

Sample Chapter from
You Are What You See: Watching Movies Through a Christian Lens
by Scott Nehring — for review only.
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Keeping an Eye on What You Watch

“Participant [Media] believes that a good story well told can truly make a difference in how one sees the world.”¹

MOVIES MATTER. THEY HAVE MEANING IN OUR LIVES. IF YOU TAKE nothing else from this book, you must understand: Movies matter and they absolutely have a deep impact on all of our lives.

This reality may run counter to all your preconceptions about watching movies, after all, our society considers them innocuous timewasters—something to do after work or on a weekend. To believe that is to be like a fly who tells itself the spider’s web is no more than a cozy place to hang out.

Life can be an irritating affair and the escape from daily life is a natural desire. Today that escape is often accomplished through the medium of film. We sit before a flickering screen and allow the lights and sounds to fill our heads. Our burdens melt away—at least for two hours.

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1. Opening sentence from the mission statement of Participant Productions, producers of *An Inconvenient Truth*, *Good Night and Good Luck*, *North Country*, and *Syriana*. http://www.participantmedia.com/company/about_us.php. Last accessed May 2010.

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available now at YouAreWhatYouSee.com. ²⁷

Each time we participate in this seemingly mundane task, we allow ourselves to be somewhat hypnotized. Have you ever gotten lost in a movie? The characters seem so rich and meaningful, the plot so surprising and original that you lose track of time? Have you been swept away to another land, involved in the on-screen struggles? This harmless escape from reality is actually a form of hypnosis. Merriam-Webster defines *hypnosis* as “A trancelike state that resembles sleep but is induced by a person whose suggestions are readily accepted by the subject.”

Instead of looking at film as a means of entertainment, consider what it actually is: a mode of communication. Screen images are more than flashing pictures blended together to give the illusion of movement. These pictures are composed and edited to make statements.

The filmmaker intentionally molds sequences of images to manipulate your conscious and subconscious. You are not a passive lump of meat in front of a screen. You are a vibrant, active soul created to experience story, and you react as the filmmaker plays with your emotions. We loathe the villain as he guns down the hero's friend then cheer as the hero blows away the villain's bodyguard. Both acts involve killing, but we chose sides because a gifted director or storyteller used our innate understanding of Story to influence our thought process.

The medium of film relies on direct manipulation of the audience in order to succeed. Cinema magic is not based on logic, it is based in the heart. We rarely expect or enjoy having our intellects touched directly. No one goes to the cinema to watch abstract mathematical concepts being explained. We need an emotional hook to grab us, to engage us, so we can feel and not think. Explanations of complex mathematical equations require the mathematician to be a debilitated, hallucinating genius (*A Beautiful Mind*), then people are interested. We want to be manipulated into that slightly hypnotic state and have the director caress our emotions.

Because film speaks to us through our emotions rather than our logical mind, we run the risk of prolonged manipulation that extends well beyond our time in that darkened room. Film is a hypodermic needle through which either a venom or its antidote is injected into the social body. The toxin or cure which is delivered is known as worldview.

A Worldview to Call Your Own?

Worldview is what it sounds like: a view of the world, how one recognizes and defines existence. Where do we come from? Where do our values come from? What is life anyway? Every one of us has a way in which we view and

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interpret the world around us.² Every filmmaker does too, as evidenced by this statement by James Cameron, writer, producer, and director of *Avatar*, *Titanic*, *Aliens*, *Rambo: First Blood*, and *The Terminator*:

I think that with large scale movies that are going to reach a lot of people, when you construct the film, what you're always trying to do is tap into people's view of the world we live in.³

— James Cameron

And every film reflects aspects of its maker's worldview. In the climactic scene of *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, Indiana Jones and his friend, Marian, are saved when they close their eyes as the Ark of the Covenant is opened. Greedy Nazis watch as the ark is opened and they are smitten by God. The film promotes the concept that God exists and that He is powerful. He punishes those who do evil and spares the good. The worldview of *Raiders of the Lost Ark* is Judeo-Christian at its core and demands the audience believe a higher order of right and wrong.

The worldview of Christians is well known. Christians see things as created and managed by a single, personal, loving God who established this universe for His purposes. Through the failure of sin, we are unworthy to be in His presence. To rectify this imbalance, God sent His Son, Jesus Christ, to pay the price for our sin. This sacrifice is God's greatest gift and, if we choose to accept it, our eyes are opened, we are purified from said sin, and are enabled to freely stand before Almighty God.

Most films do not present this worldview. They do not, for that matter, even present the concept of sin. Granted, most films are not meant as a treatise on Romans 3:23 or a debate over the doctrine of election. We do not go to the theater to witness a sermon. However, the role of faith—and Christian faith in particular—is most often completely ignored or misused. If one was to identify the prominent worldview of the past fifty years⁴ it would be

2. For more information, see Ravi Zacharias's *Jesus Among Other Gods* or David Noble's *Understanding the Times*.

3. David Chen. *The Filmcast Interview: James Cameron, Director of Avatar*. December 18, 2009. <http://www.slashfilm.com/2009/12/18/the-filmcast-interview-james-cameron-director-of-avatar>. Last accessed December 2009.

4. For a simple but well-written listing of common philosophies in film I suggest reading Brian Godawa's *Hollywood Worldviews: Watching Films With Wisdom & Discernment*. Available at <http://www.covenantbookstore.com/howobybrgo.html> or at Amazon.com: <http://tinyurl.com/yb5gsvy>.

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existentialist philosophy often in the form of its derivative, post-modernism,⁵ which in turn manifests itself in secular humanism.⁶

Existentialism, at its core, is a belief that God does not exist. The universe is a blob of random, meaningless events. We, as humans, are mere accidents who find fortune in a random universe without value. This means we have no worth beyond what we decide is valuable. Social rules, knowledge, and hope are little more than our false constructions used to apply meaning to that which means nothing. From my experience, existentialists tend to not be the happiest people.⁷

Existentially-minded cinema is a mushy place where the antiques of honor, service, and loyalty are ignored in favor of the hollow notions of following one's heart and achieving one's desires.

In an existential universe where man is alone without God, self-serving attitudes and situational ethics will rule. The decadence found in a majority of modern films aligns with the logic of an existential worldview—because truth evaporates when removed from the hand of God, and where there is no truth there can be no morality.

Generally speaking, we as a culture have tried to remove the planks of logic, history, and natural law from the platforms of public discourse, including from the Arts. The resulting vacuousness must then be filled with the only thing we know: our personal experiences, and those are precarious substances upon which to build the foundations of human understanding. To do so, we must rely upon our own, transitory feelings rather than follow moral truth as directed by divine will. We construct *truth* from our passing inclinations rather than from an identifiable code

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5. When examining this world it is good to keep a healthy amount of skepticism. Post-Modernism is what happens when you keep an unhealthy amount of skepticism on hand. While Post-Modernism has a broad range of definitions, my usage keeps with the contemporary line that grew in post-1960s America. In the Arts, Post-Modernism relies heavily on irony, deconstruction, and winking self-references—think Quentin Tarantino—which all work to underline a lack of verifiable truth, honor, or understanding. It is all the fun of working in the Arts without that pesky need to create something of value.
 6. Secular humanism is a worldview defined by its complete denial of religious dogma and institutions. In a nutshell, it is the belief that we humans are alone in the universe and must rely on our own power of reason and compassion to get by. In other words, it is the worship of science because, as we all know, scientists are never compelled to fudge their findings and never make stuff up.
 7. Some existentialists may complain that my definition of the philosophy is sophomoric and watered down. As reply to these complaints, I will remind existentialists you are indeed existentialists and therefore do not believe in a definable truth. Therefore, I am free to do as I please in your chaotic universe and define your philosophy as I choose. If you want to pretend the universe has no identifiable truth, then this is how you should expect things to work out. Your rules, not mine.

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of morality guaranteed to last from one second to the next. When we follow this existential worldview, everything quickly begins to lose all sense.

All films demand the audience take on the perceptions of the filmmakers. Films as wide-ranging as *Sands of Iwo Jima*, *300*, and *Steel Magnolias* share this requirement. We see the universe through the filmmaker's eyes, through their worldview. They intend to persuade us toward their way of thinking—which is what artists mean when they say they want to express themselves. Their expression is their explanation of their worldview.

The Arts are a valuable gift from God that Christians should cherish. As with any tool, however, the Arts—and film in particular—can be used for myriad purposes. Film can promote and speak truth, and it can be used to disseminate lies. Viewing films not created through the prism of the Christian worldview is similar to reading a non-Biblical religious text—and it is wise to approach film with this in mind.

Like many boys of my generation, *Star Wars* transformed my life. The excitement of a new world where good and evil do battle with cool laser swords awed me and every other boy I knew. I spent my childhood pretending to be Han Solo (no cool kid wanted to be Luke Skywalker, he was a whiner) and drawing pictures of Chewbacca, Darth Vader, and Boba Fett. The influence of George Lucas' classic series of films sent me on a lifelong path of film study and storytelling. I would not be the man I am today without Lucas and his original trilogy.

Others have been influenced by films such as *The Green Berets*, which led boys to be soldiers. Oliver Stone's indictment of capitalism, *Wall Street*, ironically consoled the greedy nature of a generation of stock brokers. Mel Gibson's film

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are the ones who direct its soul.

The Passion of the Christ led many to belief in Jesus Christ for salvation while it directed others to confess their sins and crimes. Conversely, a film such as Martin Scorsese's *Taxi Driver* starred a twelve-year-old Jodie Foster as a whore who is saved by a budding presidential assassin and is tied to John Hinckley's decision to attempt the assassination of President Ronald Reagan.⁸

But not all of cinema's influences on our world are that obvious—they are normally far less perceptible but equally impactful. Catch phrases, hair

8. <http://www.law.umkc.edu/faculty/projects/ftrials/hinckley/jfostercommun.htm> shows the letter written by Hinckley to Foster expressing his plans to assassinate the President. Last accessed April 25, 2010.

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styles, fashion, even social morality are dictated by the flashing light of cinema.

When Steven Spielberg produces a film, he makes detailed decisions regarding what to have on screen, what sounds will accompany the images, and which words his actors will say. He orchestrates grand productions devised to entertain but also to instruct his audience. When we watch one of his films, Mr. Spielberg literally plays with our emotions and manipulates our thinking. That is what we pay him to do. We want him to make us laugh and cry. We want to feel anything at all as long as it is not based in reality. We pay him to remove us from our daily lives and place us in an artificial one of his creation.

We can do this to some degree when we pick up a book or watch a play, yet film is somehow different. Film seeps deeper into our core than most books do; movies' flashing lights precondition our subconscious to receive more shifts in perception than we would experience during a theatrical play. Film's flickering images can hook us faster and for longer periods of time than other modes of communication. Movies affect our minds.

Strong imagery can change how you perceive your world. Once you grasp that fact you will begin to understand that those who manipulate a culture's images are the ones who direct its soul.

How many people still feel exposed in the shower thanks to Hitchcock's *Psycho*? Or realize they are uneasy while swimming because of Spielberg's *Jaws*? How do we perceive the way Old West sheriffs did their job? We learned by seeing the *High Noon* standoff. What do we think of when the issues of the McCarthy Era or Hollywood blacklisting are mentioned? Who have become today's bigger bad guys—the Communist infiltrators or the U. S. Government?

Filmmakers want to use the power of film to change the way you think. They love to explain the world to you. Each time you watch a film, you give them that opportunity.

Not all filmmakers are out to do something nefarious; many simply, thoughtlessly attempt to tell a story and make a buck in the process. Of those with something to say, a number do support a basic Judeo-Christian worldview, albeit from a socially liberal viewpoint.

What about those who want to do harm, to dismantle current society and societal norms? To use an audience's vulnerabilities to alter perceptions and behaviors? To mislead for the sake of their agenda? What about those who do wish to influence people toward evil?

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In 1934, Adolf Hitler commissioned the film *Triumph des Willens* (*Triumph of the Will*) from filmmaker Leni Riefenstahl. The film was a masterful work of propaganda which followed the proceedings of the Sixth Nuremberg Party Congress. The piece stands as one of the most haunting films ever created. It expounds the virtues of Aryan power and the righteousness of Adolf Hitler and his Nazi Party. This was not the first film to support the Nazi party line.

Works such as *Es Leuchten die Sterne* (*The Stars are Shining*) and *Das güldene Bäumchen* (*The Little Golden Tree*) were screened throughout Germany. These films promoted the image of Jews as thieving, subhuman scum. In *Der Ewige Jude* (*The Eternal Jew*), images of Jews were intercut with images of rats—a clear implication to unsuspecting audiences that their Jewish neighbors were vermin.

Though an extreme example, the Nazis used the influence of the cinema to sell the worst of ideas. We do not need to rely on extremes, however, to know that what occurs in the cinema often translates to real life. This does not mean it always crosses over, but what we see definitely has the ability to spill into our reality—and that is when film places our minds in a precarious place.

As with television, film provides both young and old with a lens to view the world. As stated in *Growing Up With Television: The Cultivation Perspective Processes*:

Those who spend more time ‘living’ in the world of television are more likely to see the ‘real world’ in terms of the images, values, portrayals, and ideologies that emerge through the lens of television.⁹

The cinema is a public mirage, and many are lured into believing the optical illusion is real. In a media-drenched society we confuse the real with the unreal. When we watch a movie, just as when we watch television, we cast the real world aside for one presented on screen. This is the *escape* aspect of movie-going. But to delve too deeply into these false worlds or rely too heavily on their teachings leads us to internalize what we see.

All this sounds rather grave, so before you throw your DVD player out the window and barricade the cinema doors, allow me to explain. While it may sound like I am warming up to tell everyone to steer clear of the cinema or television, that is not my intention. What I suggest is to understand the

9. George Gerbner, Larry Gross, Michael Morgan, and Nancy Signorelli. *Growing Up with Television: The Cultivation Perspective*. In *Media Effects: Advances in Research and Theory*. J. Bryant and Mary Beth Oliver, editors. Routledge. Hillsdale, New Jersey. 2008. 17–41.

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potential dangers of being led down the wrong path. We must tread fully aware of surrounding dangers.

What Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, and Signorelli intended in the quotation above was not to claim there is a confusion of literal worlds. No sane, mature adult believes the galaxy of *Star Wars* exists. Rather, the authors warn of spoiling our perception of *this* world, our world, as it actually is.

We have a God-given tendency to take what we experience in Story and graft it into our personal lives, whether that story was flashed on a wall or printed on a page. When moral issues are played out in that story, whether they occur in Middle America or Middle Earth, we mentally note the consequences of the characters' choices.

When we see Luke Skywalker and friends skip around the universe, we translate that to our lives on earth. When Han Solo is cornered by the bounty hunter in the cantina, we see him in a strange bar in a fictional spaceport, but we also observe someone confront a difficult situation.

This part of the scene is more subconscious in its delivery. Han distracts the bounty hunter until Han has a chance to secretly pull out his blaster and shoot the green menace. In our minds we see a semi-heroic figure confirm the moral right of self-preservation. While this lesson does not mean we will all shoot the people who confront us, it does, on a subconscious level, reaffirm acceptance of self-defense with lethal force when necessary. Now apply this concept to all the times you have seen a hero dispatch someone in self-defense. We collect those viewings into one big mental-moral concept that confirms it must always be okay to kill in self-defense.

Conversely, when we see a constant string of movies and movie scenes which show crime without moral consequence (*Ocean's 11*, *True Romance*, *A Fish Named Wanda*, *Snatch*), we weaken our convictions that theft or other immoral behaviors are wrong.

Our casual relationship with the stories of our day has consequences. As our media has become more violent and cruel, our society has likewise become more violent and cruel.

Watching movies is often a social activity. It is common to watch movies in a theatre or with friends or family. You are not alone when you watch a movie in the theatre, so the social aspects of film-viewing can deepen the effects of cinema on an individual.

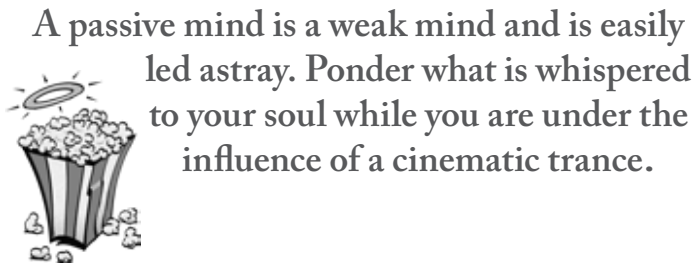
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If we are in the middle of a crowded theatre when something questionable is presented, we are not in the best circumstance to defend our self. The crowd is engaged with whatever is on screen. At that point, we are influenced by crowd dynamics to dispense with our personal inhibitions.

To complain about the content of a film while the credits roll leads to shrugs or scorn from those unwilling to be confronted by such talk. These social constraints placed upon an individual's thought processes teach us to be passive audience members. We turn off our brains and allow a film to sweep us away—and we set ourselves up for a potentially dangerous ride.



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