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MORE THAN A MOVIE: THE PLACE OF ETHICS IN THE ART AND BUSINESS OF MEDIA, INFORMATION AND ENTERTAINMENT

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**More Than A Movie: The Place of Ethics in the Art and Business of Media,
Information and Entertainment**

Synopsis:

Where do ethics and ethical considerations fall, and where should they fall, in the creation of media, information programming and entertainment?

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If one believes that filmed entertainment is merely that ... entertainment, possessed of no lasting effects on the audience's long-term psyche, then one need not be overly concerned with issues of ethics in Media, Information and Entertainment. If this is your position, you would also have to reconcile yourself to the fact that there are literally several thousand studies over the course of the past 50 years that conclude otherwise. I would also disagree with you rather vehemently.

In fact, there is an almost overwhelming case to be made that filmed Media, Information and Entertainment, taken as a whole, is the most powerful persuasive and educative force on the planet. Anyone who is a parent these days can likely tell stories of how difficult it is to keep their Tween and Teenage children away from either the television, the iPad, smart phone, Xbox or Playstation. Children spend far more time engaging with games and screened content on a weekly basis than they do engaging with their peers, or heaven forefend, their parents.

Now, if one accepts this position, even if only for the sake of argument during the time it takes you to absorb this paper, then the question of ethics would seem to be rather crucial. If we are influencing the audience, in what ways are we influencing it? ... If we are teaching, *what* are we teaching?

So, to the threshold questions. Why ethics? Why now?

The largest, fastest growing and arguably most persuasive export of the United States is not aerospace, military technology or potato chips. It is media: film, television, video, webisodes, computer games, music, music videos, even advertisements, taken together. American media has become, for better or worse, a pervasive international ambassador, bringing (many would say forcing) American values, attitudes, fashions and trends to the far reaches of the globe. This became embarrassingly real for me when I had the pleasure of visiting Iquitos, Peru on my way to a trip down the Amazon River. The only way to reach Iquitos at the time was by air or boat from the Amazon. There were no roads into the town. There was very little in the way of electric lighting or running water except for the river itself. Yet there was “Baywatch,” blaring from the ancient TV in the only downtown watering hole. Needless to say, the Peruvian concept of America, at least in the upper reaches of the Amazon, was somewhat skewed as to those of us who were *not* LA County lifeguards.

The people who create media are holding the reins of a very powerful tool, capable of influencing on a visceral as well as an intellectual level worldwide.

As such, we who create, produce, market and distribute media, collectively, need to be aware of certain realities.

For our purposes, it is enough to question whether the sort of global access and power creators have to influence people brings with it any ethical responsibility. Because so many people consume media and entertainment product, should we, as creators, have to exercise care as to the messages, intended or inadvertent, sent into the world embedded in our product.

This all sounds like more than many of us signed up for when we chose to enter the field: “We are not teachers, we are artists,” or “we are business people” I hear you cry.

Live with it! Sadly, this is our blessing and our curse. Even a casual look around will illustrate that our creations, our content, does in fact teach, even if that is not the intention.

I have spent over thirty years in the motion picture and television production business, prior to and concurrent with my career in academia. Throughout, I have seen many things that make me believe that our industry is filled with many good people working in an often deeply flawed system, as well as a very few deeply flawed people (as is true in all industries) for whom Alcatraz would have been the ideal system.

I came to the conclusion long ago that we, as an industry, must think more clearly about what we are doing, and about what we're teaching those coming up behind us. We tend to get caught up in the business aspects of our art, which in today's world is natural, unfortunately. Money drives all, often, although not always, at the expense of art, ideas or the more noble angels of our nature, to paraphrase Mr. Lincoln. We also tend to get so inundated that we too often do things the way they have been done by others simply to save time or money. These are the areas in which the flaws in the system can cause the most harm.

We should consider the broader effects of what we put out into the world, not just the immediate rewards. This may sound a bit odd to an audience of artistic or business-oriented people. However, we do not have the luxury of those in many industries to simply rivet our eyes on the bottom line. We influence society with our work to an enormous degree. We teach and socialize children. We present the United States to the world and help mold the world's values, for good or for ill.

We should attempt to think ethically about our work and consider the responsibility we have and the power we wield as media makers, while still being passionate about our First Amendment freedoms. In other words, with reach and impact comes responsibility.

Some time ago, I decided to put some of these ideas in writing. [More Than A Movie: Ethics In Entertainment](#) (Westview Press, 2000) was the result. It is, to my knowledge, still one of the very few books about this topic written by a practicing industry insider, as

opposed to an outside critic. I wholeheartedly believed the book would sell only the number of copies my mother could afford to buy. However, the book is currently in its seventh printing, which speaks *not* to the quality of the book or to my witty repartee and pithy prose, but to a certain need for a basic, practical discussion of these issues that is not filled with either vituperation for the sins of the media, nor with words like “normative,” “descriptive,” “axiology,” and so on. A follow-up volume on the ethics of the business of entertainment is due out eventually.

Strange the way things happen, but the book led to an opportunity to put these ideas into practice by creating the Film and Media Production Programs at Arizona State University. That program was a challenge to create -- it not only teaches students *how* to turn the cameras on, but *why* to turn them on. All of the coursework in the program (over 40 courses in two majors) is grounded, at least in part, on principles of ethical decision-making. Our students needed to examine themselves and the choices they made in their media projects. They were free to create any type of content they chose, as long as they had actively engaged in a decision-making process rather than simply taking the path of least resistance.

This was to inculcate the idea that the decisions we make in the everyday pursuit of media, information and entertainment creation have repercussions and should not be taken lightly.

When I left the program at the end of 2013, some 514 students were majoring in the two degrees that formed the core of the program. Again, this is a testament to some need on the part of these students for something beyond button pushing in service of the same old ideas.

The overall consideration of ethics goes far beyond the panacea of “tell stories that matter.” Good stories, of course, are a central element, but beyond creating a compelling story, we perhaps should consider issues such as the potential effects of portrayals of violence and substance abuse, easy stereotyping in writing, directing or casting, relying exclusively on special effects or what some term “shock and roll” at the expense of story.

Let’s shift from “Why ethics?” to “Why Now?” for just a bit.

So imagine you were going to take a snapshot of where we are on a continuum of sex and violence in the media just as an example.

A great many people think there is far too much violence in the media today. You may or may not agree. My guess is that, if you are not in the entertainment industry and are over the age of 25, you probably agree with this sentiment, at least periodically. However, one thing seems certain. There is more violence, more sex, more drugs – in short, more everything than there was in our parents’ generation or their parents’ generation. After all, it’s pretty likely that if you were to screen the movie *SAW* for your

grandmother, she would be horrified to the point of attempting to hurt you for subjecting her to the film.

In 1972, the film *THE GODFATHER* was considered so violent that one reviewer characterized the film as “incessantly and explicitly violent ... The violence, I had better repeat, is violent and graphic ...” (Champlin, Charles. *Los Angeles Times*, March 19, 1972).

Now if you show the movie *THE GODFATHER* to a college-aged audience these days, as I have done on a number of occasions, they do not seem phased by the violence at all. In fact, with the sole exception of the infamous horse’s head scene – and this has less to do with violence than cruelty to animals, which many of them ARE sensitive to – they find the film quite tame on the violence continuum.

Given our reviewer’s comments in 1972 – not that long ago, really – what this indicates is that the audience’s tolerance for graphic portrayals of violence has increased and the moral horror or outrage induced by seeing this violence has lessened through exposure. I suppose some *could* make the argument that these kids have seen more violence in the real world and have therefore become inured to it. However, the argument does not wash. A number of the people in the audience in 1972 were undoubtedly members of The Greatest Generation that won World War II. Not exactly an audience unused to violence. Also, as the government is wont to point out, actual violent crime in the United States has been on a steady downward trend for the last several decades (with certain

periodic upticks, but an overall strong downward trend). Federal Bureau of Investigations, U.S. Department of Justice, *Uniform Crime Report: 2012*. So, it must be the material itself.

It seems quite clear that the material has become more challenging on the violence continuum over time. The same can, of course, be said for portrayals of sex. Currently, everything is up on the screen and little is left to the imagination, even sometimes in so-called family movies.

Now, if it is the case that portrayals of violence in the media are getting, well, more violent, we have a potential issue. Such trends rarely reverse themselves. Certainly, the trend of ratcheting up the violence does not give any sign of reversing. That means, as we continue forward, the continuum flows ever more violently. If this is the case, we are forced to wonder where we will be decades hence. Remember, the continuum has only been flowing in one direction – upward, in the direction of more violence, less left to the imagination.

One theory for this one-way roller coaster ride is what I term the “Rule of 10%.”

Someone, we’ll call her filmmaker X, comes up with a new idea for showing violence in a way that has never been shown before to a mainstream audience. So, let’s posit that she was the one to first come up with what is now sometimes called “torture porn.” That’s right, it is now common enough to have become an actual sub-genre. Our old friend *SAW*

and its ilk again. The entire purpose of these films is to shock, disgust and frighten you by torturing the film's young and attractive cast, seemingly for no reason other than to show their agonies, struggles and gruesome deaths. Filmmaker X is the darling who has invented this concept and given us the first of the films to showcase this idea.

When Filmmaker X hits box office gold, the first reaction of studios and producers everywhere is MORE, we need to do it again. "Look at the money that film made ... let's do another!" Now, we begin to have our problem. While one may not have liked the first of these films, it was a relatively original idea and it did do well at the box office. You could say that it was an "original." But now, everyone else is trying to copy "the formula" that made the first one successful, and this seldom works for long. Those forced to sit through "*Book of Shadows: Blair Witch 2*" (2000, Dir. Joe Berlinger) will recognize that lightning cannot always be captured in the bottle a second, let alone a fifteenth or sixteenth time.

So, the clones of the original begin to come out, showing violence in much the same way as Filmmaker X. After a time, the audience becomes inured to the violence (both amount and style) in the clones and sequels. They get bored. They have seen it all before, usually several times. Box office decreases or, worse, the films go straight to Netflix or Blu-ray with no theatrical release. This cloning is not a phenomenon limited to violent films. However, in some significant ways, it is quite acute when discussing our violence continuum.

Now, in order to recapture the interest of the audience, their allegiance and their almighty box office dollar, Filmmaker Y, the next filmmaker down the pike, has to raise the stakes and provide something new. Sadly, this inevitably means ratcheting up the violence quotient. So, Filmmaker Y ups the violence level by 10%. This thrills the audience since it's new, and audience allegiance is recaptured. Then come the clones and imitators. We are inundated with them and the audience gets bored all over again. What happens when Filmmaker Z comes along and wants his portion of box office glory? You guessed it – he raises the stakes and ratchets up the violence by another 10%. We keep ratcheting up by 10% at each lull in the market. Over time, you can see where this is heading.

In another words, we make a 10% advance in the amount and kind of violence, then we show it over and over again until it no longer has the value to shock or outrage the audience. Then, in order to avoid the complacency of the audience that results from showing the same thing over and over again, we must ratchet up the stakes yet again by 10%.

If the violence continuum continually moves 10%, say, once per year (a very conservative estimate), over the course of the next five decades, where will we be when our grandchildren are adults? Will we have to actually murder people on screen in order to achieve the same thrill, the same uniqueness for the audience? We don't know, but this is a difficult and scary thing to contemplate. Do we all go to the Saturday matinee to watch snuff films in the year 2050? Of course I won't be here but do have a good time! Have a jolly afternoon!

It would seem that it might be a good idea for the creators of media, information programming and entertainment to spend some time considering the long-term effects that their product will have on the audience. If story is of central importance, as most everyone in the industry agrees, or at least says they agree, then perhaps we should concentrate more on finding, creating and telling good stories, rather than spending so much time and so many resources ratcheting up violence, sex and special effects. Most of us originally became filmmakers and media makers to tell stories, not to spew out blood and special effects. If we make an effort to return to these roots, we may not be able to reverse the current trends, but perhaps we can slow the ratcheting down a bit. It might well result in better art and a more satisfying product over the long term. That matinee in 2050 might not need to be a bloodbath, but a more popcorn-worthy event.

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