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Talking Back: The Morality of Self Preservation

Henry Griffin

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Talking Back

The Morality of Self Preservation

To Maryln Beker
By Henry Griffin

The Hollywood value system (too easy an oxymoron) didn’t come about by design. It evolved, as a natural function of economy. The movie business is, at its core, Darwinian. Not immoral, but amoral. The “greed is good” mentality is a symptom of the constant fight for survival by all film artists, even the greatest of whom has no job security. I’ve crossed paths with many successful producers, executives and studio heads. Some are smarter than others, and they exhibit varying degrees of class, grace and, for want of a better word, ethics. The only attribute they all share: the ability to avoid getting fired. There’s that idea again, survival. Movies don’t disappoint because of a vast conspiracy to lower the intelligence of the American public in an attempt to erode traditional Christian values, but rather, because their creative process smacks of a dire attempt at self-preservation. Movies play toward the basest interests of the American consumer in a desperate plea for money and attention. So the question of why Hollywood doesn’t behave more ethically seems at first to be totally irrelevant.

People often ask me why the general quality of big Hollywood movies seems so low. My theory holds that the studios are now multinational corporations, who conceive of an eight-figure-budget blockbuster as the tent pole of an international marketing barrage, in which the movie is little more than a large-format advertisement for a variety of merchandise (record albums, lunchboxes, fast food restaurants, any number of products who have paid for space within the movie), the success of which will support and defray the enormous cost of the project. If that sounds too depressing, think glass-half-full about it. It isn’t a dark age for cinemtic storytelling. It’s a golden age of marketing. The studios have become so good at advertising that they no longer even require a good product.

God wants you to buy soap.

I’m not going to scapegoat the advertising industry, by the way. At Loyola University, they taught film studies and advertising in the same school. Communications. And for that matter, my mother, a devout Catholic and author of an armful of volumes of inspirational theology, spent her career in the advertising industry. She wrote commercials for Ivory Soap and Pert Shampoo, and wouldn’t stand for the idea that selling products was in itself immoral. God wants you to have a job, and to do it ethically. For that matter, God probably wants you to buy soap.

So it didn’t seem at all problematic when I dreamed about being the next Spielberg. I made great movies, and happened to earn great piles of money off of them. How morally questionable could it be? I broke into the business at 26, and quickly realized the truth of screenwriter William Goldman’s notorious dictum about the industry: “Nobody knows anything.” The rule is there are no rules, as far as making a hit film occurs. But, like any jungle, it has laws.

Here’s one way that it works. Say a producer brings “the perfect script” to a studio. By perfect, I mean “Aliens versus Vampires” or “Die Hard on Temptation Island.” The perfect script is a script which evokes the perfect poster, a marketing campaign, a slew of ancillary marketing opportunities, and maybe even an opening weekend. Say this script shows up in August. The studio determines that this high-concept movie is perfect for the following Halloween. That gives them just fourteen months to go from script to screen. Once they schedule time for post-production and special effects, it becomes clear that their sixteen-week shoot has to begin in November. That leaves three months to hire a director, cast the thing, scout locations and make the production a reality. What it doesn’t leave time for is getting the script in good shape.

What gets a script sold isn’t necessarily good writing, but nail-
ing the idea. When they don't have enough time to fine tune the artistic vision, they throw script doctors (disclosure: I am one of these) at a script, to "punch up" the comedy, "ramp up" the tension, to "clarify the arcs" and "polish the thought lines." These doctors can only do so much for a screenplay hurtling toward production at the speed of a million dollars a week. By springtime, there's an ad campaign, one designed to sell the smell of the steak, rather than the steak itself, which won't be ready until October. The American public gets excited by a catch phrase, a movie star's screaming face, a glimpse of the monster.

Then it's Halloween. The movie opens on 2000 screens across the country. Lukewarm reviews get edited into complimentary blurbs for the poster. Packed houses for a week or so, until the word gets around that this perfect idea for a movie turns out to be laughably bad. Bad writing, wooden performances, passable special effects. But it was Halloween, and before it it's all over, they made a hundred million or so. Everyone involved is a little embarrassed, of course. Nobody prefers to get rich doing something stupid. But that's how the industry works. You get rich, or you get fired. So they drown their sorrows in a new Lexus, then move on. Survival instinct plus low personal accountability equals lowbrow culture.

Don't get me wrong. I've made a tidy living off of the lunchbox mafia for seven years. The difference between a writer and a screenwriter is something like the difference between a dancer and an exotic dancer. We go through similar motions, requiring the same muscles and discipline. But we're undeniably going for a bigger dollar.

It's a wacky business, not quite like any other. For example, the worse the job is, the more they'll pay you to do it. When I hear about Keanu Reeves getting twenty million dollars to star in some movie, my first reaction is, "He must really not have wanted to do it." He probably appeared in Much Ado About Nothing for lunch money, because he knew it was going to be a good film. Great screenwriter by the way. Conversely, the better the film is, the less likely that anyone in it was overpaid.

If I take an inventory to find some proof that 13 continuous years of Jesuit education prepared me to make moral decisions in the field, I think about the gigs I didn't take. Not to sound self-congratulatory, but I turned down a few paydays, convinced that I couldn't take a studio's money if I didn't think I could actually make their script better. I can think back to the time I turned down enough money to buy a small house, because I knew I couldn't look myself in the mirror if I was just doing it for the money.

Something overrode my survival instinct, something I probably picked up at Loyola. Because I think getting rich doing bad work is immoral. I worked on "Home Alone with a mouse," "Forrest Gump with a parrot," and "Stand By Me with talking penguins," and was compensated handsomely in each case. But I needed to feel that these movies would ultimately make people smile. It was implicit in my mentality. Without it, I couldn't live with myself. So, the ethics I've been ingrained with serve as a spiritual survival instinct. And morality is ultimately also about self-preservation.