

Charlie W. Starr
Program Chair Humanities
Kentucky Christian University
www.charliewstarr.com

Book Review:

You Are What You See by Scott Nehring

For what Scott Nehring does well in, *You Are What You See: Watching Movies Through a Christian Lens* (RightLine, 2010), he is to be praised, especially so since much of what he does hasn't been done by anyone else. He rightly writes of the dangers of passive viewing, of how film messages are delivered to us at subconscious levels, of the dangers of celebrity culture (which he connects directly to the sin of idol worship), of the need for Christians to move beyond the strategy of withdrawal into Christian subculture and get engaged in popular culture again, and of the limits of a culture war or condemnatory approach to responding to the secular world in which we Christians live.

I am especially grateful for Nehring's argument that, while culture war may have its place, imposing censorship is not the solution to our problems—that the choices out there aren't the problem, but our own heart is. The choices we're likely to make—that's where the problem lies; that's what we need to concentrate on.

Higher praise, however, goes to ideas Nehring expresses which are seldom expressed anywhere else. I agree with his analysis that external rating codes placed on movies are insufficient guidelines for judging a movie's merits. I also agree that watching film can be an act of ministry—it can keep us culturally relevant and create opportunities for sharing our faith.

Nehring is dead-on when he says that our “down time”—the time we use to entertain ourselves—belongs to God as much as any other aspect of our lives.

One thing which Nehring points out which several Christian critics have said and need to keep saying loudly is that Christians need to stop compromising in their own participation in the production of culture, of art, specifically of film. Christians have been making bad films for long enough! It's time to stop.

Nehring is at his best in Part Two of *You Are What You See* where he offers the reader a way to value even very secular films by showing how all movies follow a specific story in both structure and content. He introduces us to a universal four-act structure in film which, once we know it, allows us to engage movies more actively and critically. Then he shows us that the plots of movies, as built around that structure, are in fact a single plot, a single story—the story of the Hero. In introducing us to the Hero's story, the role of the villain, the role of the mentor, the secondary antagonist, and the very concept of archetypes which these represent, Nehring helps us to truly see movies through a Christian lens. And then when he introduces us to the concept of the Great Story, the one story which all stories are telling, one buried in the unconscious mind of each of us—placed there by God to familiarize us with the greatest of truths—and then shows us how Christ is the true Hero of which all those stories speak—well it's just magic: a perfect revelation. The reader who studies and embraces this section of the book will never watch movies the same way again.

Equally as good, then, and maybe better is something Nehring does which I haven't seen anyone else do: he offers practical advice for a complete and Christian movie watching life style. While Christian cultural critics cry out the dangers of movies or preach isolationism, Scott Nehring offers some simple but effective tips for watching movies well and engaging in culture. He emphasizes personal responsibility and accountability before the Lord. Ratings are a flawed guide to what we should and shouldn't watch. Even content isn't an absolute factor. Nehring is

bold enough to suggest that such material as nudity, sex, violence and cussing in movies does not automatically make them bad. He argues that context matters (consider the difference between the nudity of concentration camp Jews in *Schindler's List* versus the nudity in a cheap thrills flick like *Porky's*). He argues his point well and with good examples. He tells us to pay attention to character, to exercise freedom in Christ (which he supports heavily from scripture), to decide ahead of time which kinds of movies we think we can and can't watch, to serve our community in cultural ways like promoting "buycotts" instead of boycotts (purposely buying a DVD we think worthwhile), lobbying theaters to show a movie we think worthwhile or starting film clubs in our local communities. He suggests focusing on God's grace and forgiveness when we see a movie we wish we hadn't or realize we shouldn't have seen. He suggests doing research: read reviews, wait to see the movie till we've gotten feedback about it, or just plain decide not to see a particular film. In these moments of practical suggestion, Nehring is at his best.

The Weaknesses

It is always a difficult thing for a Christian to point out problems in the work of another Christian, not because honest critique seems harsh but because tone is so easy to mistake in writing. A negative critique can easily be perceived as mean-spirited. The critique I offer here is intended to be honest and helpful, and I offer it in a spirit of kindness, even if that spirit doesn't always come across in the tone of the writing.

If Nehring would cut out most of Part One of his book, he would be doing his reader a favor. The first hundred pages of *You Are What You See* read mostly like a typical Christian anti-cultural rant. I found myself wondering early on, "Does this guy even like movies?" as I have often wondered in reading Christian film critique. By the end of the book it's clear that Nehring is indeed a film fan, but that only makes the gloom and doom preaching of Part One so much the

worse: it puts the author in danger of having his book set aside by readers who were tired of the same old thing before Nehring gets a chance to show them this book isn't the same old thing.

The tone and content of the book's first third are so very different from the rest of the book, that the transition into the very good second part of the book is awkward to the point of making the reader wonder if this should not be two separate books.

I think I understand what Nehring is trying to do. Part One is a wakeup call to Christians to take film and culture seriously for their dangers. Even if this still needs to be done, it's been done so many times before that the author could and should have left it to someone else or at least vastly reduced the amount of time he spent on it.