopper," a trump card for which no response is possible. In fact, it's imagined potency is so great that it is rarely raised as a question, but instead simply asserted. Since no Christian can be in favor of being entertained by depictions of wickedness, and since movies contain such things, the discussion is deemed over.

Au contraire.

To repeat the obvious, but to begin at the beginning, we live in a fallen world. Everything in creation is exposed to sin and its effects. Even our worship falls short of God's holiness, apart from God's grace in Christ. Since art is a creative expression of life, it will reflect something of what it means to live in a fallen world. Artists who shy away from such honesty produce works that may be pretty, but feel artificial or sentimental.

Still, I don't go to the movies to see sin, any more than I read the Bible with that in mind, though sin is depicted there. Read again the story of David, a story that includes seduction, adultery, the cruel misuse of power, murder and deception. Or the story of Lot, about incest in an alcoholic stupor. I go to these texts not to see sin, though they depict it, but because they "are able," as Paul says, to make me "wise for salvation" (2 Timothy 3:15).

Good films depict reality in a fallen world truthfully, but they also portray much of God's common grace. If we aren't careful we become like the father who always sees the flaws first. When his child shows him a picture she colored, he immediately places his finger on the spot where she failed to color within the lines. "For their own good," such fathers always say, but before long the child will stop showing him her work.

Some films depict both sin and its consequences in ways that parallel the biblical teaching precisely. Some do not. Some even seek to glorify it. If it is a question of our own weakness and areas in which we are tempted, then we must recognize our weakness, refrain from sin and seek to grow in grace. What I am urging is not that everyone see the same films, but that we all enter the conversation that swirls around the films of Babylon, a conversation that will include a discussion of right and wrong. As we enter that conversation we must not be blind to sin, but we must not be blind to grace, either. Always seeing the sin first suggests a mind set in the wrong direction. It also fulfills an accusation often made against Christians, namely, that we tend to be negative and judgmental.

This objection is troubling because it suggests eyes that are trained for sin instead of for grace. We must never forget the world is fallen, but shouldn't our love for our Father foster a thirst to see his glory? Are we sensitive to the glimpses of grace that appear in this dark world? Or are we so intent on and impressed by the darkness that it overwhelms our ability to see the light of God's glory in the ordinary things of life and culture?

Objection #3: "Are they noble?"

"Do movies fulfill the biblical standard of Philippians 4:8, this objection asks? 'Finally,' Paul writes there, 'whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.'"

I've written about this at length, so I won't go into detail here (see "Finding the True, Noble & Pure in Babylon" on Ransom's Web site). Suffice it to say that this objection represents a misunderstanding of what Paul is saying. He is not arguing that we can engage only those things that fully fulfill this standard, since that would rule out coming into contact with everyone and everything in this fallen

world. Rather, he is insisting that we must be rooted in that which is holy, so that we can live godly and faithful lives in the midst of the fallenness. This text is not an excuse to withdraw from a fallen world, but the necessary instruction we need if we are to faithfully engage that world with the gospel. Rooted in the grace of God, having minds, hearts and imaginations steeped in the truth of God's Word, we are prepared, by the power of God's Spirit to be his ambassadors in a world that does not acknowledge its rightful King.

Objection #4: "Aren't reviews sufficient?"

"Life is short," this objection reminds us, "time is tight, and we are busy. Why should I bother to sit through a two-hour movie when I can scan a few reviews in a couple of minutes and get all the information I need?"

Well, perhaps you are too busy. At least be willing to consider the possibility. I don't mean to suggest that you need to see every movie, since no one can manage that, nor should we try since not every movie is worth viewing. What seems necessary, however, is that we have a keen window of insight into our world, a point of contact for discussing the things that matter. If not film, then find another. If we are so busy that all such windows are squeezed out of our schedule, then I suggest we are too busy. Doing lots of good things is not the same thing as Christian faithfulness.

Remember that we are discussing engaging the stories of a postmodern generation with The Story of the gospel. Consider what you are saying in this objection from the perspective of your non-Christian neighbor. If we express interest in our neighbor, but say we haven't the time for the stories that express their deepest fears and hopes, why should they take us, or our Story, seriously? I have known a number of non-Christians who gained their knowledge of my faith primarily from articles on Christianity in newspapers or news magazines. From my perspective their understanding is well informed but highly inaccurate and incomplete. Our discussions have been, as a result, rather frustrating. More importantly, I have never felt they took me or my faith all that seriously.

What I am arguing for in all this is not gathering a few sound bites that we can drop into the conversation to spice things up. I am arguing that the postmodern generation is talking about the things that matter, and, like every generation, that conversation revolves around their stories. I am arguing we need to enter that conversation with integrity and compassion. Reviews can be helpful. They can help us determine which films are worth seeing. They can help us see how those who do not share our most basic convictions and values see and interpret those films. But stocking up on sound bites is not the same thing as being part of a living, ongoing conversation. Using them the way this objection suggests is to treat our non-Christian neighbors with less than full integrity. The gospel permits no shortcuts. Thankfully, Jesus did not take any shortcuts when he entered our world.

Reflecting on sin

If you think about it, a lot of what we're addressing here involves our understanding of sin. To think rightly about these things, in other words, we need to think rightly about sin. In a recent article on popular culture, Theodore Turnau warns that unfortunately, many Christians hold a view of sin that is less than biblical:

"Many evangelicals seem to be guided by a semi-Pelagian heritage that views sin as discrete acts that can be, in a sense, isolated from the person. When someone becomes a Christian, he or she turns from his or her sinful acts. Sanctification, therefore, is seen as a process where these acts happen less and less (and one seeks environments where one is less liable to do these sinful acts). The dominant American popular culture, then, is seen as a willful and public act of sin and an enticement to others (especially to children) to follow in the sin of the sinful culture-makers. Such an approach to sin localizes the problem as something 'out there,' something we can control if only we are careful enough. So, for many, the approach to popular culture has been a strategy not of engagement but of withdrawal."

This view of sin is "thin," Turnau says. "First, it oversimplifies the way sin works in the world and in human beings. Sin can be identified and avoided too easily. Second, it is overly optimistic." In contrast, the biblical view is that sinfulness permeates the depth of our being, so that our hearts are

"compulsively idolatrous and rebellious." Our need for grace is therefore total, a view that transforms our understanding of the relationship of sin and popular culture. Turnau is worth quoting at length:

"Producers ... of popular cultural texts work out of idolatrous hearts. Then those sinful patterns are, to some extent, replicated within the structure of the popular cultural texts (perhaps as enticements to idolatry). This is what many evangelicals react to (and rightly so). Further, these popular cultural texts are appropriated in sinful ways, feeding the idols of individual (or groups of) audience members, even in *rejecting* them (out of Pharisaical pride or self-protective fear). However we respond, our own hearts serve as collaborators, and the truth is, our hearts need no enticement to idolatry because our hearts are artesian wells of idolatry, to use Calvin's memorable image (see Mark 7:14-15,20-23). One could even say that popular cultural texts are a pretext rather than an enticement to sin. It is not as if as if these texts pulled neutral or good people toward sin they would otherwise avoid ... Withdrawing from certain cultural texts and replacing them with others will not render the audience less sinful. Rather, the compulsive and organic nature of sin means that in eschewing certain cultural idolatries by disengaging ourselves from the surrounding culture, we are probably only setting up more socially acceptable idolatries that will be harder to detect and repent of (e.g., materialism, or the family, or pride in our own holiness).

"This 'thick description' of sin as rebellion that permeates all that we do... ought to drive us to repentance, not withdrawal... Perceived sin in popular culture should, therefore, cause us to reflect on these idolatries in biblical perspective, that is, cause a positive and apologetical engagement with them rather than withdrawal from them. The radical and pervasive nature of sin ought to drive us to the radical nature of grace where sinners can be restored and renewed again and again and where real growth (though not sinless perfection) is possible. Parents who have taught their children how to abide in Christ and drink deeply of his grace need not be afraid to engage popular culture (as wisdom guides) with their children. The depth and pervasiveness of sin ought to force evangelicals to recognize the depth and pervasiveness of grace as well."

There is great irony here. The view that sin is "out there" in the culture appears to assert the moral high ground, but in the end is found wanting. The more robust view of sin presented by the Scriptures may make the question of cultural engagement more richly complex, but it also opens the door to a robust understanding of grace. And that is precisely what discerning Christians need at every step if we are to live faithful lives in our fallen world.

Sources: *Institutes of the Christian Religion* by John Calvin, II.2.15; Charlie Peacock in personal communication via email; Woiwode from *What I Think I Did: A Season of Survival in Two Acts* by Larry Woiwode (New York, NY: Basic Books; 2000) p. 54; Turnau from "Reflecting Theologically on Popular Culture as Meaningful: The Role of Sin, Grace, and General Revelation" by Theodore A. Turnau, III in *Calvin Theological Journal* (Volume 37, 2002) p. 276-278.

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