

Sitting in the Seat of God
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When I was a kid television had not yet made its way to Belfast. The popular forms of entertainment were the radio, the weekly comic papers and the cinema. By far the best loved was the cinema. In the square mile that we thought was the world there were eight picture houses (today one of them survives). The quality varied from the cheap 9d (4.5 pence) to the classy Ambassador at 2/6.

You got good value. A two hour programme usually consisted of 'The big picture', 'The wee picture' (B movie), a comic short such as The Three Stooges, a cartoon, Pathe or Movietone News, a travel feature, a serial, trailers and the National Anthem. Programmes changed mid week and if you went to two cinemas regularly you were likely to see 32 films in an average week.

Much of the material that we watched as kids was pretty trashy - we were unsophisticated and undiscerning but I'm pretty sure that I owe my education more to the cinema than to the local secondary intermediate. The cinema taught me to think. I was about three years of age when I was introduced to the works of Victor Hugo and Frank L Baum - that is to say I went to see 'The Hunchback of Notre Dame' and 'The Wizard of Oz'. Within a few years Dickens, Kipling, the Brontes, R. L Stevenson, Baroness Orczy and several classic American authors followed. My horror of war stemmed from Pathe newsreel coverage of the testing of the atomic bomb on Christmas Island and my introduction to politics was seeing the fall of the French Government under Mendes France.

I had to wait until I was a teenager for the works of Mary Shelley as 'Frankenstein' was X rated. Needless to say, when I was taken, as a three year old, to see 'The Hunchback of Notre Dame' I didn't realise that I was embarking on a literary education. It wasn't a very suitable film for an infant and I spent a considerable amount of time hiding beneath the seat in terror. I was more interested in the 'full supporting programme' that included 'Superman', 'The Three Stooges', and 'Tom and Jerry'.

We were subjected to a lot of history - mostly biased - about how the West was won, World War II and Korea. John Wayne apparently defeated Native Americans, Germans, Japs and Reds single-handed. There were, however, many good historical biopics from which we learned about Nelson (and Lady Hamilton), the Brownings, Elizabeth I, Joan of Arc, Edith Cavell, St Bernadette

and a host of inventors, explorers and conquerors. There were bible stories too, more interesting on the screen than in Sunday School. I saw David kill Goliath, I begged Samson from my seat not to drink the poison poured by Delilah (Yvonne de Carlo).

We didn't realise that we were being educated. We simply accepted that we were being entertained. Much of it was kitsch, schmaltz, exaggerated and inaccurate. Nevertheless it was the most important and influential medium of mass education of any time in history. What is more, it was fun. We'd do anything to get out of school but we paid to get in to the picture house. We sold firewood, collected bottles and ran messages to raise the ticket money.

It wasn't just education - not just brain work. The cinema touched heart and soul as well. In January 2008 we'll be staging a day at the Mirfield Centre called 'A Man's Gotta Do' (moral moments in the movies) in which we will look at the cinema's influence on conscience. Even the worst of movies involves one in the struggle between good and evil. Films could make you love the Bad Guy - the angel-faced Billy the Kid or the camp and polished Count Dracula - but they could never make you love badness. As a whole series of 'B' movies declared 'Crime does not pay!' so we found ourselves inspired by a whole series of good guys - Errol Flynn's Robin Hood standing up for the poor, James Stewart's Mr Deeds fighting corruption in Washington. Whenever someone was compromised or a cause betrayed we were offended. Whenever the coward or the weakling decides that once in a lifetime a man's gotta do what a man's gotta do we were thrilled and we cheered as he turned and beat hell out of his tormentor or stood up for justice against all odds. Many movies were about the defence of democracy, the struggle for justice, free speech, the protection of the underdog, each an inspiring vision of the human quest for goodness and truth.



More recent and sophisticated cinema has tackled issues relevant to the present generation. Some films are prophetic, warning of how governments and states can become corrupted ('All the President's Men', 'Enemy of the State'). The cause of gay people has been better served by films like 'Philadelphia' and 'Priest' than all the debates in General Synod put together. Some films glorify war but powerful arguments against sending young men to be mangled on the battlefield are to be found in many others.

The things of God are always present in the cinema and not just in the crude one-dimensional Bible epics. When a young cowboy lies dying or when a life is cut short in a gangster or war movie, questions of eternity, judgement (and perhaps mercy) present themselves. I was surprised that the 'Church Times' did not include Shawshank 'Redemption' among its list of religious films during Lent because for me it is the most religious film ever made. We are presented with an ordinary man condemned for a crime that he did not commit, he finds the prison corrupt, the guards brutal, the authorities hypocritical and the inmates hopeless. His ministry to the souls in prison, the empty cell, the overthrow of the 'powers' portrays incarnation in language that

cannot be ignored. The works of Spielberg, whether he is stretching our imagination ('The Green Mile'), presenting holiness in a courageous sinner ('Schindler's List'), or philosophical questioning as in 'AI - Artificial Intelligence', are all deeply spiritual. I don't want to stretch things too far but I think that the musical has the power to raise one to another plane and that a Kelly or an Astaire and Rogers dance routine may be a better metaphor for the joy experienced at Easter and Pentecost than all the tongues that Christians can manage to speak in.

The criticism that can justifiably be levelled at the film is that it is an enclosed world. It is the least post-modern art-form. In it things move towards a satisfactory, if not always happy, ending. Even tragedy looks to a better future or justifies itself as the outcome of warnings given earlier in the film. But this is because the film is always seen from the perspective of an audience: you and I sit in the seats of God and the angels as we watch the drama unfold and therefore it is very hard to produce a film where evil is the actual basis of the work. Nazi propaganda managed it as do some forms of pornography, but in a sense these exceptions are so perverted that they prove the point. Mainstream cinema is so optimistic of the triumph of good as to be naive. Is that such a bad thing? Perhaps the persistence of God's love for us is reflected in a hope that one day love will prevail and there will be a happy ending. *f*