

Eyes Wide Open

Looking for God in Popular Culture

Book by: William D. Romanowski
Study Guide by: Troy Brydon

Welcome to the online study guide for Eyes Wide Open: Looking for God in Popular Culture. This guide is designed to enhance your understanding of this book by William D. Romanowski, Professor of Communications Arts and Sciences at Calvin College. For each chapter of the book there is:

- a brief summary
- an outline of key points
- and a list of discussion questions

By highlighting important aspects of each chapter, these treatments are intended to both encourage and to help you discuss the ideas in this book with family and friends, as well as in various small group settings. And so whether you are using this resource for your own independent reflection, in preparation for study groups, or to lead a classroom discussion, the purpose of this guide is to help you interact with the book more deeply than you might with a single reading.

It is also important to test the ideas in this book by translating them into action. And so links to additional resources are included to facilitate your continued engagement with popular art and culture. Hopefully, pursuing this course will help us cultivate a common vision for artists, critics, or patrons to share that might contribute to the development of a kind of Christian interpretive community (see page 32 of Eyes Wide Open). This, in turn, may deepen our understanding of the role of Christians in the popular arts and heighten the quality of our work and activities--whether production, criticism, or appreciation.

Ultimately, Eyes Wide Open is a call for Christians to become more involved in God's good but fallen world as Christians, seeing with the "eyes of your heart" (Eph. 1:18), that is, from the perspective of faith.

Introduction

Summary:

There is little doubt that, despite the admonishment of clergy and media critics, Christians consume their share of mainstream popular culture. They go to movies (even R-rated ones), rent videos (even the Director's Cut), watch Must See TV, and purchase CDs that top the Billboard charts. The wide range of attitudes-from sheer antagonism to uncritical acceptance-shows that Christians lack a clearly defined and reasonable approach to popular art and culture. Christians think their faith should matter, but in the absence of distinctly Christian critical tools, they simply defer to vague personal tastes and preferences.

Unfortunately, much of what has come to be thought of as "Christian" criticism is distinguished by either confessional concerns (does it enhance worship, make a statement of belief, exhort believers to faithful living, or attempt to evangelize?) or moralistic ones (determining levels of profanity, sex and violence). We need to develop and sustain a fair and rigorous Christian criticism so that we can distinguish redemptive aspects of popular culture, determine appropriate Christian participation, and develop tools for constructive criticism.

Key Points:

- Condemnation, Appropriation, and Consumption are general categories that show how religious beliefs and cultural concerns combine to shape attitudes toward culture (pp. 12-14).
- The Bible affirms the power of an informed faith to "keep your foot from evil" (1 Cor. 6: 12; Prov. 4:27). Participation in the popular arts is one way we develop and practice discernment, the ability "to distinguish good from evil" (Heb. 5:14) (pp. 14- 15).
- Every culture has its own distinctive arts, which give us insight into people and the "spirit of the time." While there is much in today's popular culture that is mindless and trivial, the popular arts have the capacity to provoke serious reflection on our lives and society.
- The popular arts are at once an affirmation of their value and a distorted version of something that God intended to be good. They do not lie outside God's judgment-or beyond God's redemption.
- We need to look at the stories contemporary culture is telling us as Christians by learning how to discern and evaluate perspectives in these representations of life in God's world.

Questions:

1. According to the Barna study cited on page 12, there is no statistical difference between Christians and other groups when it comes to media viewing. Try to make an honest assessment of how much time you spend each week watching television or movies, listening to music, or reading books. What factors might account for different viewing/listening habits among those in your group?
2. Why are Christians not more interested in developing their ability to evaluate movies, television shows and music as Christians?
3. Which of the three Christian approaches-condemnation, appropriation, and consumption-are you most familiar with? Evaluate these ways of engaging popular art and culture.
4. Why is the distinction between popular art and entertainment important for developing a Christian approach (p. 17)?
5. The author contends, "That producers seek to maximize their profits by reaching as large an audience as possible creates many of the problems that we have with the popular arts today" (p. 17). Discuss this in terms of the description of popular art on pages 16-19.
6. A fundamental assumption in this book is that the earth and everything in it belongs to God, who

created all things visible and invisible (look again at the last paragraph on page 19). How might this belief direct Christian engagement with popular art and culture?

7. The author suggests that we "establish a collective 'Christian' vision that might serve as a context for our engagement with the popular arts" (p. 20). How might developing such a common vision help the Christian community become a "stream of living water" in this area of life?
8. How does your Christian faith impact the way you experience popular artworks?

Chapter One: Christians Who Drink Beer

Summary:

Surveys show that most Americans are "religious" and that among the religious most see themselves as Christians. But the same reports reveal a wide range of opinions about what it means to be a Christian. One Christian entertainment executive identified a sizeable, if somewhat nebulous group composed of evangelicals, mainline Protestants and Catholics, who are more or less affirming of contemporary culture—"Christians who drink beer," he named them. For Christian entertainment entrepreneurs this "vast audience" of Christians is the winning number—a huge audience, not only for Christian and family-friendly popular art and criticism, but also for advertisers and merchandisers. Most people are now aware that there are "Christian" alternatives in popular music and video, television programming, and even movies, but most still watch pretty much what everyone else watches, with little thought about how faith might affect viewing habits and criticism. While they think their faith should matter when it comes to popular art, in the absence of distinctly Christian critical tools, they simply defer to vague personal tastes and preferences.

The popular arts are and should be representations of life that influence behavior, shape attitudes and opinions, and inform perspectives. In this sense, the popular arts reflect a culture they help to create. Research shows that it is the cumulative effect of viewing the world portrayed in the popular arts that has the power to persuade over time. It is important, then, for Christians to be able to understand and critique the dominant worldview in the mainstream popular arts. One way we can make progress in this by establishing interpretive communities made up of people who share a common vision for engaging popular art. Insofar as all popular artworks are embedded in cultural perspectives, the distinct features of a Christian perspective provide a standpoint and framework for interpretation and criticism.

Key Points:

- Much to the dismay of Christian entertainment entrepreneurs, the viewing and listening habits of Christians are hardly different from other groups in terms of both how much and what they watch and listen to.
- According to surveys, most Americans are unclear about what they believe and why.
- While earlier generations might have rejected many of the values and practices of the dominant culture, there exists today a sizeable group of Christians who are more or less affirming of contemporary culture.
- Most people feel immune to the messages of the popular arts because they view them as only "entertainment."
- The popular arts reflect a culture they help create (p. 32). Therefore, it is important for Christians to be prepared to understand and critique the dominant worldview in the popular arts.
- Christians should establish interpretive communities capable of discerning and interpreting popular culture.

Questions:

1. Why do you think Christians are generally more attracted to mainstream films, music, radio, and TV than they are to "Christian" alternatives?
2. An observer of British culture contends that many Christians "look at culture more positively and testify to feeling more stimulation-even spiritual stimulation-from `secular' sources than they do from sources within the evangelical sub-culture" (p. 30). Is this consistent with your own experience? Explain.
3. What, in your opinion, makes a popular artwork "Christian"? (This question that will be taken up in later chapters.)
4. Identify ways in which the popular arts reflect and impact your life.
5. How does your Christian faith influence the way you watch movies, listen to music, and read books?
6. Did you see the blockbuster film Titanic? Discuss the movie, trying to evaluate it from a Christian perspective. (Have someone keep notes for later use.)

Chapter Two: Faith and Culture

Summary:

This chapter addresses a central question: What is culture, and why should Christians be concerned with it? Culture is not simply about reading the right books, knowing the right wine to order with dinner, and being familiar with Beethoven or Monet. According to Scripture, culture represents human responses to God's first and foundational command: "Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it" (Gen. 1:28). That God entrusts ordinary human beings like you and me with the continuing process of creation is an overarching theme in the Bible and a fundamental assumption of a Christian approach to culture. So culture refers to the way that we define and live in God's world. An understanding of what the Bible says about culture offers a justification and means for Christian to be engaged with popular art and culture.

Key Points:

- The Bible is clear that God made everything-visible and invisible-and claims ownership of everything.
- Further, everything was made with a purpose-to serve in God's creation-and so all things are God's servants. (Gen. 1:28; Ps. 119:91).
- To be God's image bearer is to be human, and to be human is to be a cultural agent, carrying on God's creative work by doing culture.
- Culture is a gift from God as well as a religious duty and obligation; we are to delight in and care for the creation.
- Culture refers to the way we define and live in God's world, but after the human Fall in sin, culture is oriented away from God's ends for it.
- Christ's work restores us to our original task as stewards over the creation.
- Symbolizing is a key to living because it is the means by which we establish meanings for all things in God's world.
- The popular arts can show us the meaning of things.
- Because we are commanded by God to form and reform culture, Christians have to be actively

engaged with culture, including popular culture.

Questions:

1. What is culture, and why is it important for Christians to think of themselves as cultural agents, or stewards in God's creation?
2. What is the cultural mandate (p. 37)?
3. How should this biblical understanding of culture and stewardship affect the way we think about the popular arts and culture?
4. "Things" are servants (pp. 38-40). How might this idea affect the way we think about symbolizing and engaging culture?
5. Name some ways you can actively and intentionally fulfill the culture mandate as an individual and as a community.
6. The author suggests that "the popular arts reflect a society that they help to create" (p. 41). What do you think? Does the entertainment media reflect and/or shape society?

Chapter Three: A Christian Worldview

Summary:

The Bible gives us a complex understanding of culture. It encourages believers to engage their culture in positive ways while also providing a framework for critique of that culture. Culture is anchored in faith. To carry out our cultural duties, we have to be looking at things from the perspective of faith. In their own unique way, the popular arts help us to "see." Whether as producers or patrons, Christians have a responsibility to understand this vital means of cultural communication.

As the term implies, a worldview is a kind of window or grid through which we see and experience life in God's good but fallen world. A worldview is rooted in faith insofar as it gives answers to the ultimate questions about the human condition that can only be known through faith. But a worldview is also shaped by personal dynamics, social and cultural environment, and other conditions that may exist in a certain place and time. A worldview can mold the world into a particular kind of place that may or may not reflect the truth about God's created order. That is why a Christian worldview, formed as it is by faith and culture, has to be shaped and tested by Scripture in order to resist the temptation to wrongly appropriate secular beliefs.

Key Points:

- To carry out our cultural duties, we have to be looking at things from the perspective of faith.
- There are at least three aspects of a Christian worldview that are key to cultural engagement:
 - Culture is our common human endeavor. Both the redeemed and unredeemed alike are made in the image of God and share in God's original commission to cultivate the creation.
 - The central human task to administer the potentials of the creation (i.e., the cultural mandate) is corrupted now by sin.
 - As Christians renewed in Christ our task now after the Fall is to work toward the progressive removal of the effects of sin everywhere.
- That Christians draw lines to make distinctions between religious and nonreligious aspects of life is an effect of secularization.

- The term "secular" should not apply to specific activities but to the orientation of how those activities are carried out.
- There is continuity between this life and the new life to come. God will judge the work of our hands-including the popular arts.

Questions:

1. What kinds of things (upbringing, church, events, books, experiences, others) have shaped the development of your worldview?
2. Discuss ways that a worldview might influence the ways that people understanding events like the shootings at Columbine High School?
3. Consider ways that Christians separate life into sacred and secular realms (pp. 49- 50)? What is sacred? Secular? Why?
4. How do you understand Jesus' prayer for believers "to be in the world but not of it"?
5. Discuss this book's view of the new heavens and the new earth. How might this understanding affect our activities in the here and now?
6. While this will be treated more carefully in Chapter 7, give some consideration to how a Christian worldview might give distinction to our engagement with popular art-both in terms of production and criticism.

Chapter Four: Popular Art and Culture

Summary:

Cultural patterns and behaviors are not innate but learned. People communicate their culture by passing on stories, theories, and beliefs from person to person, group to group, and generation to generation. And in our contemporary society, the producers of popular art inform our understanding of culture as much as any other single factor. The popular arts can make our cultural values known to others and invite consideration of them. We can discuss the popular arts as cultural representations or texts that give substance to cultural values and perspectives. As such, they can be "read," interpreted, and evaluated as maps of reality, humanly constructed representations of the world. By considering the popular arts in this way, we approach them as a dramatic conversation that we can take part in as producers, critics, and audience members. So it is that the creation and evaluation of popular art is one way we turn faith into a vision both of and for life.

The popular arts facilitate our cultural conversation by serving four important roles historically associated with art: communicating cultural ideals and values, offering social and cultural criticism, providing social unity, and contributing to the collective memory. These are all good purposes that God brought into existence for the popular arts. Christians cannot ignore these purposes if they want popular art and music to serve God, the church, and the larger human community.

Key Points:

- Culture is communicated through texts, which are human actions, events, and material works that embody meanings that are widely shared (p. 57).
- A culture is like "an ensemble of texts," and we use the term culture, then, to refer to the realm of human activity and its results, both material and nonmaterial (p. 57).
- That a culture reveals what humans believe about "things" shows the close relation between faith and culture.

- Artists draw on their cultural system to make symbolic or artistic maps of the world in which we live. And so one way to begin analyzing the popular arts is to consider them as maps of reality.
- Four important roles for popular art as "maps of reality" are (pp. 59-63):
 - Communicate culture
 - Play the role of social and cultural critic
 - Provide social unity
 - Contribute to our collective memory.
- An artistic vision usually does not appear in an artwork in the form of direct statements, but cultural ideals, beliefs, values, attitudes, and assumptions inform the story, characterization, themes, images, and even artistic style.
- The task of the Christian is to evaluate the vision of popular artists in light of a Christian understanding.

Questions:

1. Discuss the relationship between the Great Commission and the Cultural Mandate.
2. Identify cultural texts that you have encountered that serve as maps of reality. Explain how they might function as "equipment for living" (p. 59)?
3. Using the four roles for popular art considered in this chapter-communicating cultural ideals and values, offering social and cultural criticism, providing social unity, and contributing to the collective memory-create a list of popular artworks that serve in each of these categories. Looking at this list, what does it reveal about our culture (e.g., cherished ideals and values, key beliefs and attitudes, basic assumptions about life, purpose, social and gender roles, and so forth)?
4. "By offering a vision, a popular artwork sets up the possibility for our accepting or criticizing that vision, and an insightful and honest Christian response will often mean affirming certain aspects while rejecting others," the author argues. "Our critical guard sometimes goes down because we expect popular art to entertain us" (p. 64). How can Christians learn to balance being entertained with maintaining a critical posture?
5. In a conversation, a friend argues that all movies are purely for entertainment reasons. How would you respond?

Chapter Five: Reimagining the Popular Arts

Summary:

Christian ideas about popular art have a history and are grounded in beliefs and assumptions about life in God's world. Imagining is part of the process by which we construct meaning-the way we do culture. The capacity of popular art to create imaginative worlds has been a source of controversy in the church for generations, revealing an historic passion in the church that gives us insight into Christian attitudes about popular art today.

At the crux of the church's concern about the popular arts is an intense rivalry that is "derived from the similar-and competing-nature of their appeal." The church and the popular arts both share a common interest in values and meaning; both offer visions of life that can, and often do, conflict. The popular arts are not only wildly entertaining, but also play an important role in shaping people's perceptions and informing attitudes and opinions by offering depictions of life that religious leaders often perceive as rivaling the church's vision.

Two important historical developments that have had a great impact on the popular arts are the similar and competing nature of the church and the arts and the division between high and popular cultures. Understanding these gives us important insights into the nature of Christian attitudes today.

Key Points:

- Participation in the popular arts involves a willing suspension of disbelief.
- The institutions of religion and popular art are both concerned-if for different reasons-with values, meaning, and visions of life.
- Some Christians have a tendency to invest popular art with a spiritual capacity to "get possession of the heart" (pp. 69-71).
- The aesthetic experience is a legitimate part of life in God's world-one that is enriched with creativity and solid critical evaluation.
- High and low are not simply categories for different art forms but a way of thinking about the arts that is inseparable from its historical origins.
 - The ideals, beliefs, and values associated with high culture are entangled with class antagonism and a human-centered desire for perfection.
 - High and popular art have much in common as social practices, and it is difficult to distinguish them based on artistic value.
- While the high arts increasingly grew out of touch with most people, the popular arts assumed roles and functions historically associated with art by providing different, but equally valid, artistic experiences for people.
- There are enough problems with the concept of high art that we should not rely on it too much in trying to understand and re-imagine the popular arts.

Questions:

1. Can you think of a movie, television program, or musical recording that transported you "elsewhere" (p. 67)? Discuss how and why you think this happened?
2. Why did the church denounce theater and film? What implications does this approach have for popular art and culture?
3. Describe some of the similarities between movie theaters, concert halls, and church sanctuaries. Can you draw comparisons between the experiences people have at church and a popular art venue that help us understand the "similar-and competing-nature of their appeal" (pp. 68-69)?
4. What are some of the problems with "a strictly evangelistic understanding of art" (p. 70)?
5. The author suggests, "When someone says, 'That song ministers to me,' I think they are trying to explain an artistic experience as a spiritual one" (p. 70). Discuss this and consider ways that Christians might learn to think differently about engaging popular art based on the understanding of culture presented in earlier chapters.
6. Why is confusing art and religion particularly problematic for Christians (p. 75)? (Look at pages 71, 74-76, and also page 13 in the Introduction.)
7. On what basis would a Christian critic write, "movies are not art" (p. 72)?
8. Why are distinctions between high and popular art problematic and unhelpful for developing a Christian approach to popular art and culture?
9. Discuss ways the division between high and low culture and the "spiritualizing" of art have affected Christian attitudes and also the roles and character of popular art.

Chapter Six: State of the Art

Summary:

In the Introduction, the author highlights three different approaches to popular art and culture that Christians employ. This chapter examines the appropriation model, which has largely become the accepted "Christian" one, not just among Christians, but in the mainstream culture as well. As an adjective to describe popular art, "Christian" has come to mean two things: overt religious themes and appropriateness for the "family" audience. Along with a dogged belief that the entertainment media somehow be used for evangelism, the penchant for sentimentality and the demographics of the "family" market have greatly influenced the character of "Christian" entertainment.

The successes and failures of "Christian" alternatives in the popular arts over the past few decades have raised questions about the nature and character of "Christian" art. Every artist has a life vision that permeates his or her creative work as an imaginative model both of and for reality. Considering "the world behind a work of art" points to the perspectival nature of popular art by showing that artworks represent a belief system and contemporary values—a worldview and cultural bearing. Regardless of the artist's faith convictions, popular artworks examine life in a fallen world that is at once hostile to and in search of God. So Christians need to have "eyes of faith" to offer honest portrayals of the human experience and be able to discern and evaluate the life perspectives present in the popular arts.

Key Points:

- "Christian" popular art has come to mean two things: overt religious themes and appropriateness for the "family" audience.
- Popular art can be used for confessional purposes, but problems arise when these are perceived to be the only legitimate reasons for Christian involvement (p. 81).
 - Since Christ is Lord over all things, popular artworks produced by Christians should affirm and demonstrate God's sovereign rule over all things.
 - Insofar as Christians do not create popular art and music giving artistic insight into every aspect of life from a Christian perspective, that is evidence of secularization.
- "Family-friendly" generally has a moral meaning—no explicit sex, foul language, or excessive violence—but it also represents a specific market demographic.
- Dealing with matters of artistic quality and morality, free expression and market demands is essential to developing a Christian approach to the popular arts (p. 85).
- Since every artist has a life vision that permeates his or her creative work as a map of reality, we can analyze the "world behind a work of art" to see how it measures up to a Christian vision (p. 86).
- Emphasizing the matter of perspective in popular art testifies to the paramount importance of faith convictions for every activity and aspect of life.
- Character and approach to life should distinguish Christian popular art and criticism.

Questions:

1. Discuss Amy Grant's "crossover" into the mainstream music market and the ensuing controversy among Christians. How would you evaluate these in terms of what you have learned from this book?
2. Are all "family" films worth watching? If not, what separates worthwhile family films from those that are not?
3. Does removing objectionable content make a film better? Conversely, does including objectionable

content make a film better? Can Christians make or watch R-rated films?

4. To one degree or another, Christian popular art will be determined by marketing and demographic reports. To what extent should we allow these to be the driving force for Christian productions? What role should a biblically directed vision play in shaping the nature and character of "Christian" art? Which of these is most important?
5. If "Christian" popular art is designed to appeal to the broadest market—primarily the tastes and values of white, middle-class American women—in order to sell, how effective is it as a cultural representation of the ideals and values of the church at large?
6. The author writes, "Christian artists should not just be singing that Jesus is a light unto our paths; they also need to create popular artworks that show how God's Word is a light and direction for our journey in life" (p. 81). Consider how Christian productions and criticism might serve the church and our neighbors in this way?
7. Based on your reading of previous chapters, what are some legitimate reasons you can think of for Christian engagement with popular art?
8. Discuss the concluding statement of this chapter: "Showing the perspectival nature of popular art can turn the tables on the mainstream culture by demonstrating that all art and music reveals life perspectives that are ultimately driven by moral and religious convictions and can be critically evaluated along these lines" (p. 89).

Chapter Seven: A Christian Cultural Landscape

Summary:

Popular artworks can explore the human condition by offering images and stories that resonate with our lives by entertaining widespread concerns and interests. Making faith the issue tends to turn popular art into religious propaganda. Instead, faith should serve as the context for artistic engagement. As Christians, we should judge the quality of popular art not by its confessional appearance (which can often be very superficial) but by its artistic excellence and life perspective.

The central concern of this chapter is to unfold a Biblical vision into a cultural landscape, a map of reality for artists, critics, and patrons to use in their engagement with popular art. While it is difficult to list all of the qualities of a good film, album, or TV show, there are some guideposts that point toward a solid work of popular art that employs a Christian perspective.

First, by inventing imaginative worlds, artists can affirm that there is more to reality than what we experience with our senses. Second, since believing people inhabit this landscape, faith is a natural dimension of this world, however much it becomes entangled with cultural practices and other beliefs. Third, characters should be like people in real life: wonderfully complicated and believably flawed and real. This complexity should show how people wrestle with the good and evil that resides within them. Without resorting to gratuitous or exploitative depictions, Christians should not shy away from dealing with the reality of evil in favor of sentimentalism. Finally, a Christian cultural landscape will show that all people need a source of redemption that comes from outside of themselves. Christian artists, critics, and patrons alike should employ these guideposts as we seek to be faithful in our engagement with popular art.

Key Points:

- The contours of a Christian cultural landscape are made up of cultural meanings: ideals, beliefs, values, attitudes, and assumptions that represent what it is like for people to live in God's good, but fallen, world (p. 93). The basic features are:
 - God is at work in the world, and there exists an invisible spiritual realm.
 - Believing people inhabit this landscape, and faith is integral to all of life.

- Human sin is real, and evil exists.
- God offers forgiveness and the possibility of redemption.
- This understanding of God's presence in the world points to two avenues for artistic presentations: irony and the unreliable narrator.
- Christian popular art will affirm that a wide range of beliefs exists and that faith convictions can be entangled with many different cultural patterns.
- When happy endings are contrived and fabricated, Christians should be critical of them-artistically and in terms of the worldview they represent-for they tend to trivialize human experience instead of enlarging it.
- The best popular artworks communicate not by explicitly stating so much as displaying ideals, beliefs, values, attitudes, and assumptions.

Questions:

1. Discuss ways the Christian cultural landscape mapped out in this chapter can be used to evaluate popular artworks.
2. The author writes, "A Christian landscape will somehow account for God at work in the world, suggesting the mysterious entanglement of God's providential care and human machinations" (pp. 94-5). Discuss representations of the supernatural in popular art. How can popular artworks persuasively account for God's presence in the world?
3. As Christians, can we take spiritual implications out of "spiritual" depictions-like the Force in Star Wars, for example-as being a kind of reference to Christianity? Are we justified in doing so?
4. What is irony and an "unreliable narrator" (pp. 97-98)?
5. What makes movies like *Silence of the Lambs* or *Basic Instinct* so appealing-even to Christians?
6. The author argues, "An honest artistic representation of God's world in popular art will include images and metaphors of chaos, injustice, pain, suffering and alienation, for they are all part of living in a fallen world" (p. 101). But many Christians tend to avoid and even criticize such depictions in popular art. If we live in a fallen world, how are we to make the conflict between good and evil real?
7. Discuss how Christian insights might contribute to an understanding of good and evil? What might distinguish "Christian" portrayals of good and evil in popular art?
8. As one writer explains, "while it is true that human beings cannot reverse their situation, or in any way create their own redemption, the very helplessness of their position evokes a search for the grace which alone can solve their predicament" (p. 103). Consider popular artworks that affirm this and others in which people bring about their own salvation. For which category do the illustrations come easier?
9. Discuss ways that forgiveness and redemption are portrayed in popular art?
10. Why do people-Christians included-want, even demand happy endings? What should Christians make of our cultural obsession with living happily ever after?

Chapter Eight: Hollywood's Cultural Landscape

Summary:

Americans are sentimental, and at least since the nineteenth century they have favored melodramas. To one degree or another, Christians are part of their culture and can be expected to share the

sentimental tastes of their neighbors. But as noted earlier, it is the cumulative effect of repeated viewing of the world portrayed in the popular arts that wields the power to persuade over time. Consequently, it is important for Christians to have a critical understanding of the mainstream culture as it is represented in popular art. For a number of reasons the melodramatic vision is problematic from a Christian perspective. It creates a simplistic view of life and the human condition, asserts that humans can solve their problems on their own, and also overemphasizes emotion as the ultimate judge of situations.

This chapter deals with several key themes that pervade American popular culture by focusing on the classical Hollywood film. As much as any popular art form, the classical Hollywood film shows that there is a common faith behind representations in American popular art—a system of meanings and values related to the individual hero, religion, gender roles, sex, violence, and materialism.

Key Points:

- American melodrama depicts the battle between good and evil in sharp and contrasting terms; evildoers are destroyed and the virtuous rewarded.
- For a number of reasons, the melodramatic vision is problematic from a Christian perspective (pp. 110-12).
- The classical Hollywood film is driven by a cause-and-effect narrative centered on the actions of main characters who utilize self-reliance in making the world a better place (pp.112-13).
 - Hollywood heroes are idealized and identified with certain traits, the most important being self-reliance and goal-achievement.
 - Action and problems introduced in the beginning are fully resolved by the end.
- What the author calls the "Wizard of Oz Syndrome" is a very humanistic approach to life, with characters on a journey to self-realization. The key to success is believing in yourself; American heroes are rugged individuals who live by a code of self-reliance.
- Hollywood films exaggerate individualism and deal with social issues by reducing them to personal matters.
- Although most Americans see religion as a personal and private matter, "living right" and worshipping God "in my own way" give priority to American values associated with individualism and not to the authority of Scripture or a church tradition.
- The belief that God is not the source of redemption, but "some magical outside assistance," is a cultural synthesis of American individualism and Christianity.

Questions:

1. Identify the key features of the melodramatic world (pp. 109-10). Why do think this "world behind" mainstream movies and television shows is so popular?
2. How should Christians respond to melodrama? Explain why the melodramatic vision runs against the grain of the main tenets of the Christian faith.
3. What are the basic characteristics of the classical Hollywood film (pp. 112-14)? How might these features work against portrayals of a "Christian cultural landscape"?
4. What do you make of the "Wizard of Oz Syndrome" (p. 114)? Do you think this motif is as prevalent in Hollywood movies as the author suggests?
5. To what extent do you think people believe they should be healthy, wealthy, and successful because they deserve it for being "good"?
6. The author maintains that "the cultural landscape of the Hollywood film clearly exaggerates individualism, favoring individual over corporate or institutional solutions to problems and conflicts"

(p. 116). How might such portrayals distort our understanding of similar events in the real world?

7. Think about recent films you've seen. How do they appeal to your existing stereotypes? How are different races portrayed? Gender? Physical appearance? Can "good" men and women be physically unattractive?
8. Generate a list of movies and consider ways they affirm or oppose the characteristics highlighted in this chapter-the classical Hollywood formula, melodrama, individualism, and religion.

Chapter Nine: Sex, Violence, and Materialism

Summary:

In the previous chapter, we began to look at the ideals, beliefs, and assumptions that make up Hollywood's cultural landscape. To be good critics, Christians have to be able to discern the cultural values that inform characterizations, drive stories, and determine acceptable resolutions. We also have to be able to evaluate these according to Christian principles. This chapter continues in the same vein as chapter 8 by examining portrayals of violence, gender stereotypes, sex, and materialism in popular art.

Hollywood films may affirm a national mythology that gives the appearance of consensus, and their melodramatic appeal makes them charming and seemingly harmless, but Christians have to adopt a critical posture toward them. Christian critical discernment requires us to become more aware of the sentimentalized cultural values that run against the grain of faith, including self-interest and self-reliance, a lust for power, violent resolutions to problems, materialism, stereotypes based on race, sexual orientation, gender, or disability, and even a humanistic outlook.

Key Points:

- Violence is central to American mythology as a means of justice, retribution, and as salvation from evil; however, while the Bible depicts evil and violence as real, it also shows them at odds with the best of human experience.
- Hollywood's cultural landscape presents a polarized view of men and women.
 - The ideal male is a virile, strong, unrestrained, and unattached man of adventure.
 - The ideal woman is a wife, mother, and a mainstay of hearth and home.
 - Christians should be critical of these misconceptions of God's male and female image bearers, for they distort our identities, relationships, and roles for service in God's kingdom.
- Christian treatments of sex will situate the variety of sexual experiences in the proper context of human love and marriage, while rejecting the practices of lust and promiscuity.
- The Bible warns against trusting in materialism as a means of salvation, while also presenting a more complex understanding of poverty than the tenets of self-reliant individualism allow.
- Even though we are overrun with popular artworks that indulge evil, Christians should resist the temptation to try to balance them out with portraits of life on the bright side-a penchant that bears little resemblance to reality.

Questions:

1. What cultural assumptions about sex, gender, and materialism are woven into the story of *Pretty Woman*? What is the nature of redemption for Edward and Vivian in this film?
2. What place does violence hold in American mythology and the Hollywood landscape? How should

we think about this as Christians?

3. Using the current movie rating system, how would you rate biblical stories like those mentioned on page 124? Consider others from both the Old and New Testaments (e.g., Judges 19-20 or Mt. 27).
4. How is violence in the Bible different from that which we see in Hollywood films?
5. Describe gender stereotypes prevalent in films, TV programs, and music videos and evaluate them from a Christian perspective.
6. Discuss this statement on page 126: "The Hollywood cultural landscape represents a polarized view of men and women that is riddled with contradictions."
7. How does the Bible challenge these gender roles and stereotypes?
8. Discuss the ambivalence in American attitudes about sex.
9. Discuss this statement on page 129: "Perhaps in reaction against our culture's preoccupation with sex, Christians draw on the Victorian sentimental idea of romantic love: the belief in a love that is pure but passionless, beautiful and eternal but close to sexless."
10. "While Christians do well to recoil from our culture's obsession with sex," the author contends, "we should not abandon it as a topic for artistic treatment or criticism" (p. 130). Is there a proper place for the erotic in popular art? If so, how should it appear in a Christian cultural landscape (pp. 130-32)?
11. Spend some time talking about a Christian perspective on sex.
12. Can you think of popular artworks that treat sex and violence with appropriateness?
13. Is sex and violence artistically necessary? Can art do without them?
14. How does the general treatment of materialism in the Hollywood landscape compare with a Christian understanding of wealth and poverty?
15. As Christians, what should we make of the assumptions about materialism that are so prevalent in Hollywood films?

Chapter Ten: The Virtue of Christian Criticism

Summary:

Much of what has come to be thought of as "Christian" criticism is distinguished by either confessional or moralistic concerns. Such an approach makes faith-based criticism seem largely irrelevant to contemporary discourse and does little to help Christians think about their faith as a vision for life that should be used to understand and evaluate popular art. To overcome this overly simplistic approach, this chapter suggests a kind of criticism based on three interrelated issues: 1) the roles or uses of popular art, 2) the perspective of popular art and criticism, and 3) the construction of popular art.

Simply being a believer does not mean that we will create and evaluate art in a way that is characteristically "Christian." While that may be true to a certain extent, such an attitude tends to diminish the effects of sin and the complex entanglement of cultural beliefs and values that are part of the Christian struggle with cultural engagement. And yet, we can also work toward a redeemed culture not only by telling stories, writing songs, and fashioning images that represent Christian ways of understanding things, but also by offering critical evaluation of popular artworks that exhibit Christian convictions and perspectives.

Key Points:

- Doing criticism need not diminish our enjoyment of popular art, but promises to enhance it and make it more rewarding, especially as we become better at it.

- For many Christian critics the paramount standard for evaluation is the confessional appearance of an artwork, an approach that oversimplifies Christian criticism.
- Christian moralists might issue warnings against artworks in terms of levels of profanity, explicit sex, or violence, but this critical approach does not get much beyond the most superficial level of analysis and can even lead to distorted interpretations.
- Christians should direct their energies to developing a critique of the value and perspective that artists give to the issues of life, the significance and quality of their endeavors, and the way that various popular artworks can be used to deepen our understanding of God's world (p. 142).
- Philippians 4:8 suggests an attitude and way of looking at things; in short, a perspective.
- Deciding on the roles that the popular arts serve is the beginning of determining how to evaluate them.
- Even though perspective is vital to a Christian evaluation of the popular arts, we cannot disregard the artwork itself, its artistic qualities, benefits, and delights.
- Christian criticism needs to account for both how and what a popular artwork communicates, for it is through artistic elements that popular artworks transform the external world in ways that engage our reason, memory, emotions, and imagination.

Questions:

1. What are the limitations of confessional and moralistic approaches to criticism described in this chapter (pp. 139-42)?
2. "A Christian critique of popular art will criticize the gratuitous inclusion of profanity, sex or violence," the author asserts, while also asking, "But are there not appropriate uses of these elements in popular art?" (p. 141). Respond to this question.
3. Name and discuss elements that are crucial to a Christian criticism of the popular arts.
4. The author asserts, "If Christians are to think about 'whatever is true,' we will have to confront the realities of our fallenness all the while seeing these as distortions in God's world" (p. 143). Give some consideration to the treatment of Philippians 4:8 and discuss the possibilities of popular artists creating depictions of God's good but fallen world along these lines.
5. The author shows that "it is through artistic elements that popular artworks transform the external world in ways that engage our reason, memory, emotions, and imagination" (p. 148). Consider ways that you can become more "media literate."

Conclusion, Appendix 1 and 2

Summary:

Like anything else, learning to do Christian criticism of popular art takes some time, effort and practice. The "Conclusion" offers a three-part method for analyzing a popular artwork: Subject, Content, and Evaluation. While these categories distinguish aspects of an analysis, in practice they are all of a piece; discussion of subject, content, and evaluation most often take place all at once as you move from one aspect of the artwork to another. Hopefully this kind of approach will also help you become a more responsible Christian critic, better equipped to serve your neighbor in this arena of human affairs.

"Appendix 1" is meant to be a resource and is filled with an array of questions you can use to ask when evaluating particular artworks. Not all of these questions will apply to any one particular artwork. Every work makes certain assumptions and addresses issues in particular ways, each requiring a different angle of inquiry and investigation before making an evaluation. Deciding which ones to pursue is

part of the critic's task. Selecting and addressing some of the most important concerns as they are related to an individual work will help you identify the subject and lead you into a discussion of content and evaluation.

"Appendix 2" provides an example of this kind of criticism that goes into a little more depth by looking at the highest grossing film of all time-Titanic. This treatment of Titanic is not meant to be the definitive analysis, and certainly not the final word, but a sketch of key points to illustrate ways of doing criticism. My review intentionally draws from themes and material covered in the chapters of this book. (You might compare this analysis with your earlier discussion in the context of Chapter 1.)

I hope that these tools and the chapters in this book help you develop an informed Christian outlook that will enable you to stand in judgment of the worlds that popular artists create.

Activities and Resources

Activities:

- As a group, select a film, television program, and/or musical recording that you would like to discuss throughout the course of your study of this book. You may agree on one or several, but it is important that everyone become familiar with these so that you can use them as a common illustration and basis for discussion. While Eyes Wide Open offers many illustrations, focusing on selected popular artworks and revisiting them while considering new topics is a productive avenue into the ideas presented in different chapters and also an effective way to develop your own critical skills for evaluations of the popular arts.
- Consider going together as a group to a movie or concert or watching a television program. Then schedule a follow-up discussion either immediately afterwards or on another date in the near future. Apply the three-part method for analysis (subject, content, evaluation) outlined in the conclusion and incorporate questions from the list in Appendix 1.
- Youth, adult groups, high school or college classes can take on as a project the making of a short video, for example, that tells a story dealing with some aspects of school, church, or college life. This collaborative effort might include scriptwriting, acting, directing, music composition, film shooting and editing, and so forth. A similar process can be used to create a concert performance and/or recording.

Web Sites:

- Rotten Tomatoes
<http://www.rottentomatoes.com>
- The Internet Movie Database
<http://www.imdb.com>
- Hollywood Jesus
<http://www.hollywoodjesus.com>
- Culture Watch
<http://www.culturewatch.net>
- Reelviews: James Berardinelli Sees Film
<http://movie-reviews.colossus.net>
- The Center for Parent/Youth Understanding
<http://www.cpyu.org>
- Faithworks

<http://www.faithworks.com>

- New York Times on Film
<http://www.nytimes.com/library/film/indexfilm.html>

Books:

- Dancing in the Dark: Youth, Popular Culture and the Electronic Media
By: Roy Anker, et al
- Art and Soul: Signposts for Christian Arts
By: Hilary Brand, Adrienne Chaplin
- Religion and Popular Culture in America
By: David Bruce Forbes, Jeffrey H. Madan
- Reel Spirituality: Theology and Film in Dialogue
By: Robert K. Johnston
- Seeing and Believing: Religion and Values in Movies
By: Richard J. Miles
- At a Theater Near You: Screen Entertainment from a Christian Perspective
By: Thomas Patterson
- Pop Culture Wars: Religion and the Role of Entertainment in American Life
By: William D. Romanowski
- Communicating for Life: Christian Stewardship in Community and Media
By: Quentin J. Schultze
- Hollywood Dreams and Biblical Stories
By: Bernard Brandon Scott
- On Being Human: Imagining God in the Modern World
By: Calvin Seerveld
- Rainbows for a Fallen World: Aesthetic Life and the Artistic Task
By: Calvin Seerveld
- Art in Action: Toward a Christian Aesthetic
By: Nicholas Wolterstorff