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Being Grateful for My "Stupid Little Life": Why We Need Movies

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Being Grateful for My "Stupid Little Life": Why We Need Movies

Abstract

"More and more I'm convinced the current cultural paradigm leaves us too thin. The practical and objective approach to reality doesn't attend to the complexity and mystery of the created world; it doesn't attend to the complexity and mystery of our humanity."

Posting about how movies help make sense of our experiences from *In All Things* - an online hub committed to the claim that the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ has implications for the entire world.

<http://inallthings.org/being-grateful-for-my-stupid-little-life-why-we-need-movies/>

Keywords

In All Things, motion pictures, reality, mystery, humanity

Disciplines

Christianity | Film and Media Studies

Comments

In All Things is a publication of the [Andreas Center for Reformed Scholarship and Service at Dordt College](#).

Being Grateful for my “Stupid Little Life”: Why We Need Movies

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Jason Lief

“The cultural race to the bottom is a myth; we do not live in a fallen state of cheap pleasures that pale beside the intellectual riches of yesterday... All around us the world of mass entertainment grows more demanding and sophisticated, and our brains happily gravitate to that new found complexity.” – *Everything Bad for you is Good for You* (p. 199)

When I discuss [American Beauty](#) with college students and tell them that it is one of the most Christian films I’ve ever seen, many of them are left perplexed. How can a film be Christian when it has so much sex? What about the language? The drugs? The violence? The same thing happens when we watch the Coen brothers’ adaptation of [No Country for Old Men](#). “This is one of the most hopeful movies you’ll ever see,” I say as I introduce the film. Then, when the closing shot of Tommy Lee Jones cuts to black and the credits start to roll, students moan and complain, angry at the lack of resolution. We spend the next class exploring what it means to bring a little bit of light “into all that cold and all that dark.” As a part of the popular culture course I teach, students watch [2001: A Space Odyssey](#) and [Interstellar](#), comparing and connecting the two films. Most of them hate *2001*, yet for some reason they can’t stop talking about it.

More and more I’m convinced the current cultural paradigm leaves us too thin. The practical and objective approach to reality doesn’t attend to the complexity and mystery of the created world; it doesn’t attend to the complexity and mystery of our humanity. There are some experiences for which objective, straightforward language fails us – the birth of a child, the loss of a relationship, the exhilaration of unexpected victory, the beauty of familiarity. Try as we may, these experiences are impossible to describe, so we fall back into the poetic to show and not tell. We witness the power of revenge in [The Revenant](#), the necessity of sadness in [Inside Out](#), and the imaginative courage of [Room](#). We need movies like these to help us make sense of our experiences, to help us make sense of the joy and sorrow of being human.

Charles Taylor’s monumental work *A Secular Age* wrestles with the consequences of secularization and disenchantment that have resulted from advances in science and technology. The sacramental interpretation of reality has given way to an experience that is calculated, technical, and pragmatic. Yet, Taylor describes how our human experience remains “haunted” — we sense there is more going on than meets the eye, but we’re not quite sure how to talk about it. We long to experience the burning bush so that we might encounter the sacred in this world with Moses, but our cultural experience lacks the language and depth to help us find our way. This is why we need Lester Burnham to interpret the fall leaves, a grandmother’s hands, fairy dresses, and a Firebird – so we might once again be opened to the presence of the sacred. We need Guillermo del Toro’s apocalyptic vision to open our eyes to the reality of good and evil. We need Han Solo and Chewbacca to make the jump to light speed, awakening a childlike imagination that truly believes in the force — the presence of God at work in the world.

I have nothing against so-called Christian films like [God’s not Dead](#) or [Fireproof](#), I just find them shallow. They tend to be didactic, telling us the truth about God, faith, and human experience in a way that makes sure we “get it.” These films assume that truth is simple, obvious, and well-defined. Instead of opening us up to the power and possibility of a divinely inspired imagination, they leave us with an overly simplistic form of religion. The mystery of God’s Kingdom does not need explanation; it needs poetry. It needs new

parables that inspire, mystify, and leave us yearning for more. We need parables that inspire the type of awe and wonder experienced by Lester Burnham:

“It’s hard to stay mad when there’s so much beauty in the world. Sometimes I feel like I’m seeing it all at once, and it’s too much, my heart fills up like a balloon that’s about to burst. And then I remember to relax, and stop trying to hold on to it, and then it flows through me like rain and I can’t feel anything but gratitude for every single moment of my stupid little life. You have no idea what I’m talking about, I’m sure. But don’t worry... you will someday.” (*American Beauty*)