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# Seeking after the Good in Art, Drama, Film, and Literature

*Travis T. Anderson*

Not long ago, kids in tow, I burst in unannounced on my parents and found them absorbed in some ubiquitous TV sitcom. While we peeled off our coats and the kids started chasing each other around the house, I jokingly chided my mom for wasting her time on such mindless drivel. In reply, she playfully denounced my elitist taste and defended her show as “good, wholesome entertainment.” Well, it may indeed have been entertaining. And being a show that originally aired back in the early eighties and even then was aimed at an older demographic, it was relatively free of the profanity, sexuality, vulgarity, and similar material that almost routinely taints current TV programming. What caught my attention, however, was my mom’s use of the word “wholesome,” which seemed oddly inappropriate with reference to such a program. Innocuous, maybe. But wholesome?

After taking over the reins of BYU International Cinema a number of years ago, I noticed with a certain degree of interest that the word “wholesome” is not only used fairly frequently in our culture, but used in a strange sort of way—precisely as my mother used it that evening. I don’t doubt that most of us understand the word properly means something nutritious or edifying, something that actually nourishes soul or body. What I find curious is that the word is so often used in an altogether different sense, referring simply to something without objectionable content. Furthermore, I have noted that when the word is used in this odd sense it is customarily paired with “entertainment” rather than with “education” or “art.” There is, of course, a certain logic to this custom. After all, true education by its very nature *should* be wholesome, so it would seem redundant to say “wholesome education.” But what about art? On the one

hand, art is much more likely to be edifying than is entertainment, which usually aims at mere diversion and amusement. On the other hand, while art isn't *always* edifying, neither is it without a capacity to entertain. Art thus seems to straddle the domains of mere amusement and earnest learning. But in either case, it would seem much more sensible for “wholesome art” to be a common catchphrase than “wholesome entertainment,” for the simple reason that mere entertainment very seldom *is* wholesome.

### **A Purpose beyond Entertainment**

Aristotle observed almost twenty-five hundred years ago that while there is nothing inherently wrong with entertainment or amusement, activities that educate are generally much more praiseworthy, since they cultivate virtue, inform our minds, and habituate us to what he called intellectual enjoyment.<sup>1</sup> Why then do most people (today as in Aristotle's age) generally prefer entertainment to education? Aristotle supposed that entertainment enjoys a natural advantage by providing us with certain sensual pleasures and thereby more readily chasing away our cares. In other words, entertainment primarily appeals to the *body*; it is more likely to be pleasing and diverting because it satisfies bodily cravings for rest, relaxation, and physical satisfaction. Education, to the contrary, appeals predominantly to the *mind*. And according to Aristotle, education “is accompanied with pain”—by which he meant that it improves our character and nourishes our mind or soul, but only at the cost of mental effort or physical exertion.<sup>2</sup> This explains why people will opt to watch a pedestrian Hollywood movie instead of a cinematic masterpiece or curl up with a cheap paperback novel instead of a great work of literature. After all, how many times have we heard someone say, when justifying such a choice, “I don't want to have to think; I just want to relax and enjoy myself”? Such comments reveal all too plainly that Aristotle was right—art indeed requires much more work to harvest its manifold endowments than does simple entertainment. And at least on some level most everyone knows this.

Accordingly, since the inclination of the natural man or woman is to avoid labor, most of us naturally incline toward entertainment rather than art. And if amusement with minimal effort is our goal, most current forms of media entertainment offer exactly that. As V. F. Perkins observed about universally popular Hollywood movies:

None of them makes extensive demands on the spectator's intellect. The dialogue and action of each of them is fully understandable without specialized knowledge of political mechanisms, sociological jargon, philosophical concepts or historical facts. None of them employs a form so radically new as to require a substantial readjustment of the spectator's

attitude. . . . Where particular knowledge is required—then it is part of the common knowledge of the common man. The spectator does not have to work for his pleasure.<sup>3</sup>

To the degree that Perkins's claims and their implications are true, then the common (albeit questionable) conception of mere entertainment as a wholesome activity renders it *doubly* appealing: first, it provides pleasure without requiring of us any real effort; and second, our conception of it as wholesome subtly reassures us that the pleasure we derive from it is altogether harmless and perhaps even beneficial. And yet that is frequently not the case. Many forms of entertainment are not wholesome at all. And a good many more are not even innocuous. By comparison, the *really* wholesome activities in which we engage generally do have the capacity to entertain us, but they also boast a purpose beyond mere entertainment. Dances and games, for example, are entertaining, but they also rejuvenate the spirit, foster positive social interaction, teach or reinforce skillful movements, provide exercise, and have a host of other virtues. No doubt this partly explains why Brigham Young commanded the pioneers at Winter Quarters to “praise the Lord with singing, with music, with dancing, and with a prayer of praise and thanksgiving” (D&C 136:28)—because such activities were not *just* forms of entertainment, but forms of devotional celebration, instances of enjoyable physical activity, and opportunities for reinforcing social ties. While it is true that activities which *only* entertain, like watching popular movies and TV shows or reading popular fiction, can be relaxing and even pleasing, more often than not they also waste our time and money. And if we overindulge in them, they can be downright harmful—as evidenced by the volumes of research linking obesity and heart disease to inordinate time spent watching TV, playing computer games, and engaging in other sedentary pursuits. And unfortunately, the harm they can inflict is not just bodily.

Like Socrates and Plato before him, Aristotle knew that whether something is harmful or beneficial frequently depends both on the amount of the thing itself, and on its relative proportion to other things. Socrates advised moderation in all things. But Aristotle recognized that moderation is a slippery standard—differing not only from activity to activity and person to person, but from moment to moment. In addition, moderation in one thing can be judged accurately only when it is decided relative to other things. For instance, whether or not the amount of food we eat is moderate depends not only on the food in question, but on one's age, one's health, one's physical condition, one's environment, the amount of energy one expends exercising, and a host of other factors. What is moderate under one set of circumstances for one person at one time will

not necessarily be moderate when any of those variables change. Hence, almost anything can be either harmful *or* beneficial. When considered in this light, the activity or substance in question is akin to what Plato called a *pharmakon*—something that is either poisonous or curative depending on its application. And both art and entertainment would seem to have pronounced pharmakotic traits.

### Dangers of a Negative Standard

Rather obviously—as my mother would readily admit—movies, books, films, music, drama, dance, and other forms of art and entertainment that are *without objectionable content* are not in consequence of that fact *spiritually or intellectually nourishing*. And if something *is* free from objectionable content but is *not* nourishing, then it is the mental equivalent of diet soda—no unwanted calories, perhaps, but nothing very good for you either. All of this begs the question, then, how and why has the *lack of objectionable content*, in and of itself, become such a prevalent standard of *goodness*? Whatever the answer to that question, I believe that the consequences are bound to be far-reaching and potentially dangerous when decisions concerning the films and dramas we see, the visual artworks we contemplate, the music we listen to, and the literature we read are guided exclusively, or even primarily, by a negative standard. Why? Because judgments made primarily with reference to a *lack of objectionable content* implicitly require an eye focused precisely on that objectionable content, rather than on *the good* as such.

One unfortunate consequence of such a negative focus is an attitude characterized not merely by an inclination to throw out the baby with the bathwater but by a reluctance or incapacity to see the baby at all. For instance, conversations with people who have been offended by a book, film, or other work of art often reveal that they can remember little or nothing good about the artwork in question, even when they themselves acknowledge the offending material was trivial. Their well-intended but immoderate focus on the bad apparently dulled or reduced their capacity to perceive the good, even within works that others have found both artistically praiseworthy and spiritually uplifting. As someone recently pointed out to me, however, in today's world of high-risk media and subversive intentions, would it not seem highly imprudent not to exercise a certain degree of active surveillance against evil? My answer is yes, and no. On the one hand, I would heartily agree with what I think is the spirit of this observation—that evil demands of us constant vigilance against its pernicious strategies and forms; on the other hand, I would insist on

differentiating vigilance from *surveillance*, which denotes the very kind of unbroken and obsessive attention *to* evil that I find potentially problematic. You don't vanquish evil or even avoid it by watching, monitoring, and studying it with singular focus. Of course, life as we know it demands of any moral person the application of a moral sense or standard by which intentions and actions can be evaluated. And, certainly, any attempt to live a moral life produces at least an informal set of both recommended and proscribed actions. So a list of carefully formulated "don'ts" may well be an integral part of that attempt—at least until we become sensitive and committed enough to Christ that we are willing and able to follow the dictates of the Holy Spirit directly and unerringly. But a moral measure comprised solely or even predominantly of things to avoid and a moral outlook singularly focused on the myriad textures and hues of evil's chameleon skin constitute what the Book of Mormon prophet Jacob called "looking beyond the mark" (Jacob 4:14).

I remember hearing or reading some years ago of an experience involving Spencer W. Kimball during a visit he reportedly made to BYU while he was President of the Church. According to the story, as he walked across campus one of his hosts noticed some students who were inappropriately dressed, at least in the opinion of this particular person. The host accordingly said to President Kimball, in a disapproving tone, "Will you just *look* at those girls?" assuming, as the story goes, that President Kimball would justify his taking offense and endorse his implicit criticism. Instead, President Kimball responded, "Yes, aren't they beautiful?"

Now, this account has something of an apocryphal flavor to it, so I'm somewhat doubtful that it actually happened. But given what little I know of Spencer Kimball's kind and generous nature, it certainly *could* have happened. And regardless of the veracity of the tale, the moral serves to illustrate my point: Where there is good to be found, even where there might also be something worthy of minor criticism, we are free and should be able to *recognize* the good. In short, we should not refuse an occasion to praise simply because there may also be some reason to condemn, as if something is worthy of appreciation or capable of edification if and only if it is completely incapable of causing any offense whatsoever.

In addition to restricting our field of vision, the application of a primarily negative standard in making moral choices has yet another potentially unfortunate consequence: any attempt to avoid the bad by making it the center of our focus is an enterprise ultimately doomed to failure. Years ago, when I was first learning to ride a motorcycle, I was taught a life-saving lesson by an older, experienced rider: If you see something dangerous in the road ahead, don't try to avoid it by staring at it—look in

the direction you want to *go* and your gaze will naturally direct you away from the object you want to *avoid*. In other words, *don't look where you don't want to go*, because however much you intend otherwise, you will inevitably go exactly where you look. If you try to skirt road debris by watching it intently as you approach it, you will inevitably hit it; if you stare at an oil slick or patch of gravel in your path, you'll inevitably run over it. The only safe and reliable way to steer clear of dangers is to focus your attention on a safe route around them. The moral parallel is obvious. The only safe and reliable way to avoid the bad is to look constantly at and for the good. Focusing solely on the bad, however innocent one's intentions, will always lead toward that very point of focus. (And I have discovered that this is true not only of motorcycle riding and value judgments, but of any attempt to replace vices with virtues.) I believe this is why Christ teaches in the New Testament that the way toward a sinless life is not to study sins and their endless variants, as did the Pharisees, but to pattern our life after Him who lived *without* sin. And I also think this is why our spiritual leaders often teach us to vanquish temptation not by concentrating on the temptation itself, but by singing a hymn or reciting a scripture or engaging our mind in some other wholesome activity that will naturally incline us *away* from the temptation by directing our attention *toward* something good. Since we can't be moving in two directions at once, any move toward the good is simultaneously a move away from the bad.

### Seeking Virtue

Inherent problems aside, the very frequency of negative strategies for securing virtue raises the question, why are we so easily seduced into thinking we can become good through focusing our attention on the bad? Or to state it differently, what has happened to our notion of virtue and goodness that we think we can achieve it by applying a purely negative standard? I will hazard that this is not the intent of our leaders when they counsel us not to see R-rated films and not to listen to music with explicit lyrics and parental advisories. They presumably do not intend that we evaluate our activities exclusively in accordance with some secular and capricious rating system, nor do they imply that all media without those restrictive ratings are edifying, nor do they suggest that we should not actively seek out really praiseworthy art and entertainment. After all, we do not identify something as “virtuous, lovely, or of good report or praiseworthy” simply on the basis of what it *is not*, but also, and primarily, on the basis of what it *is*.

Consider in this regard the entire thirteenth article of faith:

We believe in being honest, true, chaste, benevolent, virtuous, and in doing good to all men; indeed, we may say that we follow the admonition of Paul—We believe all things, we hope all things, we have endured many things, and hope to be able to endure all things. If there is anything virtuous, lovely, or of good report or praiseworthy, we seek after these things.

As Joseph Smith intimated, this article of faith paraphrases an admonition of Paul found in his epistle to the Philippians: “Finally, brethren, whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honest, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report; if there be any virtue, and if there be any praise, think on these things” (Philip. 4:8). It is worth noting that only one adjective in Joseph’s paraphrase of Paul is repeated. It is the word “virtuous.” As many are aware, the word “virtue” has a most interesting pedigree in Western civilization. It is the word most often used to translate the Greek *arete* (ἀρετή), which, in fact, is the word originally spoken by Paul in the passage above. Though *arete* was examined and discussed by several pre-Socratic philosophers, it was Socrates who first attributed real philosophical importance to it and identified *arete* in its most general sense with *a knowledge of the Good*. For Aristotle, several generations later, *arete* named the fluctuating point of moderation, the mean or midpoint between two extremes, and it could take the form of either a moral or an intellectual virtue. But in every case for the Greeks, virtue meant *goodness* or *excellence* of some kind—excellence of character or behavior, excellence in work or accomplishments, excellence of aspirations. In short, it referred not just to a *lack* of bad qualities, but to an *abundance* of good ones—to a combination of all those qualities and attributes which together would constitute a *praiseworthy and exemplary life*.

Lamentably enough, we seem to have diluted the word “virtue” to where it now refers to only one single aspect of an excellent life: chastity and purity of thought. But however important chastity is (and I’m not for a moment suggesting that it *isn’t* important), there is much more to an excellent life than chastity, as both Paul and Joseph Smith well knew—which is probably why they mentioned *both* chastity *and* virtue in the passages quoted above, and not *just* chastity. Virtue or excellence in this broader, more substantial sense is precisely what we all *ought* to be striving for, not just as Christians, but as lifelong educators and learners. And we cannot reach that goal by compiling only a list of “don’ts” or by complying with narrowly rendered interpretations of counsel to avoid particular actions,



behavior, or circumstances—however well-intentioned those interpretations might be; we must, first and foremost, actively seek the good.

Lastly, in order to nurture and preserve our own personal virtue as well as to encourage and safeguard virtue in the arts, we must strive to judge the bad with as much honesty and temperance as zeal. I would thus identify a third unfortunate consequence of judging the worth of our actions by a predominantly negative standard as the dangerous tendency to act as though a righteous end justifies unrighteous means. If we look predominantly for flaws and fail to see virtues, we run the risk of amplifying offenses out of all proportion—and that is only a short step away from outright dishonesty. As my BYU colleagues and I have sadly noted, all too often the complaints with which we sometimes have to deal as teachers, mentors, and program directors either significantly exaggerate an offense or completely misrepresent it. A book or play with one or two profane words becomes in such a complaint a work full of them; a Greek statue in an art history text or an unclothed newborn in a film becomes in the retelling a case of scandalous nudity; a tender caress becomes lewd, groping sex. Perhaps those who judge in such a fashion have become so obsessed with the bad that they see or hear things in a book or film that are not actually there. Either this is the case, or they have become willing to use dishonest means in order to defend what they apparently see as a desirable end. And when such complaints are aired publicly, they not only compromise the truth, but can unjustly sully the reputation of an artwork, a person, or an institution—all under the guise of righteous indignation. Clearly, something is very wrong when this happens.

Above all else, we need to seek the good not just in order to avoid the bad, but to *become* good. And we need to recognize that when we are seeking what is virtuous, lovely, good, and praiseworthy, it rarely comes (at least from any worldly source) with everything objectionable completely refined out of it, especially since what is deemed objectionable differs so greatly from person to person, culture to culture, and age to age. Even the writings of Shakespeare, lovingly carried across the plains by our pioneer ancestors and so often quoted in LDS books and general conferences, contain their fair share of potentially objectionable material. But we read Shakespeare despite that fact because there is so much to praise among what little there is to condemn.

### **Learning to Recognize Good Art**

I would venture to say that the reason why schools, universities, teachers and artists draw a disproportionate amount of criticism in this regard

is not because the subject matter they teach or create is disproportionately objectionable, or that they have simply become callous to offensive material. After all, no institution, artist or teacher *wants* to draw criticism. And it is certainly possible to teach a course or create a work with little real objectionable content (although I've found to my astonishment that people who actively look for reasons to be offended can find them almost anywhere). One could teach art history without exposing students to a single unpleasant image, violent scene, or nude statue; one could teach literature from books that contain not a single profane word, violent act, or idea contrary to our own. But what kind of courses would they be without the likes of Myron, Michelangelo, Shakespeare, and Twain? What distorted and impoverished picture of the human experience would be the result? And what kind of service would we be rendering if we simply engaged and re-engaged familiar, comfortable, and often mediocre material chosen primarily by reference to a negative standard, and chosen only to safeguard us from every possible complaint or offense? BYU has often drawn criticism—and will continue to do so, I suspect—precisely because so many of our faculty are laboring conscientiously under the inspired mandate to seek after the good and are striving as well to teach their students how to do the same thing. But not everyone's definition of the good is equivalent. And more importantly, as we have already noted, actively seeking the good (or teaching another how to do so) is no easy or relaxing task.

First of all, seeking after the good requires, in addition to effort, considerable sacrifice and commitment. In an address entitled "Counterfeits: A Mess of Pottage," Barta Heiner, who teaches in the Theatre and Media Arts Department at BYU, shared the following story of her own personal odyssey:

About seven years ago, I was performing with Denver Center Theatre Company and teaching at the National Theatre Conservatory. I was in an ideal situation, one that my professional peers in other cities would envy. Then I received a call from one of my former teachers at BYU. There was an opening in the department to teach acting. I said, "No, thank you." Returning to Provo would have been like committing professional suicide. A couple of months later the same offer came and I was encouraged to really think about it. So I did, and I prayed. I got this feeling that I was to return to BYU. I started to analyze myself. Was that a spiritual prompting or just indigestion? Was that really what God wanted me to do? Or just sentimentalism? . . .

I prayed again; another prompting? I wasn't sure. . . . And what if it was? Then I got angry. I didn't pray for about two weeks. I thought, "I'm a professional actress! I've worked long and hard to be where I am. I don't want to go back to teach at BYU!" I struggled and pondered, and a thought came to me: "I am teaching a group of amoral people to succeed

in acting. Who is teaching those people who want to be *moral* how to succeed in acting?”<sup>4</sup>

I am entirely sure that many of my colleagues here at BYU have had similar experiences, and they have made similar sacrifices in order to teach art, film, and literature to BYU students. And they have run the risk of offending someone in the process.

But seeking after virtue as a teacher requires not only personal sacrifice and commitment; it also requires talent, a sensitive eye, an understanding heart, and the ability to recognize, highlight, and disentangle the good from the bad in such a way that others can learn to do likewise. As Hugh Nibley once explained while speaking of gospel culture, it requires us to sift through the world’s contributions and to put our own seal on it.<sup>5</sup> But how do we do this? On the one hand, we must indeed be selective. Brigham Young once advised, “I cannot say that I would recommend the reading of all books, for it is not all books which are good. Read good books, and extract from them wisdom and understanding as much as you possibly can, aided by the Spirit of God.”<sup>6</sup> On the other hand, as Brigham Young also advised, we must be open-minded and appreciative of *all* genuine truth and beauty—regardless of its source: “If men would be great in goodness, they must be intelligent, for no man can do good unless he knows how; therefore seek after knowledge, all knowledge, and especially that which is from above.”<sup>7</sup> Likewise, he once warned, “Let us not narrow ourselves up; for the world, with all its variety of useful information and its rich hoard of hidden treasure, is before us.”<sup>8</sup> John Taylor similarly taught that we should embrace any and all truth that is calculated to benefit us, regardless of “what shape it comes in, who brings it or who believes in it,”<sup>9</sup> and he advocated that we “foster education and intelligence of every kind,” and actively cultivate literary and artistic talent and taste.<sup>10</sup>

Now, none of these admonitions is an endorsement of art, film, or literature that is degrading, gratuitously profane or violent, pornographic, or otherwise offensive to the Spirit or harmful to the soul. Such material should indeed be avoided in our classrooms and in our private lives, even when that material might appear in a context that includes otherwise praiseworthy elements. So in this regard, a moderate, mature, and prudently formulated conception of things to avoid is appropriate and maybe even necessary. But that formulation must still derive from and answer to a loftier goal than a mere avoidance of offensive material independently conceived as such. As the prophets and other Church leaders have so often repeated, we *should* have a higher standard than that endorsed by the world at large—a standard that, yes, protects us from the bad when possible, but that also draws us to the good and produces thereby a Christlike

life, not just a protected one. Does this mean religious knowledge is the only kind of knowledge we should seek? No. Is devotional art, religious art, or art produced by and for Latter-day Saints the only kind of art we should create, view, and allow our students to view? No. Is the art produced by the world or art that is not completely inoffensive necessarily and completely worthless as a result, or even blameworthy? No—of course not. If it were, then we could not praise a pagan Greek temple like the Parthenon, which numerous Church leaders have done—*despite* the nude figures and violent scenes on its friezes and pediments. Can we produce our own great artists and students of art by turning our back on what the Egyptians, Greeks, Romans, and others of the world can teach us? Again, the answer is no. So, the real question is not, how do we completely avoid the world and its influence in producing, teaching, and appreciating art? It is, how do we teach and learn to seek after what is virtuous, lovely, of good report or praiseworthy *in* the world, and *despite* the world's failings? And how do we identify and evaluate virtue in art without simply looking for vice or its absence?

Well, perhaps the first step in answering those questions would be to recognize that art is *important*. And it is not always entertaining; more often than not art educates in a decidedly demanding, *unentertaining* fashion. And *good* art, whether by entertaining or by educating, always enriches life in ways no other human enterprise can do. Hence, it should be taken seriously, with maturity, and, at times, with a certain degree of tolerance—as the Scottish philosopher and historian David Hume once claimed in arguing that we should be capable of excusing religious and cultural differences in works of art. Why? Because those differences are so fluctuating and various that it would be ridiculous to expect the beliefs of every culture and people to resemble our own. But more importantly, it would be simply wrong to assume that artworks which manifest such differences cannot otherwise enrich or educate us.<sup>11</sup> In order to understand *how* good art enriches and educates, however, we also need to learn and teach the language, history, conventions, and rhetoric of the various arts. Such learning would constitute an important second step, acquainting ourselves with art that does not merely reflect our own views and preferences. A third essential step in seeking virtue among the arts might be to thoughtfully and fairly evaluate individual artworks in the light of our personal motives, maturity, and expectations, and in accordance with the manifest ability of the art in question to improve our perception, understanding, and appreciation of the world and of others. Does Van Gogh's *Starry Night* reveal to the unbiased eye a vision of the heavens and our place beneath them that enriches our perception, understanding, and

appreciation of life, or does it not? And if it fails that test, do the experiences of others suggest that failing to be the artist's or my own?

Of course, all of this reflection and analysis requires substantial effort—which is partly why an engagement with real art is often not entertaining or relaxing, and why it is often criticized or avoided by those seeking mere amusement. When film director Michelangelo Antonioni screened *L'avventura* at the Cannes Film Festival in 1962 he was booed off the stage by the audience. His film was so intellectually demanding that viewers accustomed to effortless entertainment, as well as schooled and experienced critics, were challenged beyond their expectations. Nevertheless, his film was subsequently awarded a special jury prize for “a new movie language and the beauty of its images.” Antonioni has since become known as one of the world's greatest filmmakers, and *L'avventura* was rated in a 1962 *Sight and Sound* critics' poll as the third best film ever made (an evaluation it has largely maintained in subsequent polls). Real art challenges us and stretches our abilities, but in consequence it also nourishes us both intellectually and spiritually. In other words, unlike mere entertainment, genuine art is genuinely wholesome.

### Preparing to Create and Appreciate Great Art

In a videotaped interview entitled “The Artist and the Spirit,” Boyd K. Packer was asked, “Do you still think that art makes a difference, that the arts are important to us as human beings on this earth?” President Packer replied, “Well, just erase them, and what would you have? . . . It would be intolerable, insufferable.”<sup>12</sup> He doesn't quite say, as does Nietzsche in *The Birth of Tragedy*, that “the existence of the world is justified only as an aesthetic phenomenon,”<sup>13</sup> but he comes pretty close. Then again, what kind of art did President Packer have in mind when he made this remarkable claim? He specifically mentioned the art of the ancients, and suggested through references to the Pythagoreans that he especially had in mind Greek art and architecture. And speaking to the question of whether LDS artists should produce only art that is religious, he answered, no—certain circumstances call for devotional art, but not all art need be devotional to be good: “The beauty is you can do anything you want,” he explained. “*Everything* that is lovely, or praiseworthy, of good report—we seek after these things. So the marvelous thing is that members of the Church in the arts can do what they want. They can produce symphonic music, or they can produce ballads, religious music, or whatever. But they ought to do it *well*, and they have the right to do it with inspiration.”

Earlier in the interview, speaking specifically about how LDS artists can *prepare* to “do it well,” he said that talent and inspiration are not enough; great artists, writers, and musicians need to be *trained*—which means, at least in part, that they need to learn what the world has to teach. After he was asked what he thought about turn-of-the-century LDS artists like John Hafen (an art missionary who went at Church expense to study drawing and painting in the very worldly salons of nineteenth-century Paris in order to prepare to paint the Salt Lake Temple murals—and who produced in the course of that training, along with fellow art missionaries, numerous nude drawings and paintings now owned by the BYU and Church museums of art), Elder Packer said the following:

The temple was underway, and it was about to the point where they were going to do the interiors and the appointments, and so they called to begin with four brethren and they sent them to Paris to study painting in order to do the interior painting. And I thought that that’s a lesson because we have members in the Church who are in the field of the arts and who have an idea that “inspiration will come, and I have talent, and that’s all I need.” Well, they had inspiration, and they had all the talent, but they needed to be trained, they needed to do the work, to learn the fundamentals, the basics, in order that they could produce works of art, particularly in the temple, that would be creditable.<sup>14</sup>

He then referred to Oliver Cowdery’s failed attempt to translate the Book of Mormon by relying only on inspiration, and said that just as Oliver Cowdery had to do everything within his power first, so too do our artists. And we might add: so too do ordinary learners and teachers.

Artists and students of art have to work. They have to train. They have to learn from the world and from the history of art, film, and literature everything they can that is virtuous, lovely, of good report, or praiseworthy. And we as teachers have a sacred obligation to help them. Of course, we don’t fulfill that obligation by using degrading materials and methods; but neither do we fulfill it by teaching a Shakespeare class in which we only read those passages that contain nothing that could possibly offend. We don’t fulfill it by teaching art history classes in which we show slides of paintings and sculptures that are patently offensive and disrespectful of the human body and human relations; but neither do we fulfill it by showing only slides of those artworks that contain nothing that could possibly offend. We fulfill our obligation by carefully and prayerfully deciding what materials to use, and then, by prudently using those materials—and by teaching others, by example and by principle, how to seek for and to recognize *on their own* the good, the true, and the beautiful—even when tainted, at times, by elements we don’t endorse but can excuse when they’re not too serious.

## Seeing Life Whole

Brigham Young, who organized the Deseret Dramatic Association just two years after entering the Salt Lake Valley in 1847 and opened the first playhouse west of the Missouri River only four years later, in 1853, wrote the following about theater—though we can extrapolate his remarks to any and all of the arts:

Upon the stage of a theater can be represented in character, evil and its consequences, good and its happy results and rewards; the weakness and the follies of man, the magnanimity of virtue and the greatness of truth. The stage can be made to aid the pulpit in impressing upon the minds of a community an enlightened sense of a virtuous life, also a proper horror of the enormity of sin and a just dread of its consequences. The path of sin with its thorns and pitfalls, its gins and snares can be revealed, and how to shun it.<sup>15</sup>

Brigham Young suggests here that art has the capacity to reveal what Aristotle in the *Poetics* called “universal truths.”<sup>16</sup> This capacity is perhaps what Gerrit de Jong called “culture”: the ability to see life whole. De Jong wrote, “To be familiar with the best that has been thought and the best that has been done in the world—that is *culture*.”<sup>17</sup> But being familiar with the best that has been thought and done does not mean being familiar only with portrayals of what Brigham Young called in the above-mentioned passage the “good and its happy results.” It also means being familiar with wise, truthful, and tasteful treatments of “evil and its consequences.” In other words, art can and sometimes should address troubling matters—ironically, obliquely, and tastefully, but address them all the same. Admittedly, since artists and teachers are no more perfect than the rest of us, those treatments are sometimes less wise, truthful, and tactful than they should be. But unless they are flawed by serious offenses, we should be able and willing to glean the good and deal judiciously with the rest.

Later in the address where Gerrit de Jong defined culture, he spoke of a colleague in the English department who advised a new student that she needed to take a freshman English class. “Do I have to take some more of that?” she complained. Apologetically, he insisted that, yes, she did. The girl then indignantly replied, “Well, I ain’t never studied much of it, but I speak as good as them what has.”<sup>18</sup> I think that when we as teachers or parents fail in our responsibility to expose our students or children to great art, film, and literature, merely out of fear that they (or someone else) will find offense or complain, and when as students or learners we insist upon such treatment, we silently conspire with each other to underwrite a cultural illiteracy that is every bit as pathetic and spiritually stunting as was this young girl’s speech. We do each other no true service. We light no fire

in each other's heart. And we decidedly do not seek that which is virtuous, lovely, of good report or praiseworthy.

In an Italian film entitled *Cinema Paradiso*, a fatherless boy grows up enamored of the movies and is mentored by the kindly projectionist of the town's only theater. But he lives in a small, provincial community in an age long past, and the local priest (with only the best of intentions) edits out of every film every expression of love, passion, or physical affection: every kiss, every embrace, every caress. Some of the scenes deserve editing, but most do not. Over the course of *Cinema Paradiso*, the boy grows into a man, falls in love with a beautiful girl, loses her, moves to the big city, becomes a famous movie director, and in the end, finds himself restless and dissatisfied with life, perpetually unable to realize true love and happiness. When the old projectionist dies, his protégé finally returns home and after the funeral discovers a gift from his old friend: a reel of film, composed entirely of clips that the old man had been forced to cut from the films he had shown while the boy was growing up. It is a breathtaking montage of love, passion, and life. *Cinema Paradiso*, as the title intimates, ends with the suggestion that art and dedicated teachers can help us redeem a fragmented life—the affection and passion that had been edited out of the protagonist's life by the tragedies and circumstances of his fatherless childhood and lost love are restored to him from beyond the grave by someone who cared for him as much as any father—and art is the medium of that restoration.

In conclusion, I hope that, yes, we will be wise and careful in deciding what art we appreciate and what principles we embrace and teach, but that we will also redouble our commitment to kindle and rekindle in each other's hearts the passion for art, beauty, philosophy, and literature that fired the flame of our own various searches after the virtuous, the lovely, and the praiseworthy. I hope that we will actively seek the good and not merely avoid the bad. And I hope that we will be judicious and not judgmental, admitting to ourselves and to others that measured tolerance is a significant virtue in itself. Finally, may I at once endorse a higher standard of taste than is the mundane norm and yet suggest as well that our efforts both to articulate that standard and to comply with its dictates should be performed in the *service* of virtue, not in its stead.

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14. Packer, *Artist and the Spirit*.
15. *Discourses of Brigham Young*, 243.
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17. Gerrit de Jong, "Art and Life," address to the BYU student body, January 5, 1953, 2, L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah, emphasis in original.
18. De Jong, "Art and Life."