

Evaluating Movies “Worldviewishly” & “Redemptively”



1 Kings 3:9; Acts 17:24-28; Philippians 4:8

How to Evaluate A Movie Redemptively

3 Beginning REMINDERS:

- Do not equate SUCCESS with EXCELLENCE. Box Office Smash NOT necessarily mean it's good.
 - There's a difference between a movie made for children and a movie that TARGETS children. Many movies have become basically marketing campaigns – even some Christian movies.
- Evaluation takes TIME, but it's worth it! It may be easier to mow off the whole hedge than to weed it. But one method destroys the hedge while the other takes time to beautify it!

All movies are about redemption in one way or the other. Basically, redemption is simply the RECOVERY of what is lost. But, not all redemption is GOOD. It depends on what is *lost* and what is *recovered*!

HOW To Evaluate A Movie

1. EVALUATE A MOVIE TECHNICALLY.

- Consider the **MUSIC**. It offers quite a backdrop to the movie plus shared memories of the movie are often bound up in the music. [Star wars, Godfather, GWTW, James Bond, Pink Panther, Good, Bad, Ugly...]
- Consider the way the movie is **FILMED**. Camera, camera angle, staging, cropping, etc, + # of takes demonstrates how intentional people are about movies. [Bernie and Hillary]
- Consider the **VOICES**. Sometimes it's a voiceover, sometimes it's mainly a "subtext". WHOSE voice is being heard? And suppressed. [Simon Birch, Princess Bride (w/Columbo), How The Grinch Stole Christmas, Christmas story, Red Reddick in Shawshank]
- Consider the **ACTING**. Good acting can make all the difference. And so can poor acting!
- Consider the **WRITING**. Lame lines and tired, predictable plot lines can kill or at least maim movies. Good writing crafts memorable lines we carry with us. [SEE IF YOU CAN TELL ME . . . "Keep your friends close & your enemies closer" / "Magic mirror on the wall . . ." / "Yo Adrian!" / "Wax on, wax off." / "Go ahead, make my day." / "I'll get you, my little pretty, and your dog, too!" / "You is kind, you is smart, you is important." / "If you build it, they will come." / "Mama says, 'stupid is is stupid does'." / "Hasta lavista,baby!"]

2. EVALUATE A MOVIE'S CHOICE OF LANGUAGE.

- **Profanity** -- the rendering of words Christians consider sacred to the realm of swear words. ("omg" and using Jesus/God in a less than worshipful way, Even Zootopia).
- **Obscenity** -- sexual slurs, using the "favorite Hollywood adjective", etc. To get an "R" rating. Uncle Jack story.
- Appropriateness – does it really fit the character (may want to wait till the movie goes on a major network, and then it gets . . . a little better . . .)
- <http://www.pluggedin.com/movie-reviews/> -- This site breaks down the language, sex, violence, drugs and alcohol, and other parts of a movie quite clinically.

3. EVALUATE A MOVIE'S SEXUALITY.

- There's always some kind of **MORALITY** stated or **IMPLIED**. – Usually the hero(es) is/are sexually active. Yet, they are the "good guys". The "Bad Guys" can be subtle, obvious, or can change to and from [Spider Man / Grease]

- There's some kind of **JUDGMENT** of that **Morality**. Usually the judgment is against traditional morals or legalistic ways of dealing with life. Often times, sex without boundaries is almost viewed redemptively.

4. **EVALUATE A MOVIE'S VIOLENCE.**

- Does it advance the **STORY LINE**? -- Biblical stories are often violent, but for a reason! Some violence is just gratuitous and gross. Some is just being accurate. [**"Private Ryan" Vs Slasher films**]
- Is it **GRAPHIC** or **CARTOONISH**? -- Superhero movies often have over the top, almost laughable violence. That's nothing new (remember "The 3 Stooges?").
- Would it be better if **IMPLIED**? -- Sometimes there needs to be some appeal to the imagination. [Penny and Wallowitz]

5. **EVALUATE A MOVIE'S RELIGIOUS STANCE.**

- Are there religious **SYMBOLS** in the movie?
- Does the movie *Ignore* religion?
- Does the movie *Attack* religion?
- Does the movie *poke fun* at religion?
- Does the movie *Promote* a religion? What kind?

6. **LOOK FOR REDEPTIVE ELEMENTS IN THE MOVIE.**

In pretty much every movie, stated, implied, or subtexted, there's 3 redemptive elements. Figure these out, and you've got the "gospel" the movie is promoting! And the ways the movie is **searching for the Gospel**, even when they don't find it! What do we mean by "searching for the Gospel"?

➤ **There's GOOD verses EVIL.**

In almost every film, the fundamental drama is drawn along these lines. What creates a story worth telling is usually this:

- **good and evil clash**
- **good struggles and gets beat up for a while**
- **good defeats evil.**

Often evil has an institutional advantage. We love Bourne because he is on the run. We can't stand Warden Samuel Norton in "Shawshank Redemption" because of his hunger for power and hypocrisy. —And often good is an underdog or somehow down on their luck. Think of Rocky Balboa or Dr. Richard Kimble. Or think how many heroes in Disney films are orphans, or experience the loss of one or both parents along the way. Sometimes good and evil are cast in terms of a particular motif, like the "light" versus "dark" side in the *Stars Wars* franchise; sometimes good is orchestrated around one individual (James Bond, Indiana Jones, etc.). Often there are very static "good guys" and "bad guys," [die hard movies / Princess bride] or, in the case of superhero stories, heroes and villains; other times you can see a character

struggling back and forth between good and evil (like Gollum in *The Lord of the Rings* / *the nutty professor* / *Dr. Jeckel & Mr. Hyde*). Sometimes the “evil” is located not in people but in nature (survival stories, *Jurassic Park*, *Jaws*, *Armageddon*, etc.), though even here you often find “bad guys” creeping in; other times it’s depicted in terms of ideas or systems or even machines (*The Matrix*, *The Terminator*, etc.) or aliens (*Alien*, *Independence Day*, etc.).

But the point is, movies are never just about different parties striving for survival and power. There is always a moral dimension to the drama, and therefore a heightened sense of significance. We don’t just want one side to win: we sense one side ought to win. We know it’s right that Simba dethrones Scar, and not simply his good fortune; and we feel the universe in morally aright again when the Clanton Gang is wiped out in “Tombstone” & when Bruce Willis defeats the “bad guys” in ALL the “die hard” movies..

Why is this so common? Wouldn’t this paradigm be monotonous if it weren’t so deeply woven into our hearts that we don’t notice it’s monotonous? To me, this is one way movies are searching for the gospel. We KNOW / HOPE that evil will be vanquished and the world will be set to rights BY the King of kings!

➤ **There’s the HAPPY ENDING.**

Movies aren’t just about good fighting evil; they’re about good *defeating* evil. Movies are searching, not only for a moral framework, but for an eschatological one. Once again, this is so common we don’t even think about it. But a “happily ever after” is an essential part of every good story.

In other words, whether good defeats evil is never a matter of indifference to the viewer. You never think, “Well, either Jim Braddock or Max Baer will win—who cares?” Or, “Who cares if the Clanton Gang continue to terrorize Tombstone or not?” No, when good triumphs at the end, it always restores some happiness and harmony that was disrupted during the struggle. You could summarize most plots in three phases:

- **There’s happiness.**
- **There’s loss of happiness.**
- **There’s restoration to some *greater and more permanent* happiness.**

Sometimes there’s the idea that everything is set back to normal, particularly in time-travel films like *Back to the Future*. The whole world falls apart, but it becomes okay in the end. Sometimes, there’s togetherness, lostness, and return, like in *Homeward Bound: The Incredible Journey*. There’s the end of “The Lion King”. There’s the end of “Toy Story”. And there’s the quest, like in “Princess Bride”.

But why is this so common? Does the idea of a “happily ever after” connect to anything in the real world, the Story each of us inhabits? Once again, in a naturalistic worldview the answer is *no*. The universe will ultimately wind down and run out of energy.

But for the Christian, harmony → tension → resolution is the basic paradigm of reality. We call it creation → fall → redemption → Restoration. If Christianity is true, in other words, the reason the endings of movies make us feel the way they do is because it's going to happen one day.

➤ **There's SUFFERING and SACRIFICE.**

In almost every film, good not only fights against and triumphs over evil, but does so by means of suffering and sacrifice. How lame would a story be if the good guys won easily and without cost? That never happens.

Take *Rudy*, for instance (one of my personal favorites). That scene where he's sitting at the park and discovers he gets into Notre Dame—it never gets old to me. I could watch it over and over. But how lame would it be if Rudy was 6' 5" with a 140 IQ? It would never make a good movie. The struggle it took him to get there is what makes his story powerful to us: we all sense there is some great meaning, not only to the triumph, but to the struggle it takes to get there. Also, “Cool Runnings”.

Or Mr. Holland's Opus . . . The motif of sacrifice almost always accompanies that of suffering. How many times have we seen one of the good guys give up their life, or think they're giving up their life, or give up something else important, in order to save the day? The choice of sacrificial love is the key trigger in so many plots, from *Beauty and the Beast* to *Simon Birch*, to *Superman*, and on and on we could go. “From “Mr. Holland's Opus,” about a frustrated composer who eventually finds fulfillment teaching High School Students music . . . **Adult Gertrude Lang**: Mr. Holland had a profound influence on my life and on a lot of lives I know. But I have a feeling that he considers a great part of his own life misspent. Rumor had it he was always working on this symphony of his. And this was going to make him famous, rich, probably both. But Mr. Holland isn't rich and he isn't famous, at least not outside of our little town. So it might be easy for him to think himself a failure. But he would be wrong, because I think that he's achieved a success far beyond riches and fame. Look around you. There is not a life in this room that you have not touched, and each of us is a better person because of you. We are your symphony Mr. Holland. We are the melodies and the notes of your opus. We are the music of your life. Someone gives up their life, sacrificing themselves for someone else, only to find their life return to them.

Once again, this aspect of movies is difficult to account for on evolutionary grounds. Naturalists scratch their heads over the problem of in a “dog eat dog world” ANYBODY sacrificing for the good of anyone else. But for the Christian it makes perfect sense that

sacrificial love and suffering are the key to good's triumph over evil, and that you always get back what you truly give up.

After all, this is the great center of our faith: Jesus, the cross, the empty tomb. It's what we sing and hear about every Sunday. It's what we believe will one day renew the universe. And it's what we believe the whole world is searching for—in our movies, and in our lives.

**** And remember: There's ALWAYS a MIX of worldviews (what people believe about God, man, truth, authority, values, ethics, and hope) in every movie! ****

A “case study” in “The Lion King”

The music is still amazing, the story powerful, the voices and acting fantastic.

But what about worldview? Is “The Lion King” a divine classic or a classic example of the demonic?

The plotline, for those who haven't seen it in theaters or video already, revolves around the son of the king of the beasts, who is tricked by the king's evil brother into believing he's responsible for his father's death. The little cub then runs away into a “carefree” world devoid of duty and worries. But when he's reminded of his father's love and that he is made in his father's image, the prince returns to seek forgiveness, redemption and the righting of wrongs too long left unhealed.

This marvelous tale, alas, also contains a ton of religious and occult themes.

But for just a while, let us leave aside the movie's pantheistic “circle of life” theme, the witch doctor's divination, the astrology, the Buddhist meditation, the theme of evil being the king's “brother” (a common false teaching in several religions) and the humanist notion that we find God by looking within ourselves (the flip opposite of the biblical understanding that we find our true selves by looking to Christ).

Yes, for just a while, let's leave all that anti-biblical, false religion aside.

What's left is an incredible story of the son of the King (a biblical parallel if I ever saw one) who was shamed by evil (one of Satan's most favorite tricks to drive a wedge between us and God) into running away from his responsibility and forgetting his identity as a child of the father (another profoundly biblical analogy).

In the end, the boy remembers his father's love and the mark of his father on his life (now, that's sounding biblical again), picks up his responsibility, confesses his sin and finds redemption.

Stripped of all the mumbo-jumbo, "The Lion King" is a magnificent reminder of the story of mankind and the battle we all face each and every day, a battle in which we are attacked by a living evil that would try to strip from us the love of our heavenly Father and bury us in shame.

It's an inspiring, rousing and almost worshipful celebration of the truths of Scripture.

But now, let's put that amazing story in the same context the makers of "The Lion King" put it in.

The cub is lost. And how is he found? By a witch doctor's divination.

How is he guided? By the stars.

What is his father's key message to him? Look inside yourself.

And what is the primary theme? "We are all connected in the great circle of life."

All those great themes, all those great parallels, swim in a sea of pantheism, Buddhism, paganism and humanism. Yes, the story preaches Christ, but the preacher uses the language of anything but.

Now, what do you do with that? Using biblical terms, do you sort the chaff out and enjoy the wheat? Or does a little yeast spoil the whole dough?

I guess the answer is closely related to just how discerning you are. How good of a worldview "sorter" are you?

And to that end, then, when you consider "The Lion King" is an animated Disney movie, I'd suggest you ask the same question of your children and grandchildren. Just how discerning, or impressionable, are they?

Content advisory:

- "The Lion King" contains no profanity or obscenity, but an interesting reference in the dust to "sex" / little mermaid / alladin
- "The Lion King" implies that minorities (which is what the Hyenas symbolize) bring destruction when they are in places of leadership.
- The film's only sexuality is found in a scene in which the betrothed Simba "pins" his future mate, and she gazes up at him with a bit of animated "bedroom eyes." There's also some kissing and nuzzling among the lions.

- There are several scenes of violence, including animals fighting and dying, some of which could be frightening for small children.
- Most of the film's myriad of religious themes are discussed above, though there is also a scene that may be interpreted as insulting Islam. When the evil Scar gathers his minions, he stands atop a sharply pointed peak of rock that resembles a steeple or minaret. At the peak of his "I am evil" song, Scar scales the minaret, which just so happens to be framed with a crescent moon perched at its top. Intentional or not, it could be seen as symbolically depicting Islam as evil.