



GUEST COLUMN

CAROLYN ARENDS

See no evil?

Three questions to ask of the art we receive and create

Last year some Christian artist friends urged my husband and me to see a production at a local theatre. The play contained some of the most profanity-laden dialogue we had ever heard. And yet, as the story unfolded, we realized we were witnessing a profoundly redemptive story – one that pointed surprisingly and unmistakably to the gospel of Jesus.

We left the theatre moved and confused. Without the gritty language, would the play have been able to point so powerfully to grace in the midst of brokenness? Was it okay to expose ourselves to the language for the sake of the story?

Those of us who love stories (told in all the various art forms available to us) face a quandary. What if to tell a story honestly, unsavoury or downright evil behaviours must be portrayed? The Apostle Paul encouraged us to train our minds on “whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, [and] whatever is admirable” (Philippians 4:8).

Does that mean we are constrained – either as receivers or creators of art – to keep certain topics or words off limits?

In a class I was teaching on faith and the arts, I struggled through this question with a group of college students. We recognized that factors like maturity and personal history are important. Some things aren’t appropriate for children, and mature viewers might need to avoid any portrayals that are “stumbling blocks” in their particular context. And we could all agree on extreme cases of exploitative and gratuitous sex, violence and abusive language that are clearly out-

side the bounds of the Philippians 4:8 mandate.

But we were less sure what to do with greyer areas.

What if the questionable elements in a story are not there to titillate, but rather because they are an important part of telling the truth about the human condition? The Bible itself contains many frank and unflinching depictions of

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human depravity. If we were to legalistically and thoughtlessly apply the Philippians 4:8 mandate to Scripture, we’d have to censor a good deal of what is there.

Despite several lively debates, we never did arrive at a clear consensus. But we did settle on a framework that helped us at least begin to more thoughtfully and prayerfully engage with stories of all kinds.

When tasked with evaluating a piece of art in any genre, we asked ourselves three questions, inspired by the Church’s long history of appropriating (quite appropriately, I think) Plato’s three Transcendentals:

Is it good?

Is it true?

Is it beautiful?

Is it good? – involves ethics and morals. It requires us to consider not only whether a story contains offensive words or scenes, but also whether the worldview it tacitly conveys is an ethical one. It might be possible for a film to be rated G, but embody an insidious worldview in which material success is con-

sidered the ultimate meaning in life, or people are exploited as nothing more than means to ends. Conversely, it might be possible for a movie to contain violence, sex or language but provide a perspective on the human condition that moves the viewer toward a more ethical or moral stance.

Is it true? – is an even more theological question. Does the story – whether it is fact or fantasy or something in-between – say something honest about the world and the people who inhabit it? Does it hint at anything true about God? Even if the worldview in a story is in conflict with the gospel, can it teach us something true about the perspectives and needs of the people who hold it?

Is it beautiful? – has to do with aesthetics. It asks whether the art in question is well crafted and successfully formed. A depraved story may be breathtakingly depicted. (In such instances we should exercise caution.) Or, as is sometimes the case in explicitly “Christian” storytelling, a good and true story may be shabbily crafted. (Caution is required here too! Please!)

With these three questions, we begin a process of discernment that each of us will be working through for the rest of our lives. We might decide that a story lacking in one of the Transcendentals is still worthy of our attention due to its strengths in another. Conversely, we might discover that even a story we deem to be good or true or beautiful is out of bounds if it cultivates behaviour in us that is not. Most essentially, we’ll know that our challenge is to support and create work ourselves that is deeply good, unflinchingly true and as beautiful as we can possibly make it. **/FT**



Carolyn Arends is a musician and author in Surrey, B.C. She has taught at Pacific Life Bible College, Columbia Bible College and ACTS Seminary.