

Stalking the Wild Idea at a Theater Near You

Feature by Dr. Marc T. Newman MovieMinistry.com

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(AgapePress) - It comes in the dark, when you least expect it. Think you're immune from attack? Think again -- you won't even put up a fight. Instead, you'll stare and scream, laugh and cry, and ask the person next to you to pass the popcorn.

You're at the movies, being entertained, and -- as Dr. Roderick Hart, professor of communication at the University of Texas, Austin would tell you -- you are in danger. People are most easily persuaded when they are having a good time. Face off with an opponent in a debate and you would be wary, looking for ideological attacks and crafting defenses. However, put you in a theater with the lights down low, fill your field of vision with eye-popping images, surround you with sound, and your critical thinking capacity has all the integrity of Jello on a summer sidewalk in Phoenix.

And while you're busy not thinking, someone else is introducing political, economic, social, moral, and theological ideas. Sometimes they are blatant, such as George Clooney's *Syriana* rant or Michael Moore's -- well, take your pick. Other times the messages are subtle, woven into the fabric of the narrative to create a seamless story that moves you, or perhaps disturbs you a bit, though you can't quite put your finger on why. *Pulp Fiction* made people laugh out loud at a man getting his brains blown out. *The Ring* and *The Grudge* frightened folks in ways they had not felt before. Soon *The Da Vinci Code* will introduce people to a brand of theology most have never encountered, let alone considered: Gnosticism. It will be packaged in a slick thriller that will rivet you to your seat.

I'm not trying to contribute to some panic predicated on the idea that Hollywood is enemy territory ruled over by a cabal of uber-liberals trying to brainwash your tyke and take over the world. Most of the screenwriters I have met are really nice people. But to ignore the ideological content of films; to say, like an entertainment-deprived teenager "Geez, it's JUST A MOVIE!" is to deny the history of humankind, which tells us that our stories are the way we make sense of the world. The question is, "How can Christians make use of films, instead of letting films make use of us?" We need to acknowledge our lack of desire to do the heavy lifting of thinking, recognize the beauty of being media literate. For those for whom the whole task seems daunting, understand that you are not alone.

Slack-Jawed Media Watching is Easy; Thinking is Hard(er) □ If you are under 50, chances are great that, since your earliest memory, your life has been awash with images. We are the most mediated culture that has ever lived. Trying to get

people to recognize the manufactured nature of media is kind of like getting people to acknowledge that the alphabet, or even a pencil, is an artificial invention. Mostly people live like both are as natural as the air they breathe. So it is not surprising that viewers take movies for granted -- they are cultural fixtures, comforting in their familiarity.

The stated purpose of the movie industry is to entertain you. They do that so that you don't have to entertain them. Of course, here, I am using the word in this second sense to mean "consider" -- as in, "to entertain an idea." Thinking is hard, and frankly seems to undermine the very escapism that people seek at the cinema. As Christians, though, we are not commanded to escape, but to engage. Besides, taking a good look at the movies we ingest can have a beauty all its own.

The Beauty of Media Literacy □ There was a time when people described a well-formed argument as "elegant." There is a satisfaction in closely examining another person's thoughts that is lost on the merely receptive. It is the difference between an urbanite and an arborist looking at a forest. The city-dweller sees "trees," while the arborist has the richer experience of seeing white oak, tulip poplar, hemlock, hickory, and dogwoods. To take something apart does not require that we break it. But by looking closely we can uncover things we missed at first unreflective glance. But that's just me -- the rhetorician -- talking.

The real beauty of being able to closely examine the stories our media outlets tell us is that the mere act of recognizing film messages goes a long way toward inoculating us against those that are improper, imprudent, or dangerous. An unreflective child, watching *The Little Mermaid* for the thousandth time, still giggles at the funny parts, is frightened by the scary stuff, but by the finale is basking in the glow of a happy ending. But what about the idea that disobeying parents can cause some minor setbacks, but in the end it all works out? Once explained, such revelations might hamper some of the previous delight, but in the long run it makes for a wiser child. There are *Star Wars* fans who have been beguiled by a Manichaeism that they can't even name. Critically evaluating movies deepens the experience of film, and, as a happy side-note, can even create opportunities to start spiritual discussions you may not have had otherwise. And while it does take some effort, there are things you can do to make it easier.

You Are Not Alone □ For most people, movie-going is a social occasion. Couples use film as a date destination. Friends come together at the cinema to share a movie. Youth groups make an excursion out of it, and sometimes churches have lock-ins and screen the films themselves. Any time two or more people sit down together, the opportunity exists for dialogue. The question that derails most of us is, "Where do I begin?" People like to talk, but not all want to lead. One of the reasons MovieMinistry created [discussion cards](#) is so you don't have to -- you just

read the questions out loud and suddenly conversation will erupt. The latest card, which examines *American Dreamz*, asks viewers to evaluate the distinction between fame and contentment, looks at valuing people versus using them, challenges the way the film depicts authority figures, and asks viewers to consider what constitutes appropriate standards for success. Recent cards delve into films such as *Take the Lead* and *Ice Age: The Meltdown*. For more adventurous groups, there are [Event-Level Bible Studies](#) that turn going to the movies into a fellowship and outreach opportunity. Studies for *End of the Spear* and *Glory Road* challenged people to rethink their commitment to evangelism -- in different ways.

Already there is an Event-Level Study for *Hoot* -- a film that will be released on May 5 -- that asks adults, and the young people that are the target of this film, to consider whether their treatment of creation is in keeping with loving its Creator. Resources like these abound. If we are willing to take the chance and dig deeper into the movies we see -- at the risk, perhaps, of violating the entertainment industry's desire that we be merely amused -- we may discover that there is a whole other level of community to build upon. Movies can be more than a shared visual experience designed to divert us for a couple of hours. They can open the door to discussions that can draw people together, and cause them to think in ways hospitable to the Gospel.

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