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Contemporary Movies: Do They Matter in Preaching? (A Reflection on Timothy B. Cargal, *Hearing a Film, Seeing a Sermon: Preaching and Popular Movies*)

Cargal, Timothy B. (2007). [*Hearing a film, seeing a sermon: Preaching and popular movies.*](#)
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Why should preachers be concerned about contemporary movies? I sometimes survey my preaching students to see how many movies they watch in a given year. It is not uncommon to have a few students answer three or four hundred a year. “How,” I ask, “do you do that?”

If they have a movie they really like, they will watch it multiple times. Some students say they are able to watch movies and do their class work at the same time (which may explain some of the work I receive!).

According to Timothy Cargal, ours has become: (1) a very visual culture; (2) a culture that often gets its information from movies and television, as opposed to books. We could say that for many, their “epistemology” is narrative in nature—that is how they acquire their beliefs. Especially younger Americans are often more informed by *stories* than by *ideas* that come via printed words. Like it or not, our culture is shaped more by images and symbols (via the visual media) than by ideas and facts. Images and symbols, of course, can convey truth, but they also have the power to distort truth. In Timothy B. Cargal’s *Hearing a Film, Seeing a Sermon*, the author writes: “One purpose for engagement with films in religious education settings is to help people become more theologically cinemate—that is, to assist them in analyzing the movies they see and in understanding how films communicate meanings so that they are not passive consumers of this powerful medium” (p. 48). Cargal assumes that most Americans, including believers, watch movies. The question is, do Christians have the skills to critique what they see, as opposed to blindly accepting the overt and covert messages conveyed by those movies?

I have argued for years that our preaching must make more use of narrative—including first-person stories. I am not ready to do away with three-point sermons, but we must recognize that syllogistic structures of persuasion are less effective in contemporary culture. Movies, then, help preachers know *what* to communicate and *how* to communicate. I think movies force us to examine the questions our culture is asking; sometimes movies even provide gospel answers. Cargal encourages preachers to engage movies as “partners in conversation.” We listen to the message of the film, but we also recognize that movies, like Scripture, require *interpretation*. Often, movies give superficial answers that explicitly contradict the Christian gospel. Nevertheless, we must also be willing to affirm that “truth” is also conveyed in some movies. Cargal quotes Tillich: “Everything that expresses ultimate reality expresses God whether it intends to do so or not” (p. 14). I have had the joy of discovering a “God-moment” in a film where I least expected it.

One movie that Cargal uses as an example for a sermon is *Pleasantville*. In this film a magical time shift occurs from the present to the 1950s. Accompanying this time warp is a change from

color to black and white. David and Jennifer (as Bud and Mary Sue Parker) are caught in this time warp and are, against their will, transported back to Pleasantville and the black and white world of the fifties. Subsequently, Bud and Mary Sue introduce this small black-and-white town to “color.” Through introducing knowledge (including carnal knowledge: premarital sex; adultery) and imperfection (losing ball games; bad weather; reading books, etc.), life is portrayed as taking on its full-textured, virile nature (“colored”).

As a minister, Cargal’s mainline congregation has, over the years, steadily declined in size and influence. Some members of his congregation wish they could go back to “the way it was.” Cargal uses his sermon and *Pleasantville* to say to his congregation: “The past is never as glamorous and wonderful as it seems. Let’s not focus on what we *were*, but on what we *can be*; the future matters more than the past.” Further: “If the present is a time of uncertainty and challenge, so was the past” (p. 124).

In one sermon example, Cargal gives a brief synopsis of the movie. David (Bud Parker) learns rather quickly that life in Pleasantville isn’t so pleasant after all. In his sermon, Cargal compares the movie to the Old Testament narrative where the exiles of Haggai’s day return to Jerusalem after their captivity in Babylon. They discover a far different Jerusalem than the one of their dreams. The exiles have no king, only a governor; the temple lies in ruins. “They had expected the glory that lived in their imaginations; they found disillusionment and disappointment that exceeded the blandness of a black-and-white world” (p. 125). Yet these disillusioned Jews must not despair, for God has not abandoned them: “‘My spirit abides among you,’ God declares: ‘I will fill this house with splendor, says the Lord of hosts . . . The splendor of this house shall be greater than the former, says the Lord of hosts; and in this place I will give prosperity, says the Lord of hosts’” (Hag 2:7, 8).

As with *Pleasantville*, Cargal indicates that *color* begins to return to Jerusalem. (To me, this does not seem an accurate correlation to the significance of “color” in the movie.) In Jerusalem, this happens through the *agency of the Lord* and the *work* of the people. Especially, Cargal wants his congregation to see the value of “work.” It took courage and hard work for the inhabitants of Pleasantville to transform their small black-and-white world into a world of color. “It took courage for Zerubbabel, Joshua, and all the ‘people of the land’ to dare to imagine a future as bright as their past, and it would take work empowered by God’s spirit to bring it to reality” (p. 127).

In my humble opinion, Cargal’s interpretation of this movie and his use of it in his sermon, while not wrong, still fails to fully and accurately reflect the theological nuances of the film. In many respects, I consider the movie—and Cargal’s use of it—to be simplistic. The movie explicitly presents a narrow and incorrect view of reality in which there are only two paths open to humans: We either live in a confined world of black and white or a hedonistic, imperfect world of “color.” No effort is made to reveal the consequences of choosing “color”—as the movie defines it. That is, no one gets pregnant, contacts sexually transmitted diseases, or even is hurt by infidelity. For example, Bud seems pleased that his mother has had an affair with Bill Johnson; after all, she has discovered the beauty of a *colored world*! In the sermon, Cargal says nothing negative about the movie; he makes no effort to provide qualifiers or caveats.

From my perspective, *Pleasantville* seems to make Satan the “hero” of the Garden of Eden (Gen 3). Says the serpent to Eve: “You will not surely die. For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil” (Gen 3:4, 5). Must one disobey God’s explicit commands in order to live a vibrant, “colored life”?

Scriptures teach that we live in a fallen, imperfect world and we must acknowledge this; life and reality are not “black and white.” However, I believe life becomes “colored” not when one is introduced to knowledge (including carnal knowledge) and imperfection, but when one surrenders to God’s will. This is not to minimize the value of knowledge; without it we would face a much more difficult existence. I thank God every time I go to the doctor and he knows just what’s wrong and what to do about it. However, we must not forget that “the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom” (Prov 9:10). We do not live in a simple world that is black and white; life is about change. However, in many areas of life such as morality, God has given us freedom to choose the path we take and that choice matters, both now and forever. The movie seems to teach that truth comes from within the individual—that when we follow our own proclivities, whether for good or evil, then life becomes colored. To me that is a pervasive subjectivism that leads down a dangerous road. When using *Pleasantville* as an example, as Cargal does, these theological truths need to be asserted. Preachers must assist our listeners in understanding the underlying implications of this movie or any other that is referenced in a sermon.

Cargal’s book is worth reading—especially the sermons. The first half wades in water too deep for the average preacher. The reader wants to say: “Get to the point!” You won’t agree with everything Cargal writes. But the author makes a compelling argument for preachers becoming “movie-literate”—if we want to understand and connect with contemporary listeners.