INTRODUCTION TO
MEDIA ART

RICK MOODY

INTRODUCTION TO MEDIA ART

RICK MOODY
Brigham Young University

McGraw·Hill
A Division of The McGraw·Hill Companies

Introduction to
Media Art

Acknowledgements

Contents

Introduction:
The Film Industry Today

Over the hundred years since the advent of motion picture technology, one constant remains--people go to the movies no matter what--only the appeal of certain films change. Gone are the slow, thoughtful, and often dark films of the 70s films. The emphasis is on the upbeat and fast-moving. Right now the big box-office hits are romantic comedies like *My Best Friend's Wedding*, science fiction fantasies like *Men In Black*, and gritty crime thrillers like *Face Off*. In addition, the search for secure, "pre-sold" audiences means that "recycled" products, like remakes of classic films and even Disney's live-action adaptation of its animated *One Hundred and One Dalmatians* also do well.

In the aftermath of the 80's fears regarding the survival of the motion picture in the face of the video revolution, motion pictures are more popular than ever. They are also more *events* now than ever before, with the big-budget Summer thrillers--like *Independence Day* (which grossed $300 million last year), *Twister* ($240 million), and *Mission:Impossible* (a hefty $180 million)--bringing in half of the studios yearly revenues, and compensating for the smaller box-office, but high prestige and Oscar-nominated Winter films--like *Emma*, and *Portrait of a Lady*.

However, the costs of making films is also skyrocketing. *Waterworld's* rumored $180 million price tag in 1994 has become less staggering in the face of subsequent, and equally expensive special effects epics such as James Cameron's *True Lies* and *Titanic*, and Jan DeBont's *Speed 2: Cruise Control*. Yet some high-profile filmmakers, like Steven Spielberg, manage on smaller budgets. His *Jurassic Park-The Lost World* only cost $75 million, prompting Spielberg to comment:

> I think that we're at DefCon Three right now. Everybody is looking to their neighbor to see what they're making. There's always some high water mark, and every year it inches up. It's not going to be too long before an average film, without marketing, is going to cost $55 million. . .Right now we are squeezing the middle class out of Hollywood and only allowing the $70 million-plus films or the $10 million-minus films. And that is going to spell doom for everyone.
> The only way out is that everybody has to attack these big budgets. Actors who are rich enough as it is, and they all know who they are, should stop taking $20, $25 million a picture and start gambling on their own talent, gambling on gross first-dollar points [a percentage of the studio's gross take, before most

costs are factored in], and the trust they have in the filmmaker and the script they've obviously committed to. They'll make their money and more, based on their larger slice of the pie. Directors, too, should stop taking the huge up-front money. . .I haven't taken a salary in many, many years--I've just always gambled on my points--and that gives me the right to say that it hasn't made me any poorer. (Biskind 112)

However, in deference to Spielberg, according to many insiders the cost of an average studio film is *already* at $60 million--some eight to ten times the average of the early 1980s--requiring a film's box office return to be at least $100 million to be considered a success. While *Independence Day* cost Twentieth-Century Fox $70 million--plus some $40 million in marketing costs--it has grossed a cool $787 million to date. However, the high-concept, and computer effects driven *Space Jam* cost between $100 to 140 million in production costs alone--before $40 million in marketing costs were added--though its lukewarm kiddie-appeal has ultimately resulted in its topping out at less than $100 million. Nevertheless studios continue to gamble their survival on single film events, somewhat buffered from destruction due to their incorporation into multimedia conglomerates with diversified products, like Warner Brothers, which has a worldwide chain of stores, a fledgling broadcast network and a vast international distribution network.

Independent studios survive by picking up the slack--releasing product in the off-seasons--Spring, and Fall, hoping to tap into the market of people looking for smaller, more personal films. Since they are low-budget, they often feature unknown actors, and tend to be more strongly story and dialogue-driven. However, established stars will often accept such projects for a role which may expand their range and offer them the possibility of future salary and career perks--such as Oscars.

Though prestigious film festivals at Sundance and Telluride offer showcases to independent filmmakers, still only one out of three may find a distributor. Then, since they lack the resources for massive advertising campaigns, these films depend more upon reviews and WOM (word-of-mouth) to compete with the larger scale studio product.

However the factors which are stifling much of the originality in studio films are rapidly undermining the continued success of independent films as well, since occasional independently-made "*sleepers*" (unexpected hits) often result in studios swooping down to absorb the writers, directors, and actors associated with the project, as well as resolving to create films with similar audience appeal. Due to the high overhead of studios, the cost of any "small" film increases until the stress causes compromises which may weaken the project. Independent distributor Miramax aligned themselves briefly with Paramount pictures with negative results, Miramax co-chairman Harvey Weinstein concluding, "After *Bob Roberts*, I realized once again that we're in two different businesses. The studios are in the movie business; we're in the film business" (Biskind 4/93 51)

These increases in studio film costs are due to three major factors:

1. Advances in Computer Technology: Constantly improving--and increasingly high-priced--computer-driven technology has transformed both the look and making of motion pictures. The Summer high-concept, "event" films have become little more than laboratories for special effects, and **CGI**, or computer generated imagery is becoming increasingly important to their success, though it has caused budgets to soar. However, computer programs have also cut costs in other ways by rendering the writing of scripts, budgeting, scheduling of productions, and even the editing of films much easier and more efficient. In relation to the latter, by digitizing film footage, editors can now work on computer screens with programs which allow them to combine and recombine various shots of different lengths by punching in numbers. No longer must they have any physical contact with the film itself until they construct the final cut. Even clapboards now feature digital read-outs.

2. Star Salaries: More than ever the truth remains that movies get made because of who's in them, and movies with big stars have the potential to make two to three times internationally what they do domestically.

Currently, the most sought after and bankable actors are Tom Cruise and Mel Gibson--both of whom have strings of box office hits which have netted over $100 million each--who can now command $20 million per picture due to their appeal to

both genders and their ability to do action, drama, and comedy. The subordinate "A" list, currently includes two-time Oscar winner Tom Hanks, veteran action stars Arnold Schwarzenegger and Harrison Ford, John Travolta, and Jim Carrey. However, as evidence of the tenuousness of these rankings, Jim Carrey recently slid from the "A+" listing due to his move to turn from idiot to malevolent in 1996's *The Cable Guy*, as did long-time box office champ Schwarzenegger when he chose to go from deadly *Terminator* to a spoof of his image in the disastrous *The Last Action Hero*.

While there are currently no "A+" female stars--since the $12 million pay check to Demi Moore for *Striptease* resulted in a bomb--Moore, Jodie Foster, Michelle Pfeiffer, Sharon Stone, Sandra Bullock, Julia Roberts, and Meg Ryan are the "A" list women, who fight for the few strong women's roles in a movie world in which the storylines of most hits continue to be male-driven (Ulmer 38).

Due to these high salaries, newcomers, who are paid a fraction of these stars' salaries have better chances to be cast--epitomized by the unknown Renee Zelweiger's co-starring with Tom Cruise in his 1996 hit *Jerry Maguire*.

3. Marketing: The cost of marketing such films--currently 1/3 to 1/2 of the production budget of the film--is up to insure a return which must be two and three times the production budget for the studio to survive. Publicity must now begin nearly a year in advance with oblique trailers and one-sheets (promotional posters) announcing next year's summer hits to create mystery and anticipation. Then as the season of release draws closer, various trailers may be released in theaters and on television.

In addition the rise in costs has had a multitude of implications for the industry.

Due to the event-mentality, fewer studio films are being made for theatrical release each year, and due to the tremendous losses if one bombs--such as *The Last Action Hero* --more emphasis is being paid to producing films with as broad an audience as possible, resulting in creative decisions being increasingly based on demographic surveys and previews.

In addition, more than ever before, this appeal must be *world*-wide. Surpassing the $100 million mark necessitates maximizing foreign grosses, which in turn means

increasing emphasis on extra-terrestrials as villains--instead of members of existing races and ethnic groups--and encouraging the stars to go on international press junkets to push the film.

The high cost of production also necessitates further reliance on advance sales of ancillary rights--for home video and laser disc production, pay-per-view, pay and free cable TV, direct-to-home satellite, standard broadcast television, and merchandising--especially interactive video games.

And no longer is the plethora of titles for home video purchase and rental considered a threat, for in recent years it has been established that major theatrical releases generate three and four times the amount of rentals in comparison to lesser known films once they are transferred to tape. Further, summer blockbusters can generate extensive end-of-year revenues if released at a discounted price in time for the Christmas rush.

In addition, both major studios and independent filmmakers are finding success in producing films which are designed to be released direct-to-video. These often include sequels to more well-known films--such as Disney's sequels to its feature *Aladdin*--or low-budget action and horror thrillers.

As producer director Marshall Herskovitz observes of these trends, "While some see these steps as prudent business measures, an insidious shift has widened the gulf between art, as represented by a movie's creator, and commerce, the corporation's need to make money. As a result the worlds of *show* and *business* are closer than ever before" (Taub 22).

Works Cited and Sources For Further Reading

Biskind, Peter. "A 'World' Apart, " *Premiere* May, 1997: 68-73, 110-112

--. "Dead Zone," *Premiere* April 1993: 51.

Taub, Erik,*Gaffers, Grips, and Best Boys.* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1994).

Ulmer, James. "Global Star Power, "*Premiere* June 1997: 37-38.

Chapter 1:
FILM AND VALUES

The production company that [actor Nicholas]Cage started up recently with his old friend Jeff Levine is looking for, in Levine's words, "movies with morality and characters with a conscience." "I'd like to see less cynicism in the movies, more passion and chivalry and a sense of what it means to be honorable,"Cage says ..."Movies like High Noon were once acceptable--that sort of code of honor that makes a man stop his wedding day and do the right thing." (MacFarquhar 68)

Introduction - The Conflict (Art, Entertainment and Offense)

What do you think about during your free time--when you don't have to concentrate on something else? It has been said that the true character of an individual is based on the answer to such a question. The same could be posed in relation one's choice of entertainment, which may well influence and reflect the substance of one's thoughts, and define the kind of people we are.

Christians in general are torn in their feelings regarding entertainment-- specifically movies. We want to be able to watch a steady stream of new comedies, dramas, romances, mysteries, science fiction, and thrillers...yet we don't want to be bored by the puerile and unoriginal, or offended by strong language, graphic nudity, explicit sexuality, or violence. There seem to be so few which meet these criteria, and even fewer which further, can be considered works of *art* which edify and enlighten, containing themes and characters the viewer may admire and choose to emulate. *It's A Wonderful Life*, the inspiring *Field of Dreams*, as well as the *Star Wars* trilogy, are but a few examples of films which convey life-affirming themes through characters who perform acts of service for others, and in the process improve their own lives.   Ideally, for us as Latter-Day Saints, we want motion picture entertainment which will constantly motivate us to be more "Christlike," so that we can have the Holy Ghost to dwell with us as a constant companion--a tall order.

The Motion Picture Entertainment and the Creation of Art:

From the Greeks, we have inherited a tradition which looks upon the artist as a sort of "priest"--one who is especially in "tune" to divine inspiration, prompting Michelangelo to claim, "The true work of art is but a shadow of the divine perfection." L.D.S. painter Jim Christenson explains that inspiration and creative power are, in actuality, recollections of "art lessons from the pre-existence" (Oaks 50). "That the creative process is rooted and revered in heaven is evident in the Lord's use of the word "workmanship," not only to define the artistic accomplishments of his children, but the results of his own creation," as Elder Russell M. Ballard points out in reference to the myriad references in the scriptures to "all manner of workmanship," described as "exceedingly fine" and "curious" (Ballard 1)

Thus the artist's gift is to be able to create work which would lead one's thoughts to the divine, and thus help to make us better people in the process. L.D.S. philosopher Arthur Henry King concludes that in order to create great art, one must be "sincere:"

> In the end, sincerity is impossible to acquire except in a religious context, because we can be sincere only if in some way we lose ourselves, and there is only one final way of losing ourselves. By placing our gifts in the service of the Master, we have, in this terrible age, the opportunity of reading, speaking, and writing as we should. "Whoever will save his life shall lose it" is true in the whole field of literature, as it is in our lives." (117)

The Guidance of the Lord Regarding our Pursuits:

As members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, our values in regards to art and entertainment are as clear as those regarding any other involvements in life, and are found in reiterated in different scriptures:

The 13th Article of Faith:

> We believe in being honest, true, chaste, benevolent, virtuous, and in doing good to all men; indeed, we may say that we follow the admonition of Paul--We believe all things, we hope all things, we have endured many things, and hope to be able to endure all things. If there is anything virtuous, lovely, or of good report or praiseworthy, we seek after these things.

The Book of Mormon (Moroni 7: 13,16-17):

> But behold, that which is of God inviteth and enticeth to do good continually; wherefore, every thing which inviteth and enticeth to do good, and to love God, and to serve him, is inspired of God.

> For behold, the Spirit of Christ is given to every man, that he may know good from evil; wherefore, I show unto you the way to judge; for every thing which inviteth to do good, and to persuade to believe in Christ, is set forth by the power and gift of Christ, wherefore ye may know with a perfect knowledge it is of God.

> But whatsoever thing persuadeth men to do evil, and believe not in Christ, and deny him, and serve not God, then ye may know with a perfect knowledge it is of the devil; for after this manner doth the devil work, for he persuadeth no man to do good, no not one; neither do his angels; neither do they who subject themselves unto him."

Modern day Prophets and other General Authorities confirm and elaborate upon these scriptural mandates to seek out the virtuous and lovely, and avoid that which would distract us from doing good works.

In an April, 1986 conference address, Pres. Ezra Taft Benson advised,

> Consider carefully the words of the prophet Alma to his errant son Corianton, "Forsake your sins, and go no more after the lusts of your eyes." (Alma 39:9) 'The lusts of your eyes.' In our day what does that expression mean? Movies, television programs, and video recordings that are both suggestive and lewd. We counsel you...not to pollute your minds with such degrading matter, for the mind through which this filth passes is never the same afterwards. Satan   has made great inroads into the lives of some Latter-day Saints through the evil in the media. . .It is very unreasonable to suppose that exposure to profanity, nudity, sex, and violence has no negative effects on us. We can't roll around in the mud without getting dirty. (4-7)

Elder James E. Faust identifies four categories of enticements of Satan in the *Book of Mormon*--gain, power of the flesh, popularity, and seeking the lusts of the flesh and things of the world--which constitute the major enticements portrayed in motion pictures (8). Elder Faust contends that contrary to the thrills derived from such worldly

pleasures, "The joy we seek is not a temporary emotional high but a habitual inner joy learned from long experience and trust in God" (7), which is the result of being "in tune" with the promptings of the Spirit of God--a constant, but "still small voice" which can be effectively silenced through the "static"--the constant bombardment of sensational media temptations appealing to fleeting pleasures.

One other way to avoid the temptations of Satan is to keep focused on our end goal of eternal salvation. Pres. Heber J. Grant once stated: "If we are faithful in keeping the commandments of God, his promises will be fulfilled to the very letter... The trouble is, the adversary of men's souls blinds their minds. He throws dust, so to speak, in their eyes, and they are blinded with the things of this world" (44-5).

Essentially then, as disciples of Christ our ultimate goal is to live in such a way as to have the Spirit of the Lord with us at all times. Thus, the presumption is that in the process of struggling to achieve this goal, we will test our reactions to different types of movies. While viewing a film, we will be conscious as to how it is affecting us spiritually. Is what you are viewing making you feel stronger and more positive, or the opposite? How did you feel about the film after you saw it? A few days later? Though it may be upsetting, does it challenge your beliefs in a positive way? Perhaps render you less complacent about an issue?

As you analyze the common denominators involved in causing unnecessary upset--ranging from certain genres of film to more specific aspects, like graphic sexuality, profanity, violence, etc.--you should seriously consider removing those films from your life.

===

Issues Regarding Good and Evil in Art:

1. Excellence in Aesthetic Elements:

However, while the aforementioned scriptural and prophetic admonitions to be guided by the Spirit in seeking out art/entertainments seems simple and straightforward, they often bring individuals into conflict in trying to determine what exactly is uplifting versus not, for we are influenced by other factors, such as the

excellence of aesthetic elements like writing, acting, cinematography. For example, we may rationalize watching an Oscar-winning film which boasts excellent performances even though the subject matter and its treatment is offensive. In relation to this argument, Arthur Henry King in his essay, "Judgement in Literature and Life," offers the following advice regarding literature which could easily be applied to film viewing:

> When we are listening to our friends, we do not think primarily of how "well" they are talking, do we? We think of whether they are telling the truth or not; we think of whether they are being loving or not; we think of moral qualities, and that is what we need to think of in literature. The object of art, after all, is not aesthetic contemplation; the object of art is the experience that incites us to better behavior, better doing. Art is there in order that we may live better, not in order that we may look at it and have a private aesthetic and mystical experience. (110)

Intriguingly, though it may be viewed in a context of aesthetic excellence, what often lingers in the mind is not the excellence but the images of ugliness of the subject and its treatment.

2. The Necessity of Being "Lovers of Good, but Students of Evil"

To further complicate matters, according to Doctrine and Covenants 88: 79, disciples of Christ must become aware of: "things both in heaven and in the earth and under the earth; things which have been, things which are, things which must shortly come to pass; things which are at home, things which are abroad; the wars and the perplexities of the nations, and the judgements which are on the land; and a knowledge also of countries and of kingdoms."

In addition to this divine charge regarding the acquisition of knowledge, President Brigham Young stated:

> Upon the stage of a theatre can be represented in character, evil and its consequences, good and its happy results and rewards; the weakness and the follies of man, the magnanimity of virtue and the greatness of truth. The stage can be made to aid the pulpit in impressing upon the minds of a community an enlightened sense of a virtuous life, also a proper horror of the enormity of sin and just dread of its consequences.

While this quotation is in reference to theater, its context could easily be adapted for the medium of film. Though President Joseph F. Smith said, "The knowledge of sin tempteth to its commission" (373), we are under a divine injunction to constantly learn about the world, and so it's evil and ugliness as well as it's good. While some characters are struggling in a choice between the "best goods"--most of the memorable characters in literature and film are so admirable and memorable as a result of their struggle between good and evil--Jean Valjean in *Les Miserables*, Oskar Schindler in *Schindler's List*, and even Luke Skywalker in *Star Wars*. As Brigham Young implied, the depiction of such struggle, is not in itself evil, for if we can identify with the struggle of the character--by identifying his/her desires within ourselves--we can live vicariously through them and see the results of bad choices--preventing us from making the same mistakes. Or, as L.D.S. fiction writer Orson Scott Card puts it in his *A Storyteller in Zion*, "we are put in the position of being lovers of good, and students of evil." Card contends that in order to learn how to be good, one must present evil:

> Nature, other people, and our own desires conspire to bring sorrow into our lives. No one is immune to that. No one is so good that he is untouched by evil...And his own inner demand for the substance of truth requires that there be evil, because what in the world can a writer say about a character if he does not tell about the character's struggles against suffering? I know of no way to live untouched by evil, and so the characters that I write about will also confront evil. It is impossible to write any other way. (72)

3. Absolutes of Good and Evil

One issue which makes choices regarding entertainment difficult is the *way* evil is portrayed. The traditional portrayal of evil consists of a clear-cut and polarized hero and villain, while in many contemporary works of literary, stage, and film art, the characters are shades of grey--not struggling between good and evil--but not all good or bad. However, many would argue that this is the "normal" state of man, who is not innately good or evil, but simply chooses to do good or evil in different situations, and will have the option of repenting for evil as part of Christ's Plan of Salvation.

According to Card, those who would prefer absolutes of good and evil, are not being morally responsible.   He maintains that the suggestion of a "good" character conveys to the audience that if one decides someone is inherently "good," they can do no wrong, and will not only err in judging others by their behavior, but may also drift into sin by virtue of becoming oblivious to evil.   Avoidance of evil leads to the possible inability to recognize it and then, "a tendency to seek affirmation at the price of ignorance; cleanliness at the price of growth;   comfortability at the price of having anything intelligent or honest to say"(102).   It may also lead to a boredom with goodness and so an effort to seek out the novel or perverse, no longer seeking affirmations of goodness.   "Both tendencies are immoral," claims Card, "because both lead artist and audience alike to be complacent in sin and comfortable with evil"(102).

4.   Advocated versus Enacted Evil

Card points out that in addition to the realistic depiction of evil, there is also a distinction between *enacted* and *advocated* evil.   As has been discussed, the enactment of evil is necessary to recognize and react to it.   However, the advocacy of evil is manifest in both the positive portrayal of the outcome of evil acts and praising evil for its novelty.   According to journalist John Dillin adds, in his *Christian Science Monitor* article "Conservatives and Hollywood Continue 'Family Values' Wrangle," "Conservatives, alarmed by Hollywood's lax moral standards, argue that the movie capital is leading America down a path to social collapse by legitimizing infidelity, licentiousness, nudity, violence, greed, and materialism."   Media critic Michael Medved, author of the controversial *Hollywood vs. America*, adds that Hollywood's "glorification of ugliness, the assault on the family, and the attempt to undermine organized religion" has resulted in a nationwide decline of traditional values. According to Medved, many current films suggest:

> . . .a rejection of traditional standards of beauty and worth. . .ugliness has been enshrined as a new standard, as we accept the ability to shock as a replacement for the old ability to inspire. . .Film after film centers on characters who are, fundamentally, despicable-amoral losers who give us nothing to admire, nor even to care about. (19-20)