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When Art Is a Mirror



Monte E. Wilson

Most Christians have matured beyond the knee-jerk rejection of any art that does not have a cross firmly planted in the middle of whatever medium is being utilized. Many are still troubled, however, by art that reflects darkness, tragedy, or sin in a realistic manner. It does not seem to occur to these people that God did not have quite the same scruples, as the Bible contains stories of rape, illicit sexual relations, treachery, and battles with high body counts.

As creatures made in the image of God, creativity is our birthright, even our mandate. Understanding the purposes and functions of art is paramount to any intelligent analysis of its value. Historically, art has been a mirror that reflects societal values, religious beliefs, personal fears and passions, as well as sometimes just being a tool for propaganda. Unfortunately, at times "Christian art" is only propaganda, containing none of the artistic elements that would give it any standing in a civilized society.

Sometimes I wonder if part of the problem is with King James English. For us Americans, an individual with a British accent is immediately perceived as being quite intelligent, even sophisticated. If President Bush and Prime Minister Blair gave identical speeches, Americans would "ho-hum" the president, and applaud the intelligence of the prime minister. The King James English of Scripture has the same effect on stories

of violence and sex: it all just sounds so proper!

"But Monte, the Bible does not use graphic language and imagery in its description of violence or sex." Go back and read the battles where God told Israel to kill everything that breathed: cows, ducks, sheep, men, women, and children. When such scenes are depicted in a movie, then, why do we start criticizing "the graphic nature of the violence"? Or what about Song of Solomon? Why is it that when comparable love scenes are flashed on the big screen or written into a novel, they are ipso facto deemed inappropriate?

As I see it, the problem is not with violence or sex per se. The problem is contextual. Is the artistic mirror reflecting what life is like in our society, or what it can be? Both are legitimate arenas of exploration for an artist. But as educated viewers, we must look at the context in which an idea is presented in order to understand its meaning.

VIOLENCE

There is a difference between the violence in Mel Gibson's *Braveheart* and Arnold Schwarzenegger's *Commando*. Contextually, it is impossible to truly appreciate the sacrifices for freedom that William Wallace and his fellow Scots made in *Braveheart* if we do not understand the sort of violent battles they were willing to undertake. However, in the movie *Commando*, the violence is utterly gratuitous.

In Clint Eastwood's classic western, *Unforgiven*, the violence of gunplay is masterfully displayed so as to show the viewer how such violence corrupts the soul. The gunplay was not romanticized. The chief characters—Clint Eastwood, Morgan Freeman, and Gene Hackman—are portrayed as neither black nor white (heroically good versus diabolically evil) but as various shades of gray and black. The best of us wrestle with darkness; the worst of us still have sparks of light.

In visual art, Edward Munch's famous painting *The Scream* is an excellent example of art that reflects pain. The contorted face of the emotionally tortured face is in the foreground while the world seems to swirl in turmoil all around him. It is a brilliant portrayal of psychological pain that is not

reserved only for non-Christians.

The Spanish artist Goya painted graphic images of violence in paintings like *The Third of May*. This painting was executed after Napoleon's men slaughtered unarmed Spaniards in the streets: the artist said that he painted it so that men would remember and never allow something like this to happen again. Likewise, Picasso's famous painting *Guernica* shows the horrible results of a Nazi bombing-training raid on an innocent village.

But consider what happens when the artist's mirror is too narrow.

In Eastwood's newest cinematic release, *Million Dollar Baby*, we are given an allegory of boxing replete with themes of hope, steadfastness, sacrifice, and redemption. Maggie Fitzgerald (played by Hillary Swank) would rather fail at boxing than get to the end of her life never having tried. And while she is seeking to fulfill her dream, she refuses to take any handouts but insists instead upon paying her own way. However. . .

Toward the end of this movie, one of the characters has an accident and is left as a quadriplegic who cannot even breathe without a ventilator. After days of soul searching, a friend pulls the plug on the victim. Of course, the Christian community is up in arms because of Eastwood's depiction of euthanasia in an "understandable" and empathetic light.

On the one hand, I applaud Eastwood's courage in confronting the issue of euthanasia. This was no "I want your life insurance so I can buy a new house" presentation but one that displayed a deep sense of love and pity. On the other hand, as a Christian, I believe the story line and artistic value of the movie was weakened by the fact that, while we get a glimpse of the consequences of such a choice, we do not get a full picture of the aftermath of this decision in the life of the "compassionate" individual.

Franky Schaeffer once said that he had what he thought was a great story line for a movie. The story would open with a young high school girl confessing to her parents that she had become pregnant. The father immediately directs his daughter

to get an abortion. Later, the father is in an automobile accident and left on life-support systems.

As the daughter considers her dad's predicament, she easily decides to pull the plug on him: not because she hated him, but because he had taught her that some lives are not worth living. The movie would end with this scene. No one gets "saved," the daughter is not seen weeping over her decision. Here, the logical consequence of abortion is euthanasia.

The problem for the artist and the audience is not the violence of battles, gunplay, boxing, or even abortion and euthanasia: the problem is the context of that violence. Do we get to see "the whole picture," or are we left with a skewed or even perverted view of reality?

SEX

Art forms that depict violence are not the only challenge for Christians. Probably a far more troubling issue is the depiction of all things sexual. Consider, for example, Tom Wolfe's *I Am Charlotte Simmons*. This is a story about college sports, fraternities and sororities, keggers, and sex: all told through the eyes of Charlotte, a bright, beautiful, and young freshman lady who was unprepared for life at fictional Dupont University. The language and imagery is graphic—i.e., x-rated.

With his masterful eye for detail, Wolfe has held up a mirror before college life, and it is not a pretty picture. This is college life *as it is*.

The question for some Christians is this: is this really art or is it pornography? However, the issue is, again, context. Are the language and sex gratuitous, or are they necessary to the story? If the language and sex were diluted or even deleted, would we get a clear picture of what is happening within the culture of our universities? Would we see, hear, and feel exactly what is going on in this context? I suggest that the answer is no, we would not.

Actually, one of the areas where Wolfe exceeds expectations—at least mine, anyway—is how powerfully he shows us the consequences of choices. This is especially the case in the

deflowering of Charlotte (which takes a full chapter). The sex here is not beautiful, it is not romantic: there is absolutely nothing noble or good about what happens. It is gross and ugly. And the consequences for Charlotte—psychologically, relationally, and academically—are tragic.

I have repeatedly recommended *Charlotte Simmons* to high school teachers and parents whose children are about to go away to college. "You want to see what your students/children are going to be facing? Then read *I Am Charlotte Simmons*." The mirror of Charlotte's story reflects this part of American culture *as it is*.

Even if you believe Wolfe has gone too far, the point here is that we cannot categorically assert that *all things sexual* are taboo for an artist. Life in this world includes sex. Sometimes the sex is pure, beautiful, and filled with love; at others it is dirty, ugly, and self-centered. Both are legitimate expressions for an artist.

Art does not merely produce pastoral poetry or paint idyllic scenery or score majestic symphonies. Sometimes life is not beautiful but ugly and tragic. Art can help us to see and even to feel the full impact of both the beautiful and the ugly.

As an individual, I find far more enjoyment in art that reveals life *as it can be*. I love stories of heroic struggle where the hero maintains his or her virtue and discovers the Holy Grail. As I see it, however, when we shun, or at least shy away from, art that confronts us with painful or troubling realities, we are not being holy: we are rejecting a truth that can set us free.

"THEY LIED TO ME!"

I have a friend who was raised a Pentecostal. For him, movies were as evil as drinking, dancing, or playing pinochle. When he became a minister, it was, for him, doubly so. For years, he refused to see any movie, believing it would taint his soul and destroy his reputation.

As time went on, he began to wonder about the distinction between "all movies" and "some movies." Finally, he decided he would find out for himself and decided to go to the movies. Still being concerned for his reputation, he

dressed in an overcoat and put on a hat that he could pull down low across his forehead.

When the movie began, he said that his heart was beating so hard he could barely hear the movie. However, after a while he settled down and began, at first, to cautiously enjoy the movie, and then gradually to actually become enthralled. And then it happened: when Julie Andrews began singing, "The hills are alive with the sound of music," he could take it no more. He jumped up in his seat on the last row of the theatre and yelled, "They lied to me!"

It is not always easy to distinguish between biblical standards of holiness and those imposed upon us by our religious cultures. Tragically, for many of us the standards were set by weaker brethren and Pharisees rather than by the more mature members of our communities. This is especially true in regards to the art we judge as good or bad, holy or sinful.

I am not suggesting that you are a Pharisee or are somehow artistically challenged if you have no desire to see *Unforgiven* or read *I Am Charlotte Simmons*. I do believe, however, that, like my Pentecostal friend, many of us have been lied to. Moreover, that lie is keeping us from a world filled with meaningful insights that can provoke, enrich, and enliven us as humans.

The tragedy for my friend was not merely that he was lied to, but that it took him so long to go and judge for himself and so to strengthen his own standards and beliefs. How many of us would rather remain deaf, dumb, and blind than to judge for ourselves the meaning of a particular work of art so that we never have to face the fact that we may have been lied to?

Jesus did not come to earth to experience only the good and the beautiful: he came and embraced the full range of human experience. Yes, he experienced the joy and beauty of life (*life as it can be*), but he also embraced pain and suffering (*life as it is*): all of which made his death on our behalf even more poignant.

In his book, *Art & the Bible*, Francis Schaeffer wrote, "Christianity is not just involved with 'salvation' but with the

total man in the total world." Art reflects the entire gamut of the human experience: joy and suffering, good and evil, beauty and ugliness. To restrict the artist's focus to only one side of life would be the same as counseling Jesus to embrace only the good and the beautiful.

Obviously this is a very complex issue, but it is a subject that we evangelical Christians need to wrestle with. Not merely so as to decide what works of art are "permissible" for a Christian to enjoy but, more importantly, to more fully investigate the very nature of Christianity itself. For if we say that Christianity only speaks to or embraces what is "uplifting" or "affirming," I suggest that what we are advocating is not the Christian life but the lies of Romanticism.

Author

Dr. Monte E. Wilson is president of African American Self Help Foundation, www.aashf.org, and a minister in the Reformed Episcopal Church. Over the past thirty years he has trained leaders across five continents in the skills and wisdom that are needed for healthy communities that seek to turn poverty into productivity through transforming hearts and minds. He is also the president of Minding Success, (www.MindingSuccess.com) an organization that trains a new generation of leaders in the field of business. His clients include ABC, Disney, ESPN, Pratt and Whitney, and United Technology. He believes transformational leaders need a soul that reflects truth, beauty, and goodness in order to transform the world around them. Monte is married and the father of five adult children and four grandchildren. He lives in Atlanta, Georgia.