

## Christian and the Movies

I was about ten when the first Rock 'n Roll evangelists came to town. They weren't proselytising on behalf of Iron Maiden. They were there to tell us about the rampant satanism and occultism in contemporary rock and pop.

And it wasn't only the music. *The Smurfs* were satanic because it had Gargamel the wizard and a cat named Azrael. *Gummi Bears* was satanic because Zummi would cast spells by saying words backwards. *Thundercats* and *He-Man* were satanic because of Set and Skeletor. Mickey in *The Sorcerer's Apprentice* was just as bad. Ditto for *The Lord of the Rings* and *Narnia*. Playing Dungeons & Dragons was tantamount to holding a seance.

Of course, there was (and still is) occultism in popular entertainments, just not to the level the evangelists suggested, nor in the conspiratorial way that alarmist evangelism thrives on. When all that blew over, besides having made evenagel\*\* look goofier than ever, it probably harmed believers in a far more serious way. While looking for the frontal assault of satanism, Christians became oblivious to far greater dangers in popular entertainments, to which they gave a free pass. The concepts of sentimentalism and trivialisation seemed tame and silly compared with the roaring lion of occultism. The ideas of implicit morality, worldview, and celebrated or denigrated ideas went missing. Moral universes, characterisation, Christian or non-Christian imagination – these were (and still are) alien concepts to most Christians. And besides, it's easier to spot the occult than to judge something for its beauty or worth.

Consequently, in this scheme of things, the cornpone silliness and trivialisation of the Rapture in *A Thief in the Night* was ignored, while the witches in *Snow White* and *Sleeping Beauty* made those films clearly wrong. The bawdiness in *The Princess Bride* was no problem, but *Pokemon* was clearly a tool of Satan. Characters smooching each other on a weekly basis was fine (as was the formula in 80s and 90s TV shows), but the mention of spells, magic, dragons, witches, wizards was insidious occultism grooming our children for a future career in the occult. We could trivialise the entire faith with talking vegetables and cartoons of Bible accounts, but those were "safe", as opposed to how Disney would slip in supposed satanic salutes. In short, Christians learnt how to strain out gnats and swallow camels at the movies.

The more things change, the more they stay the same. I still find Christians operating at the same level. The films and TV series have changed, but the criteria of evaluating them seems to be the same: is there occultism? Is there bad language? Is there sex and nudity? Is there gory violence? If these are absent, then the film or programme is "innocent". (Indeed, for some Christians, even these are no hindrance to their watching a movie.)

So you will find believers watching completely anti-Christian films, discipling their children with sentimental (and therefore anti-Christian) visions of reality, and loving their choices because they score 1 out of 10 on the SNVL rating, and have no mention of magic or fantasy. Conversely, you will find the same Christians avoiding decent or even helpful visions of ultimate reality because of some reference to magic or the presence of evil in the story, and choosing rather to wallow in saccharine portrayals of reality.

- 1. If it portrays contemporary or historical life in this world, what kind of world does the movie/TV show claim we live in? Is it true?***
- 2. If it creates a fantasy world, what kind of other world does the movie/TV show create? Is it similar to God's true world? If it's better, how? If worse, how?***

These first two questions ask what kind of moral universe the movie creates. Every film is a mini-cosmos, a world that the characters inhabit. We are asked to enter that world, and view things from its perspective. The important question is, what sort of world is it? Is it a godless world? Are humans intrinsically good or evil? Is the morality like that of Scripture or is it inverted? Perhaps it is deliberately amoral, nihilistic and purposeless. Is there good and evil, truth and lies, ugliness and beauty? Do you emerge from this world, fantastical or realistic, with a clearer vision of the true world that God has made, or is it somewhat distorted? A fantasy world is not a false world; it is an alternate world. A false world is one which distorts good and evil, Creator and creation, truth and lies, whether it uses realism or fantasy. A false world reshapes the very lens of perception with which we come back to our own world.

***3. Does this movie/ TV show make fun of, or glorify, something that God hates?***

***4. What kinds of actions and characteristics does it celebrate? Does it celebrate what is shameful? Does it invite unlawful curiosity?***

One of the great powers of theatre and spectacle is its immersive character. Writers such as Augustine and Pascal warned about the power of theatre to envelop us in the action, until we sympathetically feel what we should not feel. We desire the married woman to elope from her abusive husband with the kind stranger. We want to see the hero take violent revenge on his evil persecutors. We long to see the romantic tension defused in some act of on-screen sensuality.

We need to ask, does this film make us lustful, envious, covetous, or vengeful? Do we laugh at immorality, pride, arrogance and conceit? Do we begin to admire the lust of the flesh, lust of the eyes, and pride of life? Are we drawn in to covet another man's wife or husband, to desire what we are told not to desire? Within the movie experience, are we sympathetic and supportive of sinful behaviour? Do we become contemptuous of wisdom and righteousness? Then the film is shaping our conscience away from God.

Many of the protagonists in modern movies are, by biblical definition, fools. They are immoral, proud, self-directed, profane, irreligious, immodest, bloodthirsty, violent, and ungodly in their speech. Yet they are the "heroes" of the tales. If we think that these heroes are not shaping our children just because we filter out the worst bits of nudity, violence, and language, we are straining out gnats and swallowing camels.

***5. What sort of man or woman do you want to be after you have watched it?***

What virtues has it pushed you to aspire towards? What vision of masculinity or femininity? As "cool" as James Bond, or as sacrificial as Sam Gamgee? As sultry and alluring as some female superhero in tights or as wise as Abigail? Do you want to mimic being cocky and

street-smart or being noble and chivalrous? Do you want to be a sacrificial servant or a sexual siren? If our boys want to be playboys instead of knights, and if our girls want to be covergirls and Barbies instead of Blandina or Perpetua, then we know who have become their cultural mentors.

#### ***6. Does it use spectacle (excitement, violence, nudity) to grab and keep interest?***

Spectacle is using what is visually magnetic. We are drawn to scenes of great action and noise (explosions, battles, chases). We are also drawn through bloodlust to see the human body broken, torn or killed. We are also drawn through prurient curiosity to see how much nudity or sexual activity someone will reveal. Directors know this, and use it. It is a technique, a tool, a method: to grab and keep interest. If we endorse it with viewing it, we should at least admit that we are being manipulated.

Yes, here is where we should either simply avoid some films altogether, or use technologies to filter out the morally objectionable of these elements. Sometimes, an otherwise good story is marred by the brief presence of these, and filters come to the rescue. Sometimes, the whole movie or series is so depraved and grotesque that it is unjust flattery of such trash to filter anything out and watch it.

#### ***7. Are the characters flat or real?***

Do the characters embody the real human condition: fallen people made in God's image, capable of good by common grace, and also capable of great evil? Or are they flat, two-dimensional placeholders, like no one we know or will ever know? Are they just sock-puppets for a lazy screenwriter to put words into their mouths, or use them for some gratuitous sex, violence or evil? Are they empty stereotypes, mere clichés that end up demeaning our view of our fellow image-bearers? Hollow characters mean we are watching something that is really a waste of our time.

#### ***8. Does it flatter me or challenge me?***

Poor and useless stories do not cause aspiration; they cause wish-fulfilment. In other words, the best stories ennoble us and leave us desiring to grow. The worst stories are experiences in narcissism: we pretend we are heroes, sexual goddesses, superhuman conquerors, and dwell in that fake experience for the duration of the film. It is cinematic self-abuse: pleasuring ourselves with ourselves, with no real growth in love, honour, or goodness.

#### ***9. Did I recognise everything or did I learn anything? Was it predictable or transformative?***

Poor movies use formulas and stereotypes. A formula is a particular story or character cliché. We all recognise where this is going, and like it so. The familiarity of the formula makes no demands on us. We watch and consume, lightly amused by otherwise inconsequential twists in a story we can loosely predict. Movies and TV shows like this are just chewing gum for your eyes and ears. They don't change you, because demanding art is usually not popular, and therefore hard to sell on commercial film and TV.

**10. Did it make me think about my emotions and about what I should feel, or did I just “feel my feelings”?**

Good art not only evokes deep emotion, it is even able to deepen your emotions. It gives you emotional knowledge, showing and revealing the depth of the human experience, the nature of reality, and the power of symbols and analogies. Poor art does not do this. It is more like a mirror, showing you yourself, and making you feel very emotional about your feelings: be they happiness, sadness, excitement or fear. The whole experience is shallow and self-focused. You don't deepen your affections; you just feel momentarily weepy or elated, and then it's over. Good art doesn't just tickle and scratch: it forces you to think, wrestle, imagine and change. Your affections are grown, strengthened and deepened by an encounter with good art.

Many Christians are alarmed at books or movies that involve magic or fantasy. They feel that the one is dabbling in the occult, and the other is immersing oneself in what is unreal and possibly even false. They wonder that any Christians could read or watch something containing magic, wizards or any reference to the occult. Can Christians, in good conscience, watch stories related to magic or pure fantasy?

On the first score, not all magic is created equal, so to speak. There is magic and magic. The occult practices of Deuteronomy 18:10-11 are forbidden, and any story which glorifies them or encourages participation in them is to be shunned by Christians.

The problem is, not all of those films or TV shows accused of promoting the occult practices of Deuteronomy 18 actually do so. It becomes guilt by association, or more accurately, guilt by equivocation. Not all that is called magic in films and books is occultic and satanic. The term *magic* refers to more than forbidden witchcraft, and it is easy to paint everyone who uses the word with the same brush.

For example, in the Bible itself, the wise men who visit Jesus are called *magi*, which is the word related to our word *magic*. Daniel himself was the chief of these “magicians”, a term which referred to astronomy, astrology, philosophy as well as occultic arts. (Indeed, the English word *wizard* comes from the Middle-English word for *wise one*, and simply meant sage or philosopher.) We can be certain Daniel practised only that “magic” that was pleasing to God, but it would not be incorrect to call Daniel a magician. In fact, as late as the 17th century, a believing scientist like Isaac Newton was regarded as “the last of the magicians”, since he took seriously the practice of alchemy. *Magic* is a term that broadly refers to knowledge and power, and usually supernatural power. We might want to use the term to restrictively speak about what is forbidden in Deuteronomy 18, but then that is our quirk, not one we can impose upon all authors and film or TV producers.

This brings us to books and movies containing magic. In each one, we have to be fair to the author and ask how he or she is using the term and idea of magic. Is magic, in that story, simply *power* granted to one or more of the characters? Is magic one of the *laws* of the internal universe created by the author of the story? To link magic in a given story to necromancy or calling upon demonic beings or anything that corresponds to Deuteronomy 18 requires some warrant. We need to ask what the author means by magic on his own terms, and how it functions in his literary world. Only if the author is drawing clear correspondence

between magic in his created world and the magic condemned in the Bible can we say that we have a real problem. The mere presence of the term is not enough to go on, nor is the presence of fantastical creatures with fantastical powers. The Bible contains talking trees and flying dragons, too.

For example, in Tolkien, very little is magical. Certainly the creatures are remarkable, but not magical, since they belong in the world Tolkien has created. Yes, there are “wizards” (the Istari), but they turn out to be the equivalent of angels, with powers from Illuvatar, the one true God. Tolkien even has Galadriel tell Frodo that the powers the elves possess should not be called by the same term “magic” as what the Dark Powers possess. One is sub-creation, the other is manipulation and domination. Nothing in Tolkien remotely corresponds to the prohibitions of Deuteronomy 18.

Similarly in Lewis’s Narnia. It is very clear that both good and evil power is present in Narnia. They do not come from the same source, nor are we ever encouraged to pursue interest in the dark arts. (Indeed, we see the very opposite in *The Magician’s Nephew* and *Prince Caspian*). Aslan calls the laws behind justice and atonement the “Deep Magic” and the “Deeper Magic”.

If fantasy just isn’t your cup of tea, no problem. No one requires that you like Tolkien and Lewis. But to shun Tolkien and Lewis for supposed occultic leanings would be misguided indeed. It would be to refuse two of the only contemporary Christian mythologies on the mistaken basis that they are courting and encouraging involvement with the fallen spirit world. To lump Lewis and Tolkien with the abundant occultic R-rated material coming out of Amazon and Netflix would be poor judgement of the first order.

The same could be said of many of the fairy tales that emerged from folk cultures. Most of them are morality tales, mixing in various amounts of the supernatural as part of the story. I have yet to come across a fairy tale that encouraged active and real-life disobedience to Deuteronomy 18.

Frankly, in a world that despises and discounts talk of the supernatural (except when it suits it), I think it is helpful and important for a child to have plenty of stories with the supernatural in them, told from a Christian point of view. We want to overturn the materialistic narrative of the Darwinists and naturalists, and Christian stories with magic are some of the best ways to do so.