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## Mind Games Survival Course Manual



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## Perspectives on Film

What's in a movie?

Todd Kappelman

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### Introduction

- | *Film* can be properly understood as a narrative medium, a "visual book."
- | Christians and non-Christians have a wide variety of responses and reactions to film.
- | Properly understood, film can be of great value in discerning the philosophical positions and shifts in society and can enable the Christian to better respond to his or her culture.

### **I. The history of suspicion: Fictional and imaginative literature as a clue to present concerns**

The church as a body has a tradition of suspicion concerning film which can be traced to early reservations concerning literature and many other forms of art and entertainment.

1. Alcuin(797 AD), an influential Christian leader, was concerned about the worldliness in the church. One of the things that troubled him most was the monk's fondness for fictional literature and stories about heroes such as Beowulf and Ingeld. Writing to Higbald, Alcuin said: "Let the words of God be read aloud at the table in your refectory. The reader should be heard there, not the flute-player; the Fathers of the Church, not the songs of the heathen. . . . What has Ingeld to do with Christ?"

2. Tertullian (160 AD approx.), the father of Latin theology, had raised a similar issue by asking: "What has Athens to do with Jerusalem?" Tertullian was concerned that the study of pagan philosophers would be detrimental to the Christian faith and should be avoided.
3. Paul (10 AD?) the apostle asks rhetorically, "What partnership does righteousness have with iniquity? Or what fellowship has light with darkness? What accord has Christ with Belial?" (II Corinthians 6:14-15) It is easy to see why many Christians are suspicious and extremely cautious when it comes to mixing elements of the world with their faith.
4. Plato (BC 4th cent.) writing in *The Republic* cautions against the poets because they are "imitators" of the sensory world and the things they speak of are removed from reality. Plato believed that young children could be led astray and deceived by the fictional accounts of the poets. Fiction, he reasoned, would have a bad moral effect on the city

Conclusion: The objections raised against the arts (past and present) do have merit and should not be dismissed too quickly. Christians have a right and a responsibility to make sure that the entertainment and the arts are not used in a manner that is damaging to their spiritual welfare.

## 2. The nature and purpose of film

### A. Cultural Relevance

1. As Christians who are concerned with the integration of faith and art (film in this instance), our relevance to the culture we live in, and the right we have to criticize that culture, we should have an interest in the various ways in which culture is expressed through the arts.
2. "Art [is] the embodiment of man's response to reality and his attempt to order his experience of that reality." (John W. Dixon II. *Nature and Grace in Art.* )
3. Man has always and will continue to express his hope and excitement, as well as his fears and reservations, about life and what it means to be human through the arts. He will seek to express his world through any and all available mediums, and presently that includes film.

### 2. A Picture of Reality

1. A film is able to convey an enormous range of human experience and emotions. A good film maker, script writer, director, producer, or actor can take us to places that we might never be able to see through our everyday experiences. They may also show us things about our world that would otherwise remain hidden to the untrained eye.

2. A film can also be a picture of an unreality. Through film, perhaps even more than in literature, we see things that could never conceivably occur. We visit worlds and are introduced to people who do not and could not exist.
3. As one of the dominant modes of expression in our culture, film has earned a voice and deserves to be addressed as a meaningful part of Christian and non-Christian experience. This leads to the need for interpretation of film.

Conclusion: Film has cultural relevance because of its ability to convey both the positive and negative aspects of the human condition as well its overwhelming presence in modern society.

### 3. Whose philosophy is in a film?

#### A. *Film is often more concerned with the meaning and interpretation of life and reality than with the cold hard facts.*

Film, as art, is concerned with things as they matter to men, not necessarily as they are! The English poet Shelley called this concern for meaning in fiction "the spirit of events."

#### 2. *Film creates an imaginary world into which we enter.*

It needs to be interpreted by skillful as well as sensitive hearts and minds! Failure to do meaningful interpretation leads to a blur in the distinction between fiction and reality and a loss of the meaning which those involved in making the film are seeking to convey.

#### 3. *All film has a perspective from which it was made.*

There are directors, writers, screen writers, producers, cameramen, editors, makeup artists, lighting technicians, field consultants, prop designers, costume makers, actors and supporting cast as well as many other people involved. It is, more than most arts, a collaboration of talent and efforts. The question may be asked: if so many people are involved, whose philosophical perspective is present? In short, everyone has some influence, but some more so than others.

1. *The Director.* The director should be considered the primary philosophical driver in modern cinema. He is the one who decides how a movie will look and what kind of message it will deliver, the tone, mood and conclusion of the final work. In short, it is the director who should be considered to be the primary influence in the film, just as the writer is the author of the book.
2. *The Writer.* The writer is the person who originally authors the work (a book, short story, history etc.) upon which the film will be made. He forms the basic story, but often forfeits his ability to influence a

work once it is purchased and put into production.

3. *The Screen Writer*. The screen writer takes the book or other work and transforms the written medium into one that is "camera ready." His job is to decide what lines to use or omit and also to write the instructions for the scenes.
4. *Actors*. The job of the actor is to portray a character(s) in such a way that the desires of the writer and director are conveyed. While actors and actresses are important, their influence is usually overemphasized (especially in American cinema).

Conclusion: A film is the combined effort of many individuals and no one person's "philosophical views" are present in any one film. However, the director and writers are the primary motivators and influence of a particular work and it is their views, beliefs and opinions which are most often portrayed in a given film.

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