Theology of Cinema

Part 1 of 2: Movies and the Cultural Shift
with Darrell L. Bock and Naima Lett
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Welcome to The Table, where we discuss issues of God and culture. I'm Darrell Bock, Executive Director for Cultural Engagement at the Hendricks Center, here at Dallas Seminary. And my guest today is Robert Johnston, who has been at Fuller Seminary for how long?

Robert Johnston  Twenty-one years.

Darrell Bock  Twenty-one years, and your official title there is…

Robert Johnston  Professor of Theology and Culture.

Darrell Bock  Okay, so we've got kindred spirits in the room. This could be a dangerous gathering because both of us have wrestled with how do you talk to the church and encourage the church with regard to how we culturally engage, particularly in a world that is shifting very significantly.

And I think that may be where I wanna start, is – you are doing some chapels for us here this week, and you talked about the shift in culture, particularly the relationship between I think what you called truth, beauty, and goodness.

So why don't you lay out for us, through that lens, how you see culture shifting, maybe from the time – I guess almost from the time you started teaching at Fuller to where we are today? What's going on in culture, and why is that important for Christians to be aware of?

Robert Johnston  The little typology that I used, they’re typology so that there are strengths and weaknesses to those, but I'm happy to – I think it's true. In the '50s and '60, it was high modernity. Dragnet was the favorite show on television.

Darrell Bock  "Just the facts, ma'am."

Robert Johnston  Nothing but the facts. And it was always ma'am because the women were the ones that were too emotional and subjective, and so there was sexism as well as rationalism that was going on. That's where we were. We were there as a culture. We were also there as a church so that we sought that sort of objective, historical, critical analysis of Scripture. We weren't very fond of literary criticism with regard to Scripture, for example.
By the '80s, we're now beyond Vietnam; we're now beyond the Kennedys' assassinations and Martin Luther King. The country, including us in the church, are more concerned with making sure you show it before you tell it so that rather than going truth, goodness, beauty, by the '80s, as a culture, we're going goodness, truth, beauty.

That's when churches no longer have just telling your kids what to believe and having fun, but now you're having service projects. In your high schools, if you don't have service projects, you don't get into a good college anymore. I mean there's a whole shift that's going on in church and society toward demonstrating your ethical viability, or whatever. Then you can listen to the truth, and then it's nice if it's packaged well.

But by the year 2000, we can take Pope John Paul as an example. John Paul stood up to a group of artists in 2002, I think something like that, and he said, "Beauty will be our path to those outside the church and to our youth." I think he's right, that if you look at the wider culture, you can call it a neoromantic age. You can call it postmodernity. Regard – sociological –

*Darrell Bock*  
Regardless of the label.

*Robert Johnston*  
Regardless of the label, we're talking sociologically, not philosophically at this point.

*Darrell Bock*  
Right.

*Robert Johnston*  
There has been a move, now, such that it goes beauty, goodness, truth.

*Darrell Bock*  
If I can say, it's like the football team that's – the truth is kinda having the football team that's dropping down the priority ladder, if I can say it that way.

*Robert Johnston*  
I would probably disagree, in that I would say we're talking here epistemologically, not metaphysically. We're talking here in terms of how you receive the verities of life. That's what those –
So, in effect, what you're saying is, rather than thinking about it kind of rationally in a detached kind of way, which might have been the '50s and '60s, now it is the role of experience, if I can say it that way, to drive us towards contemplating where truth may lie. And as a result, there's this engagement with life that emerges out of that, that isn't quite so detached, or doesn't at least pretend to be so detached.

Correct. And that engagement has both an ethical and an aesthetic dimension, and probably in the last 30 years there's been a flip-flop as to whether the aesthetic or the ethical is more important, so that in seminary curriculum, for example, the ethicists will still argue everybody needs an ethics course, though they won't argue everybody needs an aesthetics or a worship course. But increasingly the rest of us are saying, "Oh, ethics is absolutely crucial, but just as crucial is aesthetics."

And so there's a different way we're understanding reality, and that's happening outside the church, and it's happening in the church. Again, it's not saying truth is less important. I'm not saying that. What I'm saying is you listen to somebody speak truthfully because you trust them and because it's beautiful, because it has some transcendence or some sense of how it's meant to be. So we come at life in a different ordering.

Now let me put that into your question of how that fits with our Christian faith and witness. When I was a kid, when I was in junior high, I went to a very strong church with an excellent youth program, in Pasadena, California. I would bring my friends because I cared about the faith, and I cared about sharing the faith. They would come once or twice, and they would either politely have excuses why they didn't wanna come again, or they would flat-out say, "This is boring, and I'm not interested."

I can remember asking, as a 13-year-old myself, "Why is the Good News of the Gospel heard as bad news by most of my friends?" And that's become a lifelong question for me, actually. It's a vocational defining question that, as God has continued to work with me, that question is central.
And there's lots of answers to it, but one of those answers is that we're out of step with the culture. We're out of step with the questions that people really care about. We're out of step with how we understand what's important, such that we're speaking not where they're itching, and we're not listening to where they have something they feel. That's pretty fundamental.

So rather –

**Darrell Bock**

It's a huge disconnect.

**Robert Johnston**

A huge disconnect, and that's happening on an individual level, and that's happening probably more so on an institutional level, so I think individual Christians, at the moment, are being more effective than institutional Christian organizations that are getting a pretty bad rap at the moment.

**Darrell Bock**

And I take it that one of the reasons you would say that might be going on is that individual Christians, almost by default, have to work at a relational level that institutions, generally speaking, have trouble operating at, and so there's not that interpersonal authenticity that you can build that can help you get there.

**Robert Johnston**

I think that's true. I think, secondly, that just as, say, in the charismatic movement, our experience sometimes is a little bit different than our formal theology.

To give another example, I think it was James Davison Hunter that pointed out that even though our formal evangelical theology would emphasize righteousness and justice and the honor and integrity of God, that if you ask evangelicals how they became Christian, eight out of ten of them will talk about the love of God and being all you were meant to be, so that in our witness we went to theological plan B, even though in our theology we continued to stress theological plan A.

**Darrell Bock**

Interesting. Well, cultural shifts are an interesting part of thinking about this. I often tell my students that besides being a theologian you also need to be a little bit of a sociologist in order to engage and think about engagement, and particularly, as pastoral leaders, thinking about how to address the complexities of life in the modern world.
What we wanna do with our hour – that was kind of a esoteric introduction, if I can say it – but what we wanna do with our hour is actually go to a completely different place, and that is to talk about how things that people share in the culture on a regular basis – things like movies, television, music lyrics, commercials, even something as mundane as commercials – reflect on, and give an opportunity for us to reflect in ways that we don't normally think about.

I like to talk about, in thinking about this area, that – usually, when you think of seminaries, you think about places where you go to learn theology, learn the Bible; you go from Bible to life. But, in fact, the way most people actually engage life is they go from life, and then they take their life experience, whatever they're going through, and if they think theologically at all, they move towards the Bible from the experiences that life deals them.

It's the reverse direction. It's what I call "switch-hitting" because you have to be able to go both ways because that's how people are processing things.

And I think one of the disconnects that we're talking about is theologians tend to engage first thinking about Bible as the lens and then trying to go and match up with what life may or may not be delivering, whereas, most people's experience works the other way. Something is happening to them in their lives, and they're sitting back and saying, "What is God doing, and how do I assess and discern what's going on?"

Fair enough?

Yeah. Sure. I totally agree. My own commitment as a teacher, as a minister of the Gospel, is to ask the question: how can we bring together or relate, or how can we dialogue between our stories, our culture stories, and God's story?

God's story is primary – that's not the issue – but that we hear God's story within the context of the culture stories, if for no other reason of translations of the Bible, but at some level that's there, and we hear all of that from out of our own experiential base so that if my seven-year-old daughter died in a car crash, I read Job differently than you read it, or maybe you've had a tragedy like that, but I mean –
That's right. Exactly.

– you simply read that text differently.

And that we allow that to happen in those extreme cases, we understand that, but we don't understand that that happens in all of life so that we read those texts differently as a woman than as a man. We read those texts differently if we're from the fruits and nuts of California rather than from Dallas.

The text is still authoritative. It still is saying what it's saying, but it's in dialogue with our lives.

Yeah. The angles from which the text is approached is significant in terms of sorting through it. Though, again, another illustration I like to – I used, for years, to teach a class in Guatemala City with a colleague who teaches Old Testament at Denver Seminary, and who actually had ministered down there for several terms before he came to Denver to teach, and we would take North American students down to Guatemala, and we would – and it was hermeneutics class – and we said, "You have to write one paper, and it only is answering this question: how would you interpret the Bible differently living in this reality versus the reality you live in in North America?"

And we took them on a tour that showed both the best of Guatemala City and, perhaps more significantly, the worst of Guatemala City. We were only a couple of blocks from the garbage dump that literally runs down the city like a river, and every time we went, every two years, it had moved further down the valley.

And the experience of taking them into the dump and watching people live out of the dump was always – the meal afterwards was always one of the most fascinating times of the two weeks, as people either processed it by talking out loud so they could deal with it, or they just went silent.

The point we were making, in part, is when you hit text on poverty coming out of this environment and having to live with this reality day after day, that's very different than the almost kind of detached way we tend to view poverty text when you live in North American and you come out of a relativity well-to-do, certainly on a global scale, a very well-to-do background.
The differences are almost inevitable because of the radically different kind of experience that you're going through.

*Robert Johnston* And so my little slice on it is not that but is saying the world is being shaped by a series of stories, myths. We can critique it. We can say it shouldn't be, but in rural villages in Ghana, they saw Titanic.

Our children are looking at the latest Disney movie 53 times a year and can give the dialogue verbatim. That is a shaping influence in terms of how you process reality so that we can say – and I believe Scripture's authoritative, but that authoritative text is heard in conversation with that read on reality that's coming from our television, and our media, and our film, and so on.

And that's both good and bad, but we as Christians need to be aware of that, be conversant, be part of that conversation, or we risk being both irrelevant and handicapped in terms of our own discipleship and growth as Christians in the world.