

How Does a Critic Criticize?

By Michael Gallagher
 New York (NC) — Every once in a while, I think, it's good for anyone functioning as a movie critic to go back to basics and explain why he was so harsh, for example, with a "Breathless" and relatively kind to "The World According to Garp."

It's something that's necessary for any critic, and it's especially necessary for me, since a very significant aspect of my work is my involvement in the classifications our organization, the Communication Department of the U.S. Catholic Conference, gives to films.

How, then do we classify and review movies? What criteria do we have in mind when we make our judgments?

To answer the first question, ours is a group effort. We have a board of consultants from various walks of life, and at each of the special screenings given our office, several of our consultants will be in attendance.

They write a brief review afterward and send it in. It's my job, then, to go through these and, if necessary, confer with other staff members to arrive at a classification and a general estimate of how the consultants feel about the quality of the films in terms of esthetics and entertainment value. This is usually not hard to do, but sometimes we have to discuss the matter rather vigorously before we arrive at a decision.

The job of writing the review usually falls to me. This review, though it will never in any way contradict the moral classification or go against the consensus about the quality of the movie, will nevertheless reflect the individual taste of the critic.

Finally, the reviews and the classification go out to the Catholic press throughout the country through the National Catholic News Service.

Now as to our criteria: we don't consult a list of "thou-shalt-nots," such as "suicide in plot solution" and "accepts divorce," terminology that might just possibly have a familiar ring to some older readers, but we do have a decidedly Christian view of life.

We believe that there is an essential order to things and that there can never be any real clash between moral and esthetic values. Pornography and exploitative violence, for example, by their very nature, transgress esthetic standards as surely as they do moral.

The Greeks had an admirable principle called esthetic distance. Thus the spectator at a tragedy was never to feel that he was actually looking at the real King Oedipus undergoing such terrible suffering and gouging his eyes in an agony of remorse. If he thought he was looking at real life, after all, he could no more enjoy the play than you or I could enjoy witnessing a serious traffic accident and its aftermath.

And so the Greeks kept

their sex and violence offstage. These had a place in life and, therefore, a place in drama, but to depict them graphically might affect the spectator directly and thus rupture the esthetic distance and destroy the detachment essential to real catharsis.

It remained for the Romans in their decadent period to bring sex and violence on stage — the latter in horribly graphic style, the kind of spectacle that we, in our own decadence, approach in the likes of "Conan the Barbarian," "Creepshow," and "Videodrome." Sometimes, for example, if a mutilation or execution was called for, a hapless slave was mutilated or murdered before an appreciative crowd. And that, by the way, was the end of Rome.

That sort of thing was of course immoral, but the point I want to stress is that it was also a violation of artistic standards. The two are inextricably linked, and despite the protestations of extremists on both sides, they are never at odds with each other.

"The World According to Garp" and "Breathless" contain love-making sequences. "Garp," however, was classified A-III (adults) and "Breathless" received an O (morally offensive). Why?

Well, though sex certainly figured prominently in "Garp," the sequences involving it were not only handled with a great deal of restraint and with only some very incidental and fleeting nudity, but there was also a definite moral perspective involved. In "Garp's" world some things are right and some things are wrong. Sin, therefore, is possible and so is forgiveness.

It's not a film for the very young, it's a film with many flaws, but for the mature viewer, "Garp" is a good film, one that makes you think as well as entertains you.

"Breathless" is something else again. Sex not only figures prominently in it, but it crowds out everything else, including characterization. Not only is the sex and nudity graphic and extensive, but in place of any sort of moral

perspective, this is nothing but a bubble-gum brand of nihilism. It's not only an immoral movie, therefore, it's inferior in esthetic terms as well.

Hence, our favorable evaluation of "Garp" and our severity toward "Breathless."

St. Charles Borromeo

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On the Right Side

The Mass On Tour

At the beginning of our tours I make it clear: "Mass is available for any who wish to come, but it is not part of the package. Do not feel you must come." Father O'Connell and I usually celebrated in a TV room or such in the hotels, which was convenient.

A church would be preferable but not usually possible. However on this tour we did have Mass at a Trappist Bolton Abbey in Kildare, founded in 1965 from St. Joseph's Abbey, Roscrea; on Ascension Day at a posh girls' school, Kylemore Abbey, run by Benedictine nuns; and finally at the Shrine of Knock, where it always rains, but this time it poured!

Around 5 p.m. Saturday, our coach rolled into the park at Kilkea Castle Hotel, county Kildare, 40 miles southwest of Dublin. It had been a long day: from Killarney to Cork to Blarney. We had stopped at Blarney where the rain discouraged everyone from hiking up the 108 stone steps to kiss the Blarney Stone. This satisfied everyone, since we stopped for a couple of hours at The Old Mill for coffee and shopping.

By arrangement I met with Sean O'Mahoney whom I had met in Auburn in 1980, where he was visiting his cousin, retired school teacher Eileen McCarthy. While in Auburn he edified a group of prisoners at Auburn State Prison at a talk he gave them about the Legion work in Ireland. With him was a Mr. Copp, superintendent of an estate near Mallow. Sean had asked me to bring some Sheen cassettes, so I gave him a dozen, which means 24 Sheen talks will be repeated and repeated in Irish circles. I was especially pleased to know that Mr. Copp's daughter is connected with a radio station, and will broadcast some of the Sheen conferences.

Kilkea Castle, built in 1180, has been converted into a fine hotel. For years I have adapted to the necessity of celebrating Mass in strange places. This began in 1936 when I was a civilian chaplain to a CCC (Civilian Conservation Corps) camp at Howland's Island, near Port Byron when Father Neary was pastor there.

At the camp the only available place for Mass was in the bar room, which was cleared for the

occasions. At the castle there were no usual rooms available, but there was a small bar and lounge not in use.

I said to the manager, a handsome man in his late 20s: "This will do. We can set up a table and our people can gather round." Quite shocked, he replied firmly: "Oh, no, Father! Not for the Mass!" He arranged for us to use the residents' TV lounge. The Irish have retained a great reverence and awe for the Holy Sacrifice, and for the Blessed Sacrament. I have never visited a church in Ireland but there were people there in quiet prayer.

The next day was Sunday. Three miles down the road was the Trappist Abbey, with eight priests, eight brothers, some half dozen novices and "searchers", 220 cows, two bulls and a small guest house.

The Abbey chapel is simple, seating 120 persons, with an equal space in the sanctuary for the Liturgy. Father O'Connell and I joined the monks for celebration and were invited to read the Scriptural lessons. I was touched at the Sign of Peace when a monk shook hands and said: "The peace of Our Lord be with you, Father, and welcome to Ireland."

The monks sang well enough, though hardly up to Solesmes' perfection. Many of the Mass and hymn texts and melodies were unfamiliar to us. This is a weakness of modern liturgy with its exclusive vernacular. Once Catholics could travel the world from Rochester to Lourdes to Nairobi to La Paz and sing Masses and hymns familiar in Latin universality. After Mass the Abbot invited us to the guest house for tea and cookies, which was a thrill for all of us.

Since Mass is the highest form of worship in the world, may I recommend two little paperbacks: 1. "How to Get More Out of the Mass" by Joseph T. McGloin, SJ (Liguorian Publications); and 2. "Holy Mass: Approaches to the Mystery" by A.M. Roguet (Liturgical Press).

Father McGloin's book is a popularized presentation, easy to read, but full of help. Father Roguet's book is a translation from the French, and is more profound and scholarly. It is a pity how many of our people do not realize the spiritual wealth in the Sacrificial Banquet which is our central act of worship.

DEATHS

Geraldine A. Crowley Dies, Legion of Mary Promoter

Mass of Christian Burial was celebrated for May 25 for Geraldine A. Crowley, known throughout the diocese for her Church work, who died May 20, 1983 after a long illness.

The Mass, concelebrated by Fathers Thomas Wheeland, Paul Wohrab and David Looney, was held at Our Lady of Good Counsel Church, and was attended by more than 300, among them Fathers Bruce Ammering, Robert Bradler, Winfried Kellner and Chester Klochek.

Though affiliated with many organizations, Miss Crowley was particularly known for her Legion of Mary Work. She had been a member for more than 20 years holding offices in the Rochester Junior Curia and Monroe Curia, in addition to her Legion work in her own parish.

She was remembered last week by Marianne Bess as making "a continuing contribution of self to the Chris-



MISS CROWLEY

tian community. The theme of her Mass was love, and appropriately so, since she was loved by all who knew her and will be greatly missed."

Miss Crowley is survived by her brother and sister-in-law, William J. and Joe Ann Crowley; nieces, Kathy and Kristi Crowley; an uncle Harold E. Callahan; many cousins and several godchildren.

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