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BUSINESS, CINEMA AND SIN

ABSTRACT. In less than fifteen years after the invention of the movie camera in 1895 movies in the United States became very popular and have enjoyed that popularity for almost a century. Films are big business, but also an art form and tension between film as business and film as art was present at the beginning and continues today. A philosophy of art and a philosophy of beauty with a direct reference to God as Absolute Beauty reveals the enormous power of film to influence and shape our consciences. Movies tell stories and exposure to stories help us to become who we are. Beautiful stories have the power to help us be moral.

KEY WORDS: beauty, concept, conscience, creative intuition, fine art, servile art, theory of art

In the United States, movies are big business, really big business, and have been almost from their inception. In 1895 the movie camera was invented. By 1907 the entertainment industry had experienced a revolution (Black, 1994, pp. 6–7). In New York City over two hundred thousand people attended motion picture theatres every day and that figure doubled on Sundays. Across the nation three thousand nickelodeons drew more than two million people every day. By 1910 there were ten thousand such theatres. Though there have been occasional setbacks, movies in terms of business profits seem to have grown more and more lucrative. Today some movie stars get fifteen million dollars or more for doing a film. Even with rising costs director Sidney Lumet has claimed that because of all the ways that a film can make profits, it is difficult to lose money on a film.

Today it's again hard for movie companies to lose money, though they still manage. What are called ancillary rights now provide them with great protection for their investments: Videocassettes, cable television, free television, airline in-flight use. And of course international rights outside the United States and Canada represent about 50 percent of the total gross. . . . add in merchandising – the toys spun out of *Jurassic Park*, to name only one example – theme parks built upon blockbuster pictures, and studio ownership of cable television stations. And the financial pages are full of stories about mergers between studios and the television networks. All of this enormous income is based on the movies the studios turn out. (Lumet, 1995, p. 200)

Titanic grossed over a billion dollars and they are still counting. Check any Monday in the newspaper about the weekend box office receipts for the top five films of the previous weekend and the figures are mind-boggling. The



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love affair between Americans and movies, that began almost a century ago, still continues. Movies are really big business.

In addition to being a business, movies are also an art form and almost from the beginning this has produced tension and conflict within the industry. It still does today and I suggest that the tension and conflict are at the center of the moral questions that surround the making and viewing of films. Great art has not always been commercially successful; films that are commercially successful are not always great art. The conflict between film as business and film as art may be especially acute today. But in order to see the importance of any ethical questions concerning films we need to reflect on the meaning, mystery and power of art. I will do this in three steps: a presentation of a philosophy of art, some comments on the nature of story and some reflections on the nature of beauty. So: art, story, beauty.

My own philosophy of art fits into the Aristotelian-Thomistic tradition and I have been especially influenced by the insights of the neo-Scholastic philosopher Jacques Maritain (Maritain, 1935, 1955). The philosophy of art that I am presenting is my interpretation of Maritain's and my application of his theory to film.

There are two types of art: servile art and fine art. Servile art is art that is produced to perform a function or to fulfill a need such as a shoe or an eating utensil. Having a practical function is what characterizes servile art. Fine art does not have a practical purpose. It is its own reason for being. The logo over Leo the Lion's head as he with a roar introduces an MGM film is a good articulation of the nature of fine art: *Ars gratia artis* (Art for the sake of art). I think another way of articulating the nature of fine art would be to describe it as art for the sake of beauty. Fine art, at least indirectly, tries to be an expression of beauty.

There are two components to every work of art, which Maritain, using Aristotle's terminology for his hylomorphic theory, calls the matter and the form. The matter is easy to understand, the form has a mysterious dimension to it. By matter Maritain means the material component of the work of art. For sculpture the matter would be stone, for a painting canvas and oil, for a symphony musical notes, for a play plot characters and dialogue and more and for a film there is an almost endless number of material components. Of course a good artist must have some skill with the matter, must know how to chisel the stone correctly or use the paint skillfully or blend the musical notes properly. The great artist has a tremendous mastery of the matter. I think of the delightful scene in the film *Amadeus* in which Mozart listens briefly to a composition by Salieri and then sits down at the piano, plays it and improves on it while explaining why what he is adding is an improvement to Salieri's work.

The second component of a work of art, the form, Maritain identifies as a creative intuition. What is it? Not so easy to say. It's not a concept or an idea. A concept is a spiritual, intellectual representation of an object (Hartman, 1951, pp. 19–20). All of us have thousands of concepts such as the ideas of automobile, hat, tree, desk. Concepts are universals. They express all the members of a class. The concept of automobile applies to all automobiles, the concept of desk applies to all desks. We cannot close our eyes and picture our concepts because, though they may be accompanied by images or pictures, they are not images or pictures. I can close my eyes and look at the image I have of my car, I can not look at my concept of a car because the concept is spiritual and applies to all cars. Though we can not usually look at our concepts we know that we have them because when I say “automobile” or “hat” or “desk” everyone knows what I mean.

An intuition is also spiritual and intellectual but it is not a concept. It cannot be articulated in a word. An intuition is a real spiritual and intellectual insight into some reality but not being conceptual it cannot be articulated by a single term. As an example that might help us to understand what an intuition is I offer the experience of having a best friend. Some philosophers would suggest that as two persons grow into close friendship what happens is that the concepts each has of the other increase. So a woman might start a relationship with a man with a few concepts about him such as physically attractive and witty but as the relationship grows and deepens she might have many more concepts about him such as intelligent, pious, sincere, moral, ambitious, loyal. Some philosophers would say that this is the way to describe the knowledge that close friends have of one another, that is that the number of concepts that each has of the other increases. Other philosophers, and I am among them, would say that a person might have an intuition, a non-conceptual, spiritual insight into his or her best friend. This intuition, though real and perhaps quite profound, cannot be articulated in a word. It is an insight into a unique person, a unique other and the intuition is a way of knowing.

Probably all of us have intuitions. What distinguishes the intuitions that an artist has is that some of his or her intuitions are creative. The intuition has a kind of a drive to it, an urgency to be embodied, to become incarnate, a pressure to be expressed in some work. The image that helps me in trying to understand a creative intuition is that it is like a bug under the artist's skin and it has to come out. The artist is drawn to create. The great artists have profound creative intuitions. A masterpiece is born when an artist has great skill with matter and a profound creative intuition and is able to wed them. An artist creates a masterpiece when she or he successfully embodies a profound creative intuition in matter. Some of Shakespeare's

plays are masterpieces, some of El Greco's paintings are masterpieces, some of Gerard Manley Hopkins' poems are masterpieces.

It is possible that an artist has enormous skill with matter but has no creative intuition. She or he has nothing to "say." It is also possible that an artist has profound creative intuitions but she or he has no skill with matter.

Of course with film there are many artists who contribute to the work of art: the writer, the producer, the director, the actors, the designers of sets and costumes, the music composer and many more. My own view is that if we are going to attribute the film to one artist then that artist is the director. It is the director who ties everything together. With a given film some artist other than the director might be more influential in making the film a splendid work of art such as an actor or a cinematographer or a composer of music but my own view is that if we are going to attribute the artistic success of a film to one artist then that artist is most often the director.

Great films can have a profound influence on us and can influence us morally. However a cautionary note may be necessary: we must be wary of films that are preachy or that are disguised homilies. People who make such films may be sincere but their motive, however noble, cannot act as a substitute for a creative intuition.

There is a moral dimension to every work of art. It is being presented to people. Some films directly deal with moral questions and this is certainly true of the best films that deal with business.

The power and importance of film becomes more obvious if we reflect on the role that stories play in our lives. The meaning or lack of meaning in our lives comes about through our acceptance or rejection of stories. Each of us is writing his or her own story. Through my free actions, through my interaction with my world, I am shaping and forming the story of my life. That is true of the most free person and the least free person.

The question "How's it going?" or "How are you doing?" can be translated into "How is your story progressing? What sense or lack of sense does your life make at this point?" Stressing the importance of story in our lives John Haught wrote:

The identity of all of us is established by our interaction with the narrative context of our existences. Our sense of meaning in our lives, if we are fortunate enough to be conscious of living meaningfully, is a gift of the narrative nest in which we dwell. The meaning of our lives is determined by the way in which each of us participates in an ongoing story. And where people today speak of their experience of meaninglessness, isolation, alienation, rootlessness, etc., such experiences can almost invariably be traced to an inability to find some meaningful story in which to situate our lives. (Haught, 1986, p. 74)

Films tell stories and their stories can have an enormous impact on us. The distinguished contemporary filmmaker David Puttnam has related

an interesting anecdote that reveals the power of film (Moyers, 1989, p. 324ff). When Puttnam saw the audience reaction to his film *Midnight Express* he had the shock of his life. A scene that he thought would repel the audience led the audience to get up in their seats and cheer. Because of this shock Puttnam discussed his vocation with a Jesuit priest. Through talking with the priest Puttnam became determined to work more responsibly in the cinema. He has spoken eloquently about the power of film. Having once characterized Hollywood as a “godless place” Puttnam explained:

I meant that it's a place that has managed to convince itself that the rule of cause and effect doesn't function. Some of the deals that go on, the self-serving quality of many people within the society – there's a notion that somehow or other there isn't a price to pay. Now, interestingly enough, the price that's being paid is in the quality of the movies. As you move around Hollywood in any reasonably sophisticated group, you'll find it quite difficult to come across people who are proud of the movies that are being made. Sometimes they'll say that they're not bad. Other times they'll defend them by saying that the movies are relatively successful. But you'll find very few people who feel that there is a strong vein of first-class movies emerging from Hollywood. (Moyers, 1989, p. 320)

Puttnam went on to say that while one film will not change anything, many films of the same type will have an impact because “Every single movie has within it an element of propaganda. You walk away with either benign or malign propaganda” (Moyers, 1989, p. 327).

Years ago Harold Gardiner argued persuasively that every novel had a moral dimension to it, that the author, however indirectly was presenting a philosophy of life, a moral outlook on life (Gardiner, 1953, pp. 118–129). The same can be said of films.

Before discussing specific films that deal with the world of business there is one more important element of art and more specifically of film that should be mentioned as we consider the impact that cinematic stories can have on viewers. That element is beauty.

In his excellent book *What is God? Some Ways to Think about the Divine* (Haught, 1986, p. 74). John Haught argues persuasively that there are five experiences that can be identified as experiences of the divine. These are the experience of depth, the experience of future, the experience of freedom, the experience of truth and the experience of beauty. Borrowing a phrase from Rudolf Otto's classic *The Idea of the Holy* (Otto, 1950). Haught suggests that each of these experiences can be described as a *mysterium tremendum et fascinans* (a mystery that is awesome and frightening but also attractive and seductive). When we have one of these experiences we may feel simultaneously frightened and attracted, in awe at the power of the experience but also drawn to experience more. We want the experience more profoundly but we also are afraid. We want

depth, future, freedom and truth but we are afraid we will be overwhelmed by them. The same can be said of our experience of beauty. What is the beautiful? Maritain is quite good in explaining St. Thomas' view:

St. Thomas, who was as simple as he was wise, defined the beautiful as what gives pleasure on sight, *id quod visum placet*. The four words say all that is necessary: a vision, that is to say an intuitive *knowledge* and a *joy*. The beautiful is what gives joy, not all joy, but a joy superabounding and overflowing from such an act because of the object known. If a thing exalts and delights the soul, it is good to apprehend, it is beautiful. Beauty is essentially the object of intelligence, for what *knows* in the full meaning of the word is the mind, which also is open to the infinity of being. (Maritain, 1935, p. 23)

Beauty pleases us when we see not merely with the eyes but with the mind. The five transcendentals are being, one, good, true and beauty. Beauty is the effulgence of being, the shining forth of being. Unlimited Beauty is one way of depicting God. Jesuit poet Gerard Manley Hopkins caught something of the power of God's beauty in his *God's Grandeur*:

The world is charged with the grandeur of God
It will flame out, like shining from shook foil;
It gathers to a greatness, like the ooze of oil
Crushed. (Hopkins, 1953, p. 27)

Everyone wants more beauty in his or her life. However we are afraid that beauty, which is so attractive and alluring, might overpower us, might cause us to lose control. Let me offer an example from my own life, I saw Da Vinci's painting, *Mona Lisa*, once in my life. I had an appointment in one section of Paris at about 4:30 p.m. but I rushed to the Louvre which was in another section of Paris so I could see the *Mona Lisa* before I traveled to meet my friend. When I entered the room in which the *Mona Lisa* was hung, there were about fifteen people in front of me looking at the painting. My initial reaction was surprise and disappointment. What was so special about this painting? The famous smile seemed silly to me and not at all attractive. Why was this painting considered a masterpiece? I did not have much time because of my appointment with my friend but I was determined to find out what was so special about the *Mona Lisa*. I moved around the room looking at the painting from different angles. Time was running out but the beauty of the *Mona Lisa* began to get to me. I could not leave the room. I think I tried five times but eventually decided to be late for my appointment! *Mona Lisa, Mona Lisa!* Its beauty was seducing and overpowering me.

John Haught emphasizes that our encounter with beauty calls us to surrender (Haught, 1986, pp. 69–70). For us to experience the beauty of nature or of other persons or of artistic masterpieces such as some films we have to allow ourselves to be carried away. Haught believes that being

grasped by the beautiful is an experience of our encounter with the divine (Haught, 1986, pp. 69–70). God is Ultimate Beauty.

In trying to state conceptually what makes things appear to us as beautiful and some realities more beautiful than others, Haught borrows from Whitehead's philosophy and writes:

Alfred North Whitehead, whose philosophy is permeated by aesthetic considerations, tells us that beauty is the 'harmony of contrasts.' What makes us appreciate the beauty of things is that they bring together nuance, richness, complexity and novelty on the one side, the harmony, pattern and order on the other. The more 'intense' the synthesis of harmony and contrast, the more we appreciate their union. Nuance without harmony is chaos, and harmony without nuance is monotony. Beauty involves the transformation of potentially clashing elements into pleasing contrasts harmonized by the overarching aesthetic pattern of the beautiful object of experience. (Haught, 1986, p. 72)

Haught goes on to mention that such a harmony of contrasts can be seen in any great novel. I would add that it can be found in any great film. Like other artistic masterpieces great film reveals the divine. An experience of the beauty of a great film is an experience of God.

Our stance toward beauty is the same as our stance toward God, Who is *Mysterium Tremendum et Fascinans*. We want to grow closer to God but are afraid that we will lose control. For example, I want to be a saint. I would not have become a priest if I did not want to become a saint but I want to be a saint on my terms. When I recite the Our Father and I come to the line "Thy will be done" I often implicitly mean as long as it's the same as Lauder's will. Art strives for beauty and so do we in our lives. We are trying to make our lives more beautiful, we are trying for a harmony of contrasts. We want nuance, richness, complexity and novelty in our lives or we would be incredibly bored but we also want harmony, pattern and order or our lives would be chaos. We want a harmony of contrasts, we want beauty, we want God.

If I say to you "How's it going?", your answer will tell me how much beauty there is in your life at this moment. If your description of your life is accurate, you are also, at least indirectly, telling me about your awareness of the presence of God in your life. Beautiful stories, beautiful films can serve as models for the beauty we desire in our lives. What makes a story or a film a classic is the amount or depth of beauty it depicts. Great films are beautiful. The beauty in great films reveals the presence of the divine, the presence of God.

Great stories, great films, beautiful films form our consciousness and our consciences. By conscience I mean the habitual way that a human consciousness judges in moral matters. A conscience is formed by many experiences and every person has a conscience. If we accept Haught's view of beauty then I think it follows that a person who is open to Ultimate

Beauty and striving to incorporate beauty into his or her life but never attends a church or synagogue or mosque is closer to God than a person who regularly attends religious services but is closed to Ultimate Beauty. A less striking and more obvious way of saying this is that a person who is open to God but never attends religious services is holier than a person who attends religious services but is closed to God.

In a brilliant essay on Beauty, Andrew Greeley wrote:

It overwhelms us, enchants us, fascinates us, calls us. As we ponder it, we see that it is good and are attracted to the Goodness it represents. Finally, bemused by the appeal of goodness, we discover that it contains truth, and we listen to the Truth we hear from it. This is not an inevitable process, nor one that involves logical deduction . . . Rather it is an existential tendency that is built into the structure of the human condition.

We live surrounded by God's beauty. Sometimes we notice it . . .

Human artists see things more clearly than the rest of us. They penetrate into the illumination of being more intimately than do the rest of us. They want us to see what they see so that we can share in their illumination. They are driven to duplicate that beauty in their work . . . The artist is a sacrament maker, a creator of emphasized, clarified beauty designed to make us see. Artists invite us into the world they see so that we can go forth from that world enchanted by the luminosity of their work and with enhanced awareness of the possibilities of life . . .

. . . encounters with beauty open us up to their own alchemy, which gently guides us to goodness and truth. There is simply no other way, because faith and ethics cannot be imposed from the outside. They can be embraced only as a consequence of an act of love. (Greeley, 2000, pp. 10–11, 14)

Beauty calls us to love.

Great film, in addition to being a moral teacher, can, by depicting beauty, play a role in opening people to Ultimate Beauty, that is, to God. Unfortunately the moral atmosphere of the business world has been somewhat neglected in the world of cinema. When Richard Blake wrote his book *Screening America: Reflections on 5 Classic Films* he chose works that would represent five classic genre: the screwball comedy, the gangster movie, the western, and detective story and the horror film. It is not surprising that one of the genre is not the "Business film" because there really is no such genre. That is not to say there are no interesting films made about business but there are not many. With what I have mentioned about art, story and beauty as a background, I will just mention a few films that deal with the world of business and a few that deal specifically with the movie business.

I think that *Patterns* (1956) is the finest film ever made about business. With a script by Rod Sterling and excellent performances by Van Heflin, Everett Sloane and Ed Begley, the film is exceptionally powerful. The film dramatizes the involvement of young executive Van Heflin, in the rat race of a big city business film. Sloane runs the business like a tyrant and treats

aging Ed Begley as dispensable, wanting Heflin to replace him. First Heflin is appalled by the treatment of Begley but eventually, under the guise of battling Sloane to make the company more humane, is seduced into the rat race and the title of the film tells it all.

Executive Suite (1954) with an all-star cast led by William Holden and Frederic March, dramatizes the battle for control of a company by its executives, March, who is only interested in profits, and Holden, who believes that a business can be human and interested in serving its clients.

In *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* (1956) young architect Gregory Peck is being primed by boss Fredric March for a very big spot in the company. Once again March turns in an excellent performance as the boss who has sacrificed personal relationships with his wife and daughter for the business. Young Gregory Peck avoids the lure of big money in order to be more present to his family.

Wall Street (1987) with a fine performance by Michael Douglas does have some weaknesses but it does capture something of the allure of greed.

Perhaps because it might be considered shooting itself in the foot the motion picture industry has not produced a large number of films about the motion picture business. One, *The Last Tycoon* (1977), with a cast that includes Robert de Niro, Jack Nicholson and Robert Mitchum, directed by Elia Kazan, is an artistic disaster. Considerably better is director Vincent Minnelli's *The Bad and the Beautiful* (1952) with an all star cast headed by Kirk Douglas, Lana Turner and Dick Powell. Douglas is a brilliant egotist. His personal relationships are disaster but he is a brilliant filmmaker. At the end of the film all the Hollywood people, who have rejected him as a person, eagerly listen as he presents his new idea for a film.

Woody Allen's *Stardust Memories* (1980) is not Allen's best film but it does raise in a humorous way important questions about meaning, morality, God and about the business of making films. There is an especially amusing scene in which writer-director Sandy Bates, played by Allen, has a vision of a muse. He asks what he should do with his life, should he go and help the blind or be a missionary or what? The response is "Tell funnier jokes!"

Perhaps the best American film about the movie business is writer-director Preston Sturges' *Sullivan's Travels* (1941). Successful Hollywood film writer-director played by Joel McCrea wants to move beyond the lightweight, hugely successful films he has made to make a heavy drama entitled "Brother, Where Art Thou?" Both humorous and insightful, *Sullivan's Travels* is an excellent example of Hollywood successfully satirizing itself.

Let me close with one more film about business that I think illustrates the contemporary problem that serious filmmakers face. The film is *The Big Kahuna* (2000) which opened and closed quickly this year. It is an exceptionally good film that only a few of us have seen. Starring Kevin Spacey and Danny DeVito the film depicts one 24 hour period in the lives of three salesmen at a business convention. Much of the film involves discussions about Christ and the morality of business. Filmed in 16 days, the film is an excellent example of what serious, talented filmmakers can do on a low budget. The good news is that it is now on video cassette.

Unfortunately *The Big Kahuna* died commercially and it places the key moral question before us. Film is an art and a business. There have been golden moments when great art was able to be created. Right now that is not happening in American film. Film as business is ruining film as art. What can we do? All we can do is reject the junk and support the good films. Every so often something special comes along, like *The Big Kahuna*, and that enables us to keep hoping.

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