



WHAT I LEARNED AT THE MOVIES

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The heavens are constantly telling the glory of God. The earth showcases his artwork. And the silver screen echoes that telling and showcasing eight days a week.

A picture is worth a thousand words – or originally, a thousand pieces of gold. Hollywood understands that math. Also, some words are worth a thousand pictures. Together, words and pictures are the ultimate double whammy. An 8th century Chinese proverb says this: “That art is best which to the soul’s range gives no bounds; something beyond the form, something beyond the sound.” Some movies achieve this best.

SOME OF THE DROPS SPARKLE

When you look to the silver screen and its repertoire you will no doubt find both moral and artistic drivel, and much that should be avoided at almost any cost. But it was Jesus who said, “It is not that which goes into a person that defiles them; but that which comes out from them.” What defiles originates in our own darkened hearts and then flows out in hurtful and false words, and hateful and deceitful acts.

But back to the movies. As King Arthur said to King Pelinore in the musical *Camelot*: “One of what we all are, Pelly – less than a drop in the great blue motion of the sunlit sea. But it seems that some of the drops sparkle, Pelly. Some of them do sparkle!”

Some films in the great ocean of theatrical releases do sparkle like droplets of water in the great blue motion of the sunlit sea. And some do reflect the glory and craftsmanship of the Maker and Redeemer of all.

So much wisdom. So much truth. So much splendor. So many movies and so little time!

“Show and tell. Tell and show.”

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A LOVE AFFAIR WITH THE MOVIES

My love affair with the movies began in 1955. I was six years old when I first saw James Dean on the big screen. His brooding character, Cal, was coming to terms with the soiled dove that was his Mother, then angrily destroying the valuable ice that could transport his father's crop to market by train, and finally caring for this aging, ailing self-righteous patriarch and making peace with all. A six year old cannot possibly process all that information. But fifty-six years later I sure remember the way those things made me feel. *They made their mark.*

The deal was sealed when I was seven. That's the year I met the adventurer Ishmael, the eerily tattooed Queequeg and the hate-driven Captain Ahab in *Moby Dick*. The bloody, barbaric whaling industry made another indelible mark on my young sensibilities.

The Searchers with John Wayne came along that same year. I don't know if there actually was a 3D release or not. But the arrows shot by the Comanche braves seemed to zip off the screen right into my chest. This was my first recollected exposure to racial prejudice. And I learned from John Wayne's conflicted Ethan that it could be trumped by love.

Anyone who feels like they are stuck in a dysfunctional family should see 1968s *The Lion in Winter*. It is set in Henry II's Christmas court of 1183. When his three potential heirs are trying to take the life of their tyrannical father, with knives provided by their mother,

Kathryn Hepburn's Eleanor of Aquitaine, she says: "Well, every family has their ups and downs." Indeed. And in that moment any dysfunction in my family or yours seems to pale by comparison.

IT'S A WONDERFUL FILM

I have learned of servant leadership from James Stewart's George Bailey in *It's A Wonderful Life*; of the glories of adolescent puppy love in 1979s *A Little Romance*; of tempestuous, star-crossed young love in 1969s *Romeo and Juliet*; of true love in *The Princess Bride*.

I have learned to cheer for the good guys and hate the bad guys. I have learned that good guys are capable of some very bad moral choices and that bad guys are capable of some surprisingly good ones. I have learned the hills are alive with the sound of music.

From *Moulin Rouge* and *Across the Universe* I have learned that the musical is not a dated, dead genre. And I have come to value more than ever the power of the popular song (and the longevity of the Beatles' repertoire).

I never served in the military. But from the movies I have learned that war is hell. And I've also learned that oftentimes hell is happening right where we live in our families, our workplaces and our churches.

LEARNING FROM THE STORIES

Filmmakers are capable of drawing characters as richly on the screen as any Dickens,

Tolkien or Rowling ever did on the page. The Cohen brothers do this so powerfully in *Fargo* when they use as grisly a tale as you'd ever want to hear to promote values that would get a loud "Amen!" from Dr. James Dobson.

I have learned from *Shakespeare in Love* and *Anonymous* how the Bard's plays may actually have been composed. I have learned from *Black Swan* where idolatry of any kind inevitably leads.

I have learned from *Amelie* that childlike wonder is appropriate for grown-ups. I have learned from *The Unforgiven* that "Deserve's got nothing to do with it."

I have learned from several Tyler Perry movies and from *Moonstruck* that sometimes the African-American community and the Roman Catholic community are better at merging church and everyday life than are we evangelicals and charismatics.

SHOW AND TELL

Most of all I have learned that God goes to the movies. He meets me there so often. And "His" glory literally sings off the screen.

Art making is part of our humanity; it is part of us reflecting the dynamic essence of our Maker. Last year's *Cave of Forgotten Memories* from Werner Herzog shows that the most ancient cave-wall paintings we know of are all so imaginative and so very vivid.

Let's return to that magical marriage of words and pictures. Movies are show and tell. Show and tell.

That is what our worship was designed to be. Word and table. Table and word. Tell and show. Show and tell. With the service of the word, with the hearing of scripture publicly read and the preaching or teaching applying it to life, we tell our story. With the service of the table – when we break the bread and share the wine – we re-enact the story.

We show. We tell. We have much to learn from the movies.



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