

HOW TO ADDRESS SIGNIFICANT ISSUES WITHOUT WRITING PROPAGANDA

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One approach to entertainment is to offer it up as a mind-numbing drug: fluffy chic-flicks or sex and explosives are aimed at distracting the audience from their troubles and keeping them, temporarily, in another world in which they need not face any real, significant issues.

The second approach is to write moralistic sermons that grab the audience by the hair and rub their noses in a depressing "reality check."

These two modes of entertainment are a reflection of an ailment in our society at large: you are set up to either live in a white, middle-class, American bubble of cluelessness, and keep your attention on the next thing to buy, or, alternatively, you can spend your life keeping your head in a gray cloud of hopelessness, wallowing in guilt and despair over imperialist wars, the poverty line, and global warming.

The good news is that it is entirely possible to stay informed and realistic about what is in need of repair, while living every moment in joy.

So how do we write a movie that is neither mind-numbing fluff, nor depressing propaganda?

The trick is to quit manipulating your audience, quit preaching your audience, and instead, love your audience.

Your audience lives in a world full of pain - their own, and the pain they see all around them. They don't need to escape from this pain, and in fact, they turn to you as a story teller to help them face this pain and heal from it.

A good film exposes the pain and then portrays a hopeful CONTRADICTION to it. By contradicting the pain, you accomplish two things at once: you invite your audience to face the pain, but you are also offering the healing. You're not saying to them: "No, you don't have a headache. La la la. Look at the pretty lady. La la la." You're also not saying: "You have a headache! You have a really big headache!!! " Instead, you are saying: "I know you have a headache. Let me massage your temples."

Examples:

BROKEBACK MOUNTAIN openly exposes the oppression of gays. All the while: it's a story about two men who truly love and care about each other. You have the pain. You have the contradiction.

MILLION DOLLAR BABY shows the struggle of a poor, downtrodden woman. The pain of her world: the neglectful family, the change in her pocket, is fully exposed. All the while, the story is about a coach who takes her under his wings and cares about her. You have the pain. You have the contradiction to it.

In WHALE RIDER the young girl is shunned and dismissed because she's a girl. But she turns around and saves her people by being powerful. The pain. The contradiction.

ERIN BROKOVICH: an evil corporation poisons an entire town. A powerful working-class woman stands up and fights.

WITNESS: John Book lives in a harsh, violent world. The love of an Amish woman changes his life.

Should we test this on super blockbusters?

STAR WARS. Darth Vader: the pain. Luke taking Darth's mask off and reuniting with his repentant father: the contradiction.

You needn't write fluff to be entertaining, and you needn't be depressing to write intelligently. The movies that have the widest appeal tackle the wounds head on by offering a caring and hopeful message that contradicts the pain.

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