Popular culture and the war against standards

By Michael Medved
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When people meet me and they find out that I make my living as a film critic, they often exhibit two spontaneous but absolutely contradictory reactions. The first comment is, "Boy, you have a great job!" and, usually in the very next breath, they add, "Aren't movies terrible these days?"

The fact is that both statements are accurate. I do have a great job in many ways, and yes, movies are absolutely terrible today. Ironically, it is sometimes those films that are the most profoundly, irredeemably awful that make my job most stimulating. That was certainly the case with one of the most critically praised movies of 1990, **The Cook, the Thief, His Wife and Her Lover.**

This is not a film for the faint-of-heart—or the delicate of stomach. It begins with a scene showing the brutal beating of a naked man while the main character gleefully urinates all over him. It ends with that same character slicing off a piece of a carefully cooked and elegantly prepared human corpse in the most vivid and horrifying scene of cannibalism ever portrayed in motion pictures.

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In between, we see necrophilia, sex in a toilet, the unspeakably bloody and sadistic mutilation of a nine year-old boy, another victim smeared with feces, a woman whose cheek is pierced with a fork, and an edifying scene with two naked bodies writhing together ecstatically in the back of a truck filled with rotting, maggot-infested garbage. There is, in short, unrelieved ugliness, horror and depravity at every turn.

Naturally, the critics loved it.

Caryn James of the August *New York Times* hailed **The Cook, the Thief, His Wife and Her Lover** as "brilliant." Two leading film critics, whose approach to film reviewing I have often considered all thumbs, called the picture "provocative" and awarded their coveted "Two thumbs up" endorsement.

Richard Corliss of *Time* magazine went even further and described the film as "excellent, exciting and extraordinary."

For me, this sort of critical praise proved even more disturbing than the film itself. The movie just made me sick, but the positive reviews made me angry. My partner and I had initially decided not to cover the film on SNEAK PREVIEWS, the weekly show we host on PBS, because we felt that by discussing it on the air we'd only be granting it additional publicity. Jeffrey Lyons and I don't always agree by any means, but we certainly saw eye to eye on **The Cook, the Thief, His Wife and Her Lover**. And when some of our esteemed colleagues began using words like "brilliant" and "excellent" to describe this putrid, pointless and pretentious piece of filth, we decided that we had to respond.

So we did a special segment on our show in the course of which I transgressed one of the great unwritten rules of the so-called critical community: I not only attacked the film itself, but I also attacked my fellow critics who had praised it so lavishly. I objected in particular to the tendency to describe the picture as "a raunchy black comedy" without giving prospective moviegoers any honest indication of the vivid brutality and horrors it contained. I also cited the laudatory response to this hateful film as an indication that Americans are absolutely justified in their deep distrust of film critics.

After I made such statements on nationwide TV, there was a minor--and entirely predictable--firestorm concerning my comments and protesting my alleged "arrogance" and "irresponsibility." One letter from a viewer in Oregon eloquently summarized these protests: "I was angered and disgusted by your unfair and savage attack on **The Cook, the Thief, His Wife and Her Lover**," she wrote, and then went on revealingly,

> "Though I have not seen the film, I certainly plan to do so and your review was way out of line. The one thing we don't need is a Jessie Helms clone on PBS .... If you are so full of old-fashioned, judgmental, right-winged bigotry, then that is your problem, but you have no right to pollute the airwaves with your narrow-minded stupidity ....Your job is to tell us if a movie is skillful or not, but please stay off your moralistic high horse and keep to the business of reviewing movies."

Ignoring soul and substance

This letter represents just one very small skirmish in what I would describe as the "culture wars" currently raging in our society, but it reveals very forcefully what those wars are all about. My correspondent is saying that it's fine for me to talk about a film being in or out of focus, about sloppy or competent editing, about a convincing or unconvincing performance, but Heaven forfend that I should address its moral content! Heaven forfend that I should discuss in any way the message that a particular film is sending to the moviegoing public!

This is the very nature of the cultural battle before us. It is, at its very core, a war against standards. It is a war against judgment. Its proponents insist that the worst insult you can offer someone today is to suggest that he or she is judgmental.

One of the symptoms of the corruption and collapse of our national culture is the insistence that we examine only the surface of any work of art. The politically correct, properly liberal notion is that we should never dig deeper--to consider whether a given work is true, or good, or spiritually nourishing--or to evaluate its impact on society at large. Contemporary culture is obsessed with superficial skill and slick salesmanship while ignoring the more important issues of soul and substance. This is one of the consequences of the war on standards--a war that is currently being waged on three fronts: the glorification of ugliness, the assault on the family, and the attempt to undermine organized religion. Each of these fronts is serious enough to merit separate consideration.

The glorification of ugliness

Everywhere around us, in every realm of artistic endeavor, we see evidence of the rejection of traditional standards of beauty and worth. In the visual arts, in literature, in film, in music of both popular and classical variety, ugliness has been enshrined as a new standard, as we accept the ability to shock as a replacement for the old ability to inspire.

This tendency has reached absurd extremes with the recent efforts to elevate the banging and shouting of rap music into some sort of noble art form. Consider, for a moment, the recent obscenity trial of 2 Live Crew. One of the expert witnesses who helped secure the group's acquittal was a professor of literature at Duke University named Henry L. Gates. Under oath, mind you, he testified that these poetic souls, whose lyrics exalt anal rape and the mutilation of female genitalia, had created a "refreshing and astonishing" body of work. Professor Gates went on to compare their achievements to those of Shakespeare, Chaucer, and James Joyce. (As the late George Orwell once commented, "There are some ideas so preposterous that only an intellectual could believe them.")

In film, the art form which I most regularly consider, the process of degradation has already reached levels that should lead all thoughtful critics to despair for the future of the medium. Indescribable gore drenches the modern screen, even in movies allegedly made for families. And the most perverted forms of sexuality--loveless, decadent, brutal and sometimes incestuous--are showing regularly at a theater near you.

Perhaps you haven't seen **The Grifters**, another critical favorite of the last few months. Oscar winner Anjelica Houston co-stars with John Cusak in a story about the sexual tension between a mother-and-son team of con artists. In the climactic sequence, Houston attempts to seduce her boy in order to steal his money, but this heart-warming family reunion ends with blood spurting endlessly from his severed jugular vein.

This kind of work is regularly described as high art, along with another sort of ugliness that is even more commonly celebrated on movie screens today. Film after film centers on characters who are, fundamentally, despicable-amoral losers who give us nothing to admire, nor even to care about.

Goodfellas, the winner of nearly all the most prestigious critics' awards for 1990, is a case in point. This gritty tale of small-time Mafia hoods is Martin Scorsese's follow-up to **The Last Temptation of Christ**. Technically, it is indeed a brilliant achievement, and it features superb performances by a number of talented actors. Why, then, do most people who see the film leave the theater feeling cold and empty?

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Because **Goodfellas**, with its fascination for its own collection of lavishly loathsome characters, never engages our sympathy or our concern. This has been a problem with scores upon scores of recent American films. From **Miller's Crossing** to Dennis Hopper's **The Hot Spot**, from **After Dark, My Sweet to State of Grace,** to David Lynch's **Wild at Heart** to Robert Redford's **Havana** to Jack Nicholson's **Two Jakes**, Hollywood has been creating central characters with all the warmth and charm of poisonous lizards. This trend reached its logical conclusion, I suppose, in an absolutely unbearable film called **Homer and Eddie**, in which the heroine, played by Whoopi Goldberg, is a murderer, a thief, and an escaped mental patient who also happens to be dying of a brain tumor. What an inspiring role model for today's youth!

You may never have heard of **Homer and Eddie**, or many of the other films I've just mentioned, because they all proved to be pathetic flops at the box office. Despite the presence of major stars, obscenely inflated production budgets, and enthusiastic endorsements from some of my fellow critics, these motion pictures failed to connect with ordinary moviegoers. Hollywood nevertheless persists in shelling out untold millions on projects that emphasize the darkest, most repulsive aspects of American life. To vary the lyrics of the old song, these cinematic artists insist on walking exclusively on "The Slimey Side of the Street."

In years past, in the heyday of Gary Cooper, Jimmy Stewart and Katharine Hepburn, Hollywood was accused of creating characters who were larger than life, more deeply lovable and admirable than people in the real world. Today, the movie business regularly offers us characters who are smaller than life, who are less decent, less intelligent, less noble than our own friends and neighbors. Four years ago, George Roche wrote an eloquent and important book that highlighted the threat within our culture to those values of civility and faith that many of us hold most dear. The name of that book was *A World Without Heroes*. And that is precisely the sort of world that Hollywood portrays again and again on screen. It is a world in which ugliness--and emptiness--emerge as the new standard for our society.

The assault on the family

The second front on the war against standards involves an attack on the family that seems to gather new force with every passing year. For thousands of years, society has acknowledged the fact that a permanent partnership between a man and woman, for the purpose of nurturing children, offers the best chance of human happiness and fulfillment. This fundamental notion has not only been challenged in recent years, it has been assaulted with unparalleled ferocity by some of the most powerful forces in our culture.

The popular music business, for instance, has become a global enterprise of staggering proportions that generates billions of dollars every year through the simple-minded glorification of animal lust. Nothing could stand at a further remove from the selflessness and discipline that are essential to successful family life than the masturbatory fantasies that saturate MTV 24 hours a day.

Once upon a time, parents worried about the impact of idolized crooners like Frank Sinatra, Elvis Presley, or the Beatles, but these performers were tender, wholesome romantics when compared to Guns and Roses, Madonna and other paragons who dominate today's music scene. The singers of yesteryear certainly exploited sexuality as part of their appeal, but the fantasies they purveyed in their songs still centered on long-term emotional relationships between men and women. What is most striking about the popular music of the moment is the cold, bitter and sadistic edge to the vision of fleeting sex it promotes.

Another message of the music that is ceaselessly reinforced by television and movies is the perverse but pervasive idea that "kids know best." Teenagers are regularly portrayed as the source of all wisdom, sanity and sensitivity, while their parents are shown as hopeless, benighted clowns. With Bart Simpson regularly turning up on lists of the most admired Americans, we've certainly come a long way from the Andy Hardy model, with young Mickey Rooney learning life lessons from his father, the stern but kindly judge. This new idea that children have all the answers, and have to show the older generation how to live and how to adjust to the brave new world around them, is a holdover from the destructive obsessions of the '60s youth culture, and it poisons the climate for family life.

Even the smash hit motion picture **Home Alone**, which cunningly caters to America's desperate hunger for family entertainment, advances the notion that today's hip kids don't really need their bumbling parents. The seven year-old hero not only survives in fine style when his parents fly away to Europe and accidentally leave him behind, but the boy also displays remarkable courage and skill in foiling the designs of two adult burglars.