



SEEDS

January 2007

GOOD NEWS *Associates*

13730 15th Ave NE , A302, Seattle, WA 98125

www.goodnewsassoc.org

The Three Questions of Art

Mark Oppenlander

It is a generally held commonplace that art is subjective. But what does that mean? How much of art's beauty or power to speak to us is merely in the eye of the beholder? I mulled over this question this month as a group of us viewed *The Mission* at our congregational movie night. *The Mission* concerns two 18th century Jesuit priests who must decide what, if anything, they can do to protect the South American tribe they are evangelizing from slave traders. One of them, Father Gabriel (Jeremy Irons), stays true to the Jesuit path of non-violence. The other, Mendoza (Robert DeNiro), once a slaver himself, returns to his violent ways to defend his Christian brothers.

After the film, we joined in discussion; an informal conversation to process the thoughts and emotions associated with the movie. In our dialogue some interesting things happened. One viewer expressed disappointment in the portrayal of the Mendoza character. She herself knew some modern-day Jesuits and felt confident that no Jesuits, then or now, would willingly take up arms against an aggressor. Such a depiction dishonored the Jesuit order. Another viewer, although generally affirming of the film, felt that the characters were too perfectly "typed." The contrivance of the pacifistic priest and the violent slave trader, though compelling, was not believable for her.

If art is completely subjective, both of the aforementioned viewers could be "right" in their opinions of the film. But even though the act of experiencing or receiving art can and will be affected by our personal histories and other subjective elements ranging from the worries on our minds to the temperature of the theater, I contend that there are ways to objectively evaluate the art our spirits consume. And make no mistake: art is a type of spiritual food. Few of us have been given good cultural tools to assess the art we see and hear on a daily basis. Those of us in the church are not immune to this; in some cases Christians are the worst culprits of non-discrimination. The more tools we have to evaluate art, the more objective we can be – and the better able we will be to separate our own experience from a rational judgment of the art itself.

Most of us come to books, movies or pieces of music with unspoken or even subconscious expectations of the work. When our expectations or preconceptions are confounded, we walk away shrugging our shoulders and saying that we didn't "like" the art. It is not my intent to make anyone "like" the same things I like (e.g. forcing you to "watch this film because it's good for you," like a parent shoveling spinach). However, I think that there are tools we can use to separate out our own feelings. In some pieces of art, our personal enjoyment may not have been the point. Let me share one simple rubric that I think is a good starting place. I call these "The Three Questions of Art." I forget where I learned them, but I know that they have been around a lot longer than I have. They have often served me as a springboard for to further explore or understand (if not always appreciate) a work of art.



1) **What is the artist trying to do?** This may seem like a simple question, but it isn't always. Is the artist trying to make me laugh? Cry? Think? Sigh? Am I meant to be exhilarated? Confused? Contemplative? The author (or composer, or painter) may have obvious or hidden agendas. In all likelihood the artist will have multiple goals (the filmmakers may have wanted to make money *and* make a political statement). If I use *The Mission* as an example, the narrative and cinematographic techniques used suggest that the artists wanted to provide a thought-provoking exploration of the tension between pacifism and violence as a way of furthering God's purposes on earth. It is also quite clear that they want to draw the viewer in to that dialogue, forcing each person who views the film to reflect on ways in which they may have contributed to the violent world in which we live, either through action or inaction.

2) **How well did the artist accomplish their goals?** This question requires the audience to have some basic understanding of the medium in question. Our level of evaluation may be limited by our understanding of the technique of the art; different brushstrokes may mean different things. I cannot evaluate ballet very well because I don't understand the forms or the structures – the *language*, if you will – of ballet. To me, it is just a bunch of people leaping around in tights.

Sometimes too, we make the mistake of evaluating a piece of art based on outcomes. I may assume that if I didn't laugh very much at a comedic play that it was not done very well, and that may be true. However it may also be true that I am not the intended audience for this play. I was not a part of the artist's purpose. Perhaps in this comedy, all of the humor is based on pratfalls – the man slipping on the banana peel – whereas I prefer puns and verbal ripostes. As an example of classic vaudevillian slapstick, the play may be brilliant while for me it is a bore. Note that this takes us right back to question one: What was the artist trying to do? If we misjudge the artist's intent, we may misjudge the quality of the art. The questions are progressive.

If we return to our conversation of *The Mission*, we can ask the question of whether the two characters were too strongly typed. In light of the artist's goals, I don't think so. The severe dichotomy between the two priests serves the artist's intentions so well. The filmmakers want us to look at this stark contrast and then evaluate our own souls. And at that, I think they succeed.

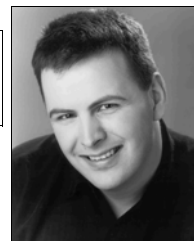
3) **Was what the artist attempted to do worth doing?** Frederick Buechner suggests that artists ask themselves, "Why are you breaking the silence of the universe to say this thing?" It is a good question, and it is where the subjective assessment actually finds its home in the "three questions" model. It is where my spirit gets to stand in the path of the art and either affirm or deny the goodliness of the artist's intent. It is "I and Thou," artist and audience, in dialogue.

This third question is another place wherein we may run into our unspoken expectations. If I think this painting wasn't worth painting, why not? What would I have painted instead? Sometimes the dialogue is between the artist whose work we are experiencing and our own inner artist, which may be rising up to indignantly express a contrary view of life, truth, beauty, God, etc. My fellow viewer who was disappointed by the historical inaccuracy of a Jesuit taking up arms against an aggressor may be craving deep in her soul a different story. She may be waiting for someone to tell the story of the beautiful peace testimony of the Jesuit order. Perhaps her inner artist is stirring within her the desire to share that story herself.

Naturally, our answers to the "was it worth doing" question will differ. I may be able to ascertain that the latest pop song desires to spread a message of existential, post-modern nihilism and that it does so with clever lyrics, a catchy melody and an infectious bass line . . . but was that message worth spreading? I will likely say "no," while the guy listening to the same radio station while stuck in an endless traffic jam may say, "yes!" I am not concerned with our disagreement. I am far more concerned with the person who has never taken the time to evaluate the art with which they feed their heads and hearts to make a determination either way. As Madeleine L'Engle says in her book *Walking on Water: Reflections on Faith and Art*, "The smarmy picture of Jesus, which I find nauseating may be for someone else, a true icon."

So although there is subjectivity, it is the subjectivity of dialogue in human interaction. Art is a conversation. Begin with the objective assessment and remember the three questions: What was the artist trying to do? How well did they do it? Was it worth doing? These basic questions can be used to evaluate everything from a dime store novel to Da Vinci's *David*.

Mark Oppenlander is Secretary and Treasurer of the Board for GOOD NEWS Associates, the editor of *SEEDS* and a movie buff.



To subscribe or unsubscribe to *SEEDS*, click here:
www.goodnewsassoc.org/seeds.html