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LOOKING FOR HEAVEN AT THE MOVIES: WHAT OUR FONDNESS FOR NOSTALGIC FILMS SAYS ABOUT US

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Year after year, Hollywood churns out movies on a quest to find Eden, because embedded deep within our souls is a quest for a lost paradise — and film is often where it leads us. It seems that most popular new movies these days are sequels, prequels, reboots, or remakes. Consider the top-ten grossing films of 2016. Five of them were either a sequel or a prequel: *Finding Dory, Rogue One: A Star Wars Story, Captain America: Civil War, Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them, Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice*. Of the remaining five, three of them are based on source material produced or popular during the adolescent years of many a contemporary moviegoer. The same can be said of the top-five grossing films so far this year: *Beauty and the Beast, Wonder Woman, Guardians of the Galaxy Vol. 2, Spider-Man: Homecoming*, and *Despicable Me 3*. Some fear that Hollywood has run out of original ideas, but these are the films we want. Theatrical film production is a forty-billion-dollar-per-year industry. If we all suddenly stopped paying to see sequels, reboots, and adaptations, they would no longer be made. The reason Hollywood seems unoriginal is because, when it comes to films, we prefer nostalgia to novelty.

Understanding Nostalgia. In *Mere Christianity*, C. S. Lewis provides a beautiful and succinct eschatological explanation for this phenomenon, asserting, "Creatures are not born with desires unless satisfaction for those desires exists. A baby feels hunger: well, there is such a thing as food. A duckling wants to swim: well, there is such a thing as water. Men feel sexual desire: well, there is such a thing as sex."[1]

For Lewis, our desires and the things that satisfy them are an essential part of human life. Nostalgia is a desire, not unlike a baby's desire for food. However, nostalgia is unique in that it is "a desire which no experience in this world can satisfy."[2] This is because we have an innate desire for heaven. In a sermon titled "The Weight of Glory," Lewis puts it this way: "Our lifelong nostalgia, our longing to be reunited with something in the universe from which we now feel cut off, to be on the inside of some door which we have always seen from the outside, is no mere neurotic fancy, but the truest index of our real situation. And to be at last summoned inside would be both glory and honour beyond all our merits and also the healing of that old ache."[3]

According to Lewis, nostalgia, rather than a longing for better days or bygone memories, is a desire for how things are meant to be, how they once were, and how they ultimately will be.

Particular Yearning. The biblical concept for this idea is the Hebrew word שָׁלוֹם, transliterated as *shalom*, most often rendered in English translations of the Old Testament as peace. *Shalom* is not merely the absence of conflict. It means harmony and delight in all of our possible relationships — with God, with other human beings, with nature, and with oneself. God created the world for *shalom*, and the first two chapters of Genesis describe the Garden of Eden as a manifestation of this fourfold relationship. The Bible concludes with a similar view of harmony and delight, when God inaugurates a new heaven and new earth in the final two chapters of Revelation. However, in our current sinful state, *shalom* is only a distant half-forgotten memory, an unfathomable hope. Every human has a basic desire for how things are actually meant to be. Nevertheless, this ideal is perverted by sin to the extent that, more often than not, our desires themselves are wayward.

The reason sequels, reboots, and remakes become mixed up in this desire is because our broken world is deficient to satisfy our hunger. Instead, we attach the desire to something more tangible, but still vague enough to provide an ineffable hope, like memories of feelings we have had during certain times in our past when things seemed just right. If Lewis's assessment is correct, we can expect evidence of this reality when we go to the movies. We are drawn to sequels and prequels because they promise to take us back to a place we remember enjoying. We are drawn to remakes because they promise to recreate encounters with characters and stories that once gave us comfort. Thus, it should not be surprising that *Beauty and the Beast* became a box-office smash by reimagining a real-life version of an animated movie that so many of us loved in our youth.

Beyond Memory. Our memories are poor guides to the wellspring of *shalom*, however. We intuitively assume our memories are static snapshots of how things were; in reality, they have a tendency to change over time, often becoming distorted, causing us to recall experiences as worse or better than they actually were. This is why nostalgia is a false promise. It tells us we can start over or go back to how things are supposed to be. C. S. Lewis describes this experience well:

In speaking of this desire for our own far-off country….I am trying to rip open the inconsolable secret in each one of you — the secret which hurts so much that you take your revenge on it by calling it names like Nostalgia…Our commonest expedient is to call it beauty and behave as if that had settled the matter…The books or the music in which we thought the beauty was located will betray us if we trust to them; it was not in them, it only came through them, and what came through them was longing. These things — the beauty, the memory of our own past — are good images of what we really desire, but if they are mistaken for the thing itself, they turn into dumb idols, breaking the hearts of their worshippers. For they are not the thing itself; they are only the scent of a flower we have not found, the echo of a tune we have not heard, news from a country we have never yet visited.[4]

This is why we are often so ambivalent toward nostalgia films. If the film does not deliver just the right amount of newness with just the right amount of familiarity to temporarily fulfill our nostalgic desire, we feel betrayed. Our hearts are broken.

Star Wars fans experienced this when *The Phantom Menace* was first released after years of anticipation. Droves of fans packed theaters the opening weekend with hopes of reliving cherished memories. However, a storyline revolving around a dry trade federation concept, the revelation that the mysterious power of the force was reducible to a not-so-enchanting organism called Midi-chlorians, and the out-of-place and cartoonish Jar Jar Binks seemed contrary to the spirit of the original trilogy. It was not the same far, far away galaxy, from a long time ago that fans had spent years remembering.

The most-well-received nostalgia films succeed not by fulfilling our desire for heaven but by creating and fulfilling some other desire. Sometimes this is done by providing adequate closure to an epic story or by reinventing source material that would otherwise seem anachronistic. A prime example of the former would be *The Return of the King*, the final installment of The Lord of the Rings trilogy, which won an Oscar for best picture and was the most financially successful of the three. *The Return of the King* was not successful because we all simply loved seeing Middle Earth so much. As a novelty, that may have contributed to the first installment's success. Rather, the

film reminded us of our investment in the characters and fulfilled our desire to see their journeys come to a satisfying completion. In other words, it was far more than nostalgia and familiarity that made the film so popular; it was closure for our friends, knowing their stories were complete.

Greater Hope. This is not an indictment on our love for nostalgia films, or nostalgia in general. We need not abstain from sequels and reboots just because they are poor substitutes for heaven. Rather, by understanding where our desires come from, and what their proper ends are, we can derive an ethic. Our yearning for shalom should spur us to recreate shalom here and now. By recognizing our desire for the good things of our past as a deeper desire for a lost perfection, we can surrender it to God for spiritual renewal. When nostalgia directs us to the next summer blockbuster, it also should direct us toward Christ.

In *The Weight of Glory*, Lewis goes on to outline five promises from Scripture concerning what heaven will be like, or how our desire to be "reunited with something in the universe from which we now feel cut off"[5] will be fulfilled. He believes we will be with Christ; we will be like Christ; we will have glory; we will have some sort of official vocational position in the universe; and we will in some sense be fed, feasted, or entertained. There is reason to believe that sequels, prequels, and reboots will not need to be a part of that entertainment. Rather, the past will be remembered by the glory of the Cross, and the original Garden will be celebrated with a massive new city featuring the Tree of Life. Our deepest desires will be met as we come into the truest and realest new beginning. Heaven is our reboot. —*Jeffery Porter*

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NOTES

1 C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: MacMillan Pub. Co., 1952), 137.
2 Ibid.
3 C. S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory: and Other Addresses* (New York: Harper Collins, 1949), 18.
4 Ibid., 30–31.
5 Ibid., 42.