How to choose what we watch

by Daniel Reynaud

The subtle and the not so subtle values promoted in television and movies present the Christian with a challenge as to what and how to watch. Some guidelines.

With multiple channels accessible at the press of a button and with videos and movies available throughout day or night, the visual media poses a dilemma for Seventh-day Adventists.* Much of it appears fundamentally at odds with our faith. Violence, sex, destructive lifestyle, and rampant materialism characterize most of what passes for entertainment. Some Adventists respond to the problem by simply eliminating the visual media from their lives: no television, no videos, and no movies. These are avoided as a major source of corruption.

Yet it seems unrealistic to cut ourselves off entirely from the media and its potential value. Without proper understanding and use of mass media, our message may become isolationist and irrelevant. We also run the risk of becoming disconnected from the very society with which we must engage. Of course, an unrestrained and uncritical acceptance of the diet that television, videos, and movies offer is clearly not in the best interest of the Christian. On what basis, then, can we choose what to see and what to avoid?

Media and values

To begin with, we need to understand how the visual media works. Too often, we judge this media according to popular myths that circulate about it, without really examining how true such myths really are. Ironically, many of these myths about the media are in fact promoted by the media, as they serve the media's self-interest.

The media's primary concern is not aesthetics or morality. Some media producers of television programs and films have a social or moral agenda that they push—for example, advocacy of tolerance toward homosexuality and a more accepting attitude to those with AIDS. But by and large, the visual media does not consciously set out to present a particular point of view. The fact that the media often has a fairly uniform social and moral stance owes more to the commercial pressures under which it operates, rather than any conspiracy of evil producers.

Sometimes we as audiences feel as if we are at the mercy of these producers, and that their opinions are foisted on us. However, when you talk to the producers, you discover that quite often they feel they are at the mercy of fickle audiences, whose tastes and desires they are constantly searching to understand and fulfil. Media history is full of examples of films, television programs, and music albums that should have sold well but failed. They had popular talent and high-quality technical production, but for some mysterious reason, they failed to ignite audiences. As programs are usually quite expensive to make, producers are constantly searching for the magic formula that will guarantee them a good return on their expensive investment. Thus the tendency for hit movies to be followed by sequels and look-alikes. However, producers still have not isolated what it is that makes one movie a hit and another a flop.

Having established that the media is not primarily concerned with passing on specific values, we need to establish what it is about. Movies, videos, and television programs are a business be-

fore they are anything else. As a business, the primary goal of the media is to make money. Since movies make a profit mostly through the box office, their aim is to please the broadest possible spectrum of the public. For television, the main source of income is advertising. While ratings are important to television producers, the opinions of advertisers are even more significant. One can point to many cases of popular programs being taken off the air, simply because advertisers did not feel that they were a suitable medium for their products. Television's main function for audiences is usually to entertain, but for producers, it is a means to sell an audience's attention to the advertisers.

What advertisers want from television programs is a suitable setting to show off their products. Typically, this revolves around portraying upper-middle class white people with lifestyles of conspicuous consumption. Having popular characters whose manner of living is somewhat more expensive than ours encourages consumerism, and hence is what the advertisers like best. Television's rampant materialism, and to some extent its racism (it is overwhelmingly white) and sexism (men appear three times more often than women on television, and usually hold the positions of power) are to a large degree an outcome of the need to create programming that supports advertising.

Movies are a little different, as they do not depend on advertising revenue. Hence their value system can vary. However, two factors tend to hold the cinema in line with accepted social values: the need to appeal to large sections of the audience, and product placement. The latter is a disguised form of advertising, whereby a company pays a fee in exchange for having meaningful and positive coverage of its product. If any brand name is visible in a movie, someone probably paid to have it there. This is particularly true of products such as airlines, cigarettes, and alcohol. In effect, the movies tend to reinforce selfish consumerism, and support racist and sexist attitudes.

What Christians notice most often, and object frequently about television and movies, are things such as sex and violence. But we often fail to notice the crass materialism so inbred in these entertainment avenues. The reason that materialism as such fails to offend us is that we share the same values! And the media is at its most influential when it coincides with our values, for then it tends to reinforce what we already believe without us noticing. When the media portrays something to which we object, then we usually consciously reject the ideas, minimizing its impact.

What we watch

Having established the process by which the media generates values, and to some extent the way it slips them past our notice, we can now turn our attention to our choice of viewing. Two issues arise immediately: What shall we watch? How shall we watch? Our selection of viewing must be complemented by a particular viewing attitude and process if we wish to sustain a sound Christian approach to the media. I believe the "how" opens up a range of media to positive Christian interaction, and without it, there is little media to be recommended to the Christian.

The "what" is both simple and impossible to answer. Often people want a list of acceptable films. Such a process is too much like an inverse "Index"—the list of banned books maintained by the Catholic Church during and after the Reformation. However, appropriate films to watch can be defined qualitatively, not quantitatively; in other words, what may be acceptable for one person in one context may be inappropriate in different circumstances. Clearly, different personalities will respond in different ways to particular films and television programs, as is the case with any aesthetic creation such as music or painting. Differences in taste must be acknowledged as part of the human diversity created by God. So, how to choose a film or program?

I would ask, "Does it reflect the world or a part of it? Does it make us more sensitive to suffering and joy, pain, and wonder? Does it put me in touch with the emotions of someone else? Is there aesthetic merit in its formation, a delight in the creative processes, such as the use of language or the juxtaposition of images?" Each of these characteristics opens up a film or program to a positive Christian response.

The first question (Does it reflect the world?) asks us to consider in what ways the media allows us insight into the human condition. I would emphasize at this point that the human condition portrayed need not be positive, all sweetness and light. All too often, Christians assume that portrayals of evil are inappropriate for them. There has been a tendency to adopt a Disney view of the world, both literally and metaphorically. I believe this to be fundamentally flawed. There is no false romanticism about God's picture of the world. The Bible is full of very graphic and indeed disturbing images of evil—and that is the point. When the Bible portrays evil, it shows it in its full context, sometimes as having short-term gain, but always as having long-term pain. Christians should reject media products that ignore the reality of evil and its consequences. A number of programs are excessively sweet; many more suffer the opposite problem of glamorizing or romanticizing evil, by showing the behavior as having no negative consequences. Typically, heroes use violence to achieve their ends or have multiple sexual relations without any of the emotional baggage that goes with such behavior.

A program that reflects the world, or at least part of it, should put us in touch with the experiences of real people. An understanding of the true nature of evil

as well as good is valuable to the Christian. It makes us more sensitive to people's needs and to the nature of the spiritual conflict on this planet. A film need not be realistic to achieve this. A parallel case is that some of the parables in the Bible are not literal, yet they still teach real truth.

The last question, about aesthetics, is too often ignored by Christians. We have a responsibility to develop aesthetic appreciation, for it is a gift of God and a reflection of His own sense of beauty. It is appropriate for us to watch and admire a film or program that is aesthetically well made.

How to watch

Moving to the important question of how to watch television and movies, let me suggest a few things. Remember that the media is built around commercial values. To be aware of this makes us more sensitive to its influence, and acts as a barrier to its full effect. Indeed, we should always reflect on the underlying value system that a film portrays. Often, a film will have surface values and underlying values, which may in fact work in opposite directions. For example, the recent popular film *Bridget Jones' Diary* has surface values that appear to support loose sexual attitudes, yet its underlying values are about human integrity and identity. Viewed with the right attitude, the film can sensitize us to the situations facing secular people today. Viewed superficially, it can simply be seen as entertainment or even as a negative experience.

An awareness of the values in a media product can help us respond in an appropriate way to it. It is also helpful to know something of the processes by which a program or movie is produced. For example, a knowledge of basic film technique can be a powerful way of understanding how the media seeks to persuade us. Camera angles, lighting, editing, sound track—all these factors help shape our response to the characters portrayed. The more we know about the processes, the greater our power in determining our response to the media.

I have lectured on mass media at university level for 10 years now, and the most common response I have from students is that their knowledge of film technique gives them a healthy contempt for the rubbish they used to watch. They are much more discriminating, both in their choice of viewing and in the way they respond to their viewing. In other words, film knowledge shifts the power balance away from the film to the viewer.

There are other ways to educate the viewer. For example, most films and television programs are reviewed in the press. Naturally, these are not necessarily done from a Christian perspective. Nor are the reviewers always fair. Often they have an elitist attitude toward popular cinema. All the same, the reviews offer perspectives on current media offerings, and are a source of knowledge to empower the viewer. Another valuable way of watching films from a positive Christian perspective is to discuss them with others after the viewing, particularly analyzing their value system. Practice at this helps build up the skills of understanding a film, and getting other people's perspectives can broaden one's own view, sensitizing us to aspects we may have missed.

Conclusion

Let me conclude by commenting briefly about two relatively recent popular films: *Shrek* and *Pearl Harbor*. You may disagree with my responses, but at least we will have considered the values of the films.

My response to *Pearl Harbor* was quite negative. It was expertly directed and had technical excellence, and clearly showed the horrors of war, but I felt these virtues were undone by serious flaws. The script was poorly written, and the story was overloaded with cliches, the treatment of the characters was superficial, and the themes were light, mainly driven by the need to resolve the love triangle. In many respects it reminded me of *Titanic*, another film whose technical dazzle concealed identical faults. What made both of them worse was the illusion they created of actually showing us something historical and real. Technically, both had many aspects of reality—for example, the ships and aircraft were authentic-looking. However, both used this to sell a value system that was sentimental and superficial.

On the other hand, *Shrek* is a classic example of an unrealistic film that deals with real issues. Its images are computer-generated, and the whole story is a play on every fairy tale we have ever heard. Yet it deals with human relationships in a way that reflects the complexities we face in real life. The characters have competing values that demand priority, and they must choose. In the end, the main characters opt for relationships based on trust and forgiveness rather than ones based on personal gain and superficial appearance. The punch line of the film, when the princess turns into a plump and somewhat ugly creature, similar to Shrek, emphasizes that true human value cannot be based on mere outward appearance. Despite occasional coarse language, the film is open to a positive response from a Christian perspective.

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*I am aware that etymologically *media* is the plural of *medium*, and that it should require verbs in plural. However, its common use is leaning toward singular, which is what I have used in this article.