



Critiquing the Movie Critics



The Good, the Bad, and the Wicked

SPECTRUM IS TO BE COMMENDED for its fall 2007 series of articles on the cinema. The "Top Ten Movies Every Adventist Should See," as listed and explained by Winona Wendth, especially caught my attention. The word

should in this context is not far from the word *ought*. Moreover, if there are identifiable movies that Adventists should see, there must also be a list of films that Adventists should not see.

My daughter-in-law is a devout Southern Baptist, and she has made her decisions regarding which movies to see based on ratings, thus avoiding all R-rated films. I have pointed out to her that many PG and PG-13 movies are a waste of time, whereas R-rated movies often teach important truths about the human condition and promote values that are good. This is an easy argument to make and still does not give a definitive answer to the ethical question regarding whether there are movies that Adventists or Baptists ought not to see, and, if so, which ones.

Plantak addresses this issue in what he calls his "main premise." He describes seeing a sign on a bridge in Venice that reads "More Ethics and Less Aesthetics." Thinking about this slogan, he decides it has the argument "utterly upside down." "The more aesthetics we allow into our lives the more ethically we grow," he asserts. He then makes a somewhat illogical leap back to safer ground by calling for "more beauty in the world."

Let us use a practical and current example to examine the relation between ethics and aesthetics. I recently saw the film *No Country for Old Men*. This movie got the best critical reviews of any in years. I was immediately drawn into it. It had a perfect harmony of script, cinematography, sound,

editing, and general production values. The ending was in perfect accord with the theme of the movie, which was a portrayal of evil as random, implacable, and inescapable. The movie took no moralistic position on this issue, other than to express wonderment that such evil could exist.

This movie was aesthetically perfect. Should it be on a list of movies Adventist should see? Or on a list that Adventists should not see? Or should there be no such list?

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YOUR FALL 2007 ISSUE, which contains discussions about the need to take movies seriously, interested me greatly. I have seen many movies and formally studied their history. But I have watched most of them with guilt.

In general, movies tend to elevate the trivial and make trivial those things that are powerful and important. Furthermore, visual representations have subtle effects, even as a whisper, creating impressions that travel through the eyes to the mind. Over time, these impressions claim space and may dull our sensitivities.

As Jack Provonsha used to warn us, certain things should make us ill; we ought never to get used to their sight. What kind of shallow need do terror and violence fill? Why be embarrassed not to have seen yet another examination of violent behavior? What possible purpose can it serve us to watch graphic violence?

Maybe we should insist on a frank discussion about the direct link between movies, on one hand, and sex and violence, on the other.

It was wrong in the past to forbid all movie watching. It is just as wrong today to deny the need to be very cautious about watching them.

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