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"Popular Culture and the War Against Standards

Michael Medved, co-host, Sneak Previews

Editor's Preview: *In this edited transcript of his remarks at Hillsdale's Shavano Institute for National Leadership seminar, "Faith and the Free Market," held in Orange County, California last November, PBS film critic Michael Medved describes the destructive character of modern films, TV, art and music and suggests that ordinary Americans fight back.*

When people meet me and they find out that I make my living as a film critic, they often exhibit two spontaneous but absolutely contradictory reactions. The first comment is, "Boy, you have a great job!" and, usually in the very next breath, they add, "Aren't movies terrible these days?"

The fact is that both statements are accurate. I do have a great job in many ways, and yes, movies are absolutely terrible today. Ironically, it is sometimes those films that are the most profoundly, irredeemably awful that make my job most stimulating. That was certainly the case with one of the most critically praised movies of 1990, *The Cook, the Thief His Wife and Her Lover*.

This is not a film for the faint-of-heart—or the delicate of stomach. It begins with a scene showing the brutal beating of a naked man while the main character gleefully urinates all over him. It ends with that same character slicing off a piece of a carefully cooked and elegantly prepared human corpse in the most vivid and horrifying scene of cannibalism ever portrayed in motion pictures.

In between, we see necrophilia, sex in a toilet, the unspeakably bloody and sadistic mutilation of a nine year-old boy, another victim smeared with feces, a woman whose



Photo: Courtesy of the *Washington Times*

cheek is pierced with a fork, and an edifying scene with two naked bodies writhing together ecstatically in the back of a truck filled with rotting, maggot-infested garbage. There is, in short, unrelieved ugliness, horror and depravity at every turn.

Naturally, the critics loved it.

Caryn James of the August *New York Times* hailed *The Cook, the Thief His Wife and Her Lover* as "brilliant." Two leading film critics, whose approach to film reviewing I have often considered all thumbs, called the picture "provocative" and awarded their coveted "No thumbs up" endorsement.

Richard Corliss of *Time* magazine went even further and described the film as "excellent, exciting and extraordinary."

For me, this sort of critical praise proved even more disturbing than the film itself. The movie just made me sick, but the positive reviews made me angry. My partner and

I had initially decided not to cover the film on *Sneak Previews*, the weekly show we host on PBS, because we felt that by discussing it on the air we'd only be granting it additional publicity. Jeffrey Lyons and I don't always agree by any means, but we certainly saw eye to eye on *The Cook, the Thief His Wife and Her Lover*. And when some of our esteemed colleagues began using words like "brilliant" and "excellent" to describe this putrid, pointless and pretentious piece of filth, we decided that we had to respond.

So we did a special segment on our show in the course of which I transgressed one of the great unwritten rules of the so-called critical community: I not only attacked the film itself, but I also attacked my fellow critics who had praised it so lavishly. I objected in particular to the tendency to describe the picture as "a raunchy black comedy" without giving prospective moviegoers any honest indication of the vivid brutality and horrors it contained. I also cited the laudatory response to this hateful film as an indication that Americans are absolutely justified in their deep distrust of film critics.

After I made such statements on nationwide TV, there was a minor—and entirely predictable—firestorm concerning my comments and protesting my alleged "arrogance" and "irresponsibility." One letter from a viewer in Oregon eloquently summarized these protests: "I was angered and disgusted by your unfair and savage attack on *The Cook, the Thief His Wife and Her Lover*," she wrote, and then went on revealingly,

"Though I have not seen the film, I certainly plan to do so and your review was way out of line. The one thing we don't need is a Jessie Helms

clone on PBSIf you are so full of old-fashioned, judgmental, right-winged bigotry, then that is your problem, but you have no right to pollute the airwaves with your narrow-minded stupidityYour job is to tell us if a

Heaven forfend that I should discuss in any way the message that a particular film is sending to the movie-going public!

This is the very nature of the cultural battle before us. It is, at its very core, a war against standards. It is a war against judg-

anal rape and the mutilation of female genitalia, had created a "refreshing and astonishing" body of work. Professor Gates went on to compare their achievements to those of Shakespeare, Chaucer, and James Joyce. (As the late George Orwell once commented, "There are some ideas so preposterous that only an intellectual could believe them.")

In film, the art form which I most regularly consider, the process of degradation has already reached levels that should lead all thoughtful critics to despair for the future of the medium. Indescribable gore drenches the modern screen, even in movies allegedly made for families. And the most perverted forms of sexuality—loveless, decadent, brutal and sometimes incestuous—are showing regularly at a theater near you.

Perhaps you haven't seen *The Grifters*, another critical favorite of the last few months. Oscar winner Anjelica Houston co-stars with John Cusak in a story about the sexual tension between a mother-and-son team of con artists. In the climactic sequence, Houston attempts to seduce her boy in order to steal his money, but this heart-warming family reunion ends with blood spurring endlessly from his severed jugular vein.

This kind of work is regularly described as high art, along with another sort of ugliness that is even more commonly celebrated on movie screens today. Film after film centers

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on characters who are, fundamentally, despicable—amoral losers who give us nothing to admire, nor even to care about.

Goodfellas, the winner of nearly all the most prestigious critics' awards for 1990, is a case in point. This gritty tale of small-time Mafia hoods is Martin Scorsese's follow-up to *The Last Temptation of Christ*. Technically, it is indeed a brilliant achievement, and it features superb performances by a number of talented actors. Why, then, do most people who see the film leave the theater feeling cold and empty?

"One of the symptoms of the corruption and collapse of our national culture is the insistence that we examine only the surface of any work of art. The politically correct, properly liberal notion is that we should never dig deeper—to consider whether a given work is true, or good, or spiritually nourishing—or to evaluate its impact on society at large."

movie is skillful or not, but please stay off your moralistic high horse and keep to the business of reviewing movies."

Ignoring Soul and Substance

This letter represents just one very small skirmish in what I would describe as the "culture wars" currently raging in our society, but it reveals very forcefully what those wars are all about. My correspondent is saying that it's fine for me to talk about a film being in or out of focus, about sloppy or competent editing, about a convincing or unconvincing performance, but Heaven for-fend that I should address its moral content!

Michael Medved is well known to millions of Americans as the co-host of the weekly PBS television program, *Sneak Previews*. An honors graduate of Yale, he is the author of seven nonfiction books, including the bestsellers: *What Really Happened to the Class of '65?*, which became a bestseller and the basis for a weekly series on NBC, *Hospital: The Hidden Lives of a Medical Center Staff*, and with his brother, Harry Medved, *The Golden Turkey Awards*. Mr. Medved has been a frequent guest on "The Tonight Show," "Oprah Winfrey," "David Letterman," "ABC Nightline," "Today," "Good Morning America," and other programs. He is also active in a wide variety of Jewish causes and is president of the Pacific Jewish Center in Venice, California. In 1989, the December issue of *Imprimis* featured his presentation, "Hollywood vs. Religion," which was reprinted in *Reader's Digest*. Copies are available upon request.

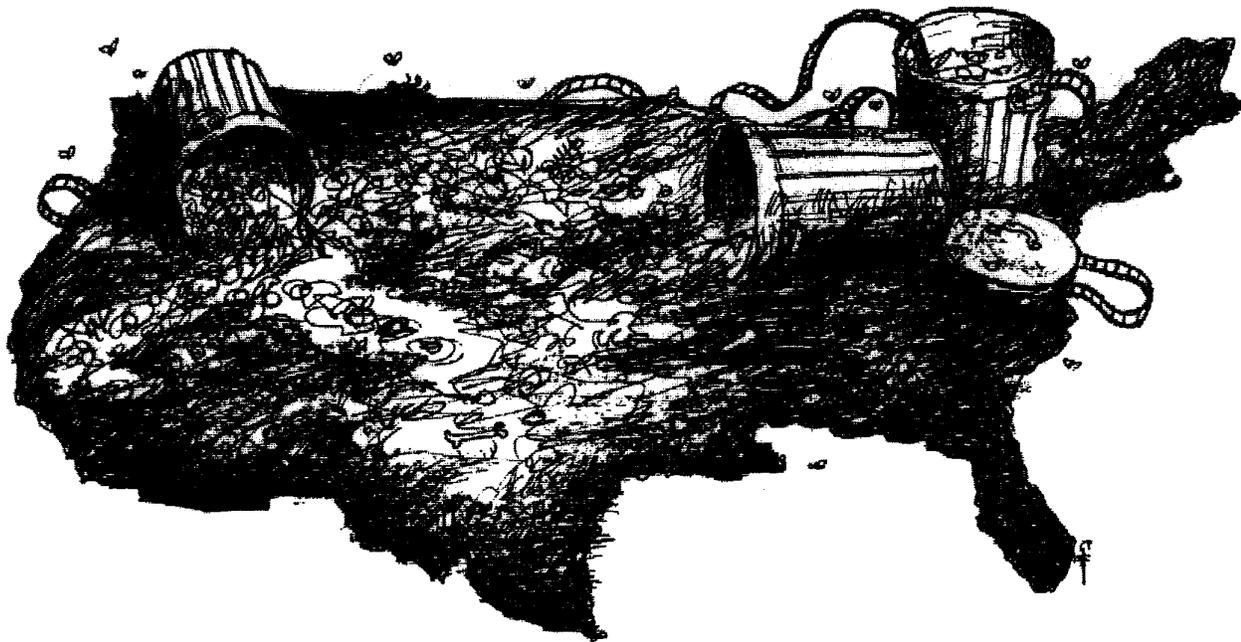
ment. Its proponents insist that the worst insult you can offer someone today is to suggest that he or she is judgmental.

One of the symptoms of the corruption and collapse of our national culture is the insistence that we examine only the surface of any work of art. The politically correct, properly liberal notion is that we should never dig deeper—to consider whether a given work is true, or good, or spiritually nourishing—or to evaluate its impact on society at large. Contemporary culture is obsessed with superficial skill and slick salesmanship while ignoring the more important issues of soul and substance. This is one of the consequences of the war on standards—a war that is currently being waged on three fronts: the glorification of ugliness, the assault on the family, and the attempt to undermine organized religion. Each of these fronts is serious enough to merit separate consideration.

The Glorification of Ugliness

Everywhere around us, in every realm of artistic endeavor, we see evidence of the rejection of traditional standards of beauty and worth. In the visual arts, in literature, in film, in music of both popular and classical variety, ugliness has been enshrined as a new standard, as we accept the ability to shock as a replacement for the old ability to inspire.

This tendency has reached absurd extremes with the recent efforts to elevate the banging and shouting of rap music into some sort of noble art form. Consider, for a moment, the recent obscenity trial of 2 Live Crew. One of the expert witnesses who helped secure the group's acquittal was a professor of literature at Duke University named Henry L. Gates. Under oath, mind you, he testified that these poetic souls, whose lyrics exalt



Because *Goodfellas*, with its fascination for its own collection of lavishly loathsome characters, never engages our sympathy or our concern. This has been a problem with scores upon scores of recent American films. From *Miller's Crossing* to Dennis Hopper's *The Hot Spot*, from *After Dark, My Sweet* to *State of Grace*, to David Lynch's *Wild at Heart* to Robert Redford's *Havana* to Jack Nicholson's *Two fakes*, Hollywood has been creating central characters with all the warmth and charm of poisonous lizards. This trend reached its logical conclusion, I suppose, in an absolutely unbearable film called *Homer and Eddie*, in which the heroine, played by Whoopi Goldberg, is a murderer, a thief, and an escaped mental patient who also happens to be dying of a brain tumor. What an inspiring role model for today's youth!

You may never have heard of *Homer and Eddie*, or many of the other films I've just mentioned, because they all proved to be pathetic flops at the box office. Despite the presence of major stars, obscenely inflated production budgets, and enthusiastic endorsements from some of my fellow critics, these motion pictures failed to connect with ordinary moviegoers. Hollywood nevertheless persists in shelling out untold millions on projects that emphasize the darkest, most repulsive aspects of American life. To vary the lyrics of the old song, these cinematic artists insist on walking exclusively on "The Slimey Side of the Street."

In years past, in the heyday of Gary Cooper, Jimmy Stewart and Katharine Hepburn, Hollywood was accused of creating characters who were larger than life, more

deeply lovable and admirable than people in the real world. Today, the movie business regularly offers us characters who are smaller than life, who are less decent, less intelligent, less noble than our own friends and neighbors. Four years ago, George Roche wrote an eloquent and important book that highlighted the threat within our culture to those values of civility and faith that many of us hold most dear. The name of that book

"Today, the movie business regularly offers us characters who are smaller than life, who are less decent, less intelligent, less noble than our own friends and neighbors."

was *A World Without Heroes*. And that is precisely the sort of world that Hollywood portrays again and again on screen. It is a world in which ugliness—and emptiness—emerge as the new standard for our society.

The Assault on the Family

The second front on the war against standards involves an attack on the family that seems to gather new force with every passing year. For thousands of years, society has acknowledged the fact that a permanent partnership between a man and woman, for the purpose of nurturing children, offers the best chance of human happi-

ness and fulfillment. This fundamental notion has not only been challenged in recent years, it has been assaulted with unparalleled ferocity by some of the most powerful forces in our culture.

The popular music business, for instance, has become a global enterprise of staggering proportions that generates billions of dollars every year through the simple-minded glorification of animal lust. Nothing could stand at a further remove from the selflessness and discipline that are essential to successful family life than the masturbatory fantasies that saturate MTV 24 hours a day.

Once upon a time, parents worried about the impact of idolized crooners like Frank Sinatra, Elvis Presley, or the Beatles, but these performers were tender, wholesome romantics when compared to Guns and Roses, Madonna and other paragons who dominate today's music scene. The singers of yesteryear certainly exploited sexuality as part of their appeal, but the fantasies they purveyed in their songs still centered on long-term emotional relationships between men and women. What is most striking about the popular music of the moment is the cold, bitter and sadistic edge to the vision of fleeting sex it promotes.

Another message of the music that is ceaselessly reinforced by television and movies is the perverse but pervasive idea that "kids know best." Teenagers are regularly portrayed as the source of all wisdom, sanity and sensitivity, while their parents are shown as hopeless, benighted clowns. With Bart Simpson regularly turning up on lists of the most admired Americans, we've certainly come a long way from the Andy Hardy

model, with young Mickey Rooney learning life lessons from his father, the stern but kindly judge. This new idea that children have all the answers, and have to show the older generation how to live and how to adjust to the brave new world around them, is a holdover from the destructive obsessions of the '60s youth culture, and it poisons the climate for family life.

Even the smash hit motion picture *Home Alone*, which cunningly caters to America's desperate hunger for family entertainment, advances the notion that today's hip kids don't really need their bumbling parents. The seven year-old hero not only survives in fine style when his parents fly away to Europe and accidentally leave him behind, but the boy also displays remarkable courage and skill in foiling the designs of two adult burglars.

Nevertheless, *Home Alone* deserves some credit for showing a more-or-less normal middle class family, since this sort of unit has become an increasingly endangered species in American feature films. According to the Census Bureau, two-thirds of all American adults are currently married, but movies today focus overwhelmingly on single people. If you want to test this premise, all you have to do is pick up a copy of any metropolitan newspaper and read the entertainment section to see what's currently playing at your local theatres. The number of films about single people will outnumber the films about married people by a ratio of five or six to one. And even those relatively rare films that do make an attempt to show life within a family will most often depict a marriage that is radically dysfunctional—with a husband accused of attempting to murder his wife (as in *Reversal of Fortune*), or a wife sleeping with her husband's male (or female) friends, as in *Henry and June*, or *The Sheltering Sky*, or *Alice*, or so many others.

Apparently, some stern decree has gone out from the upper reaches of the Hollywood establishment that love between married people must never be portrayed on screen. If a wedding occurs in the course of a film, it invariably marks the conclusion of a romance, never the beginning or the middle of the love relationship. The top grossing film of 1990 was *Ghost*, one of a series of sex-after-death fantasies that the movie industry has churned out in recent years. In this crafty tear-jerker, the filmmakers seemed to make a point of the fact that the central couple, connected by a love so deep that it survives into the afterlife, have never taken the trouble to get married.

Even those films that seem to celebrate the joys of child-rearing display a contemptuous attitude toward marriage. A few years ago, Hollywood discovered that babies could serve as a major draw at the box office, and attempted to lure moviegoers with a series of diapers-and-formula fantasies. The three most successful of these films—*Three Men and a Baby*, *Look Who's Talking*, and *Baby Boom*—all featured single people in the parental roles. The underlying message could hardly be more clear: infants may be cute and cuddly and desirable, but they are best enjoyed without the inconvenient entanglements of marriage. This is precisely the sort of irresponsible message that encourages the tragic epidemic of out-of-wedlock births that is sweeping the country.

With its single-minded focus on unmarried characters, the movie industry conveys the idea that it's exciting to live on your own, but boring and stifling to live within a marriage. The unspoken assumption is that married people never experience anything that's interesting enough to be dramatized in a feature film. My favorite contemporary psychologist—who also happens to be my wife, Dr. Diane Medved—recently wrote a book called *The Case Against Divorce*. In the course of that book, she shows how the media's titillat-

distinctions. In the Book of Genesis, God creates the world by dividing the light from the darkness, dividing the waters above from the waters beneath, and so forth. In traditional Jewish homes, when we say farewell to the Sabbath every Saturday night and prepare to move into the secular week, we recite a blessing that praises God for separating aspects of reality, one from the others—for making distinctions. To the extent that we as human beings feel that we are created in God's image, we make distinctions too—and we have standards.

That is a position that is honored by millions upon millions of our fellow citizens, but it is regularly ridiculed in the mass media. One of the national television networks has chosen to promote its most popular show with a scene that mocks a family saying grace. With the Simpsons solemnly gathered around their cartoon dinner table, Bart intones: "Dear God, we pay for all this stuff ourselves, so thanks for nothing."

Meanwhile, the federal government pays to display a crucifix immersed in a jar of the artist's own urine, and the nation's most prominent vocalist, Madonna, abuses Christian symbols and sacraments in sexually explicit music videos commonly viewed by children.

"A war against standards leads logically and inevitably to hostility to religion, because it is religious faith that provides the ultimate basis for all standards."

ing portrayal of the sexy thrills of singlehood has helped to foster the sense that people are missing something if they remain married, and has thereby promoted the rising divorce rate. Of course, there are many other sociological and psychological reasons that couples break up, but can anyone doubt that the popular culture's determined assault on the traditional family has contributed to the problem?

Hostility to Organized Religion

This brings us to the third front in the current culture wars, and perhaps the most crucial battlefield of all, and that is the attempt to undermine organized religion. A war against standards leads logically and inevitably to hostility to religion, because it is religious faith that provides the ultimate basis for all standards. The God of the Bible is not a moral relativist, and He is definitely judgmental. The very nature of the Judeo-Christian God is a Lord who makes

In 1989, I spoke at Hillsdale College on the topic, "Hollywood Versus Religion," and I focused on the film industry's self-destructive tendency to portray all religious characters as corrupt, or crazy, or both. I found this pattern particularly perplexing since the major movie projects that attacked traditional faith all turned out to be commercial flops, while the very few films that took a more sympathetic attitude toward religion performed surprisingly well at the box office.

I wish that I could report that Hollywood has gotten the message in recent months, but if anything the situation has deteriorated. Since I last spoke on this subject, major studios have given us films such as *Nuns on the Run*, which savagely lampoons every aspect of Catholic practice and belief; *Star Trek V*, in which the villains are a band of crazed believers who follow a mysterious, demonic force that they, and the film's credits, identify as "God"; *Mermaids*, which features Cher as a nymphomaniac single mother and manages the considerable feat of

trashing both Judaism and Catholicism in the same film; and *Godfather III*, which focuses on corruption and murder within the Vatican and displays far more sympathy for the mafia than for the Church.

Popular Culture: Why It's Impossible to Tune Out

When I try to discuss some of these issues with working professionals in the entertainment industry, they usually offer the same response: "Nobody's forcing people to see these movies," they'll say. "If you object to the messages that you're getting from a piece of creative work, then you can exercise your right to avoid that film, or to switch that channel on your TV set, or to turn your radio off. If something offends you, then it's easy to tune it out."

Unfortunately, they're wrong. Popular culture is an overwhelming and omnipresent force in this society; not even the most determined and conscientious efforts can effectively insulate you—or your children—from its powerful reach.

Allow me to illustrate the point with a personal recollection. Last spring, my family and I went with a large group on a Passover retreat to the mountains near Santa Barbara. It was a wonderful experience, and in the middle of the week we took a private side trip to a nearby lake. The weather couldn't have been more perfect—with puffy April clouds in a pure blue sky—and as we got out of the car our daughters, aged one and three, went toddling off toward the ducks at the edge of the water. All of a sudden, the one year-old was saying one of her first words, "Duckie! Duckie!" and reaching out to the birds with her chubby little arms, while my wife and I looked on with satisfaction.

But within minutes, a group of teenagers, mostly 13 to 15 year-olds, arrived at the lakeshore. They were carrying a "boom box," and coming out of that shiny chrome machine was a rap song with the foulest, ugliest language I have ever heard. It produced a series of angry shouts of four-letter words describing rape and feces and oral sex—all blasting out at a deafening volume. Our little girls had never heard those words before. They were startled. I don't know if it was the words themselves, the violent explosions of that so-called music, or whether it was merely the painful level of that throbbing bass. Whatever it was, my one year-old started to cry. Naturally, the three year-old soon joined her, and we had our hands full trying to comfort two frightened little girls.

I suppose we could have stayed and made a scene, but the fact is that I don't carry

assault weapons in my trunk. Instead, we did the only sensible thing, which was to get into the car and to drive away. We gave up the shores of the lake, the waterfowl, and the beautiful day. We abandoned the scene to these brutish kids, and to the degradation of that hideous noise.

The point is that you can say to yourself, "I'll just tune out the messages of the media," but it's not possible today. In the past, if you talked about popular culture, you meant going to a movie theatre perhaps once a week and paying your money to see a single show. But modern technological advances have brought us boom boxes, and Walkmans, and VCRs, television and MTV. The messages, the images, are everywhere around us, and seep into every corner of our lives.

Is it a coincidence that the war on standards in art, music, television and film, corresponds with increasingly destructive behavior on the part of the young people who are the most devoted consumers of these media?

In one of his most important columns, George Will asks if it was merely an accident that the horrifying "wilding" attack in Central Park so precisely mirrored the images in popular rap songs celebrating sexual violence and the degradation of women. The members of a new generation of American children will have watched an average of 15,000 murders on television by the time they've reached the age of eighteen. Is it illogical to suspect that some of them might be intrigued enough by all this vicarious violence that they might want to explore similar experiences first hand?

Is there no connection between the media's obsession with crime and violence and the fact that the number of 14 to 17 year-olds who were arrested in 1990 was thirty times what it was in 1950?

The rate of out-wedlock-births in this country has increased by 500 percent since 1960, and one out of ten of all teenaged girls will be pregnant in 1991. The Centers for Disease Control recently reported that more than a quarter of American females have engaged in sexual intercourse by age fifteen—five times the rate that prevailed as recently as 1970. How can media moguls plausibly maintain that these behavioral trends have nothing to do with the sex-drenched popular culture that plays such a central, all-consuming role in the lives of so many young Americans?

Ironically, the leaders of the entertainment industry regularly downplay the significance of their own work, insisting that the

fantasies they have created have no influence on anyone. The networks and the studios have commissioned expensive studies from various experts to support their appallingly illogical contention that violence on screen has no connection to violence in real life, and that intensely sexual material does nothing to encourage promiscuity.

This same industry then turns around and asks advertisers to pay hundreds of thousands of dollars for thirty seconds of air time in the hope that this fleeting exposure will directly alter the public's buying behavior! Don't they grasp the internal contradiction here? On the one hand, we're told that an hour of television programming has no real world consequences whatsoever, and on the other we're led to believe that 60-second spots that occasionally interrupt this program are powerful enough to change public perceptions of everything from canned goods to candidates.

I happen to believe that the industry is right when it touts the impact of media images, but I can't accept the contention that motion pictures, and song lyrics, and music videos and TV shows are somehow less influential than commercials.

Getting Government Out of the Culture Business

That is why the current war on standards in the popular culture is such an important struggle for America's future. I believe that this will be *the* issue of the 1990s—the issue of values, of trying to maintain standards against those who are seeking to erase them altogether.

Unfortunately, there's a tendency at both ends of the political spectrum to confuse this question with absolutist claims about the need for censorship versus the protections of the First Amendment.

For conservatives, there's the special danger of surrendering to the fundamental liberal temptation, which is to attempt to solve every problem with a new government program. When it comes to the current crisis in values in the popular culture, the governmental initiative that is sometimes recommended is a vastly expanded role for official censorship. I am always surprised at thoughtful conservatives who argue passionately that bureaucratic solutions will never eliminate poverty, or improve medical care, or end racism overnight, but who nonetheless believe that a government program can somehow succeed in the delicate task of raising the moral tone in this country.

Expanded censorship is not the answer, and attempts to move in that direction will

invariably prove counter-productive. Take the example of 2 Live Crew, our country's most celebrated poets of the perverse. When we tried to censor them and had them arrested on obscenity charges, we made these thugs into instant folk heroes. They were performing in front of an adults-only crowd of masochists who had been stupid enough to pay money to listen to their feeble-minded filth, when the police appeared to apprehend the stars of the evening and to cart them away in handcuffs. Of course, they became the objects of sympathy, while receiving generous coverage on the evening news.

Largely thanks to the free publicity resulting from governmental attempts to silence them, 2 Live Crew has now sold more than two million copies of their disgusting album, "As Nasty as They Wanna Be." This is a group that had been wallowing in well-deserved obscurity before it became the target of would-be censors. As Talleyrand once commented about a particularly ill-considered policy of Napoleon: "It is worse than a crime; it is a blunder."

People on our side of the current culture wars should be calling consistently for less governmental involvement, not more. The fact is that it is the other side that has relied upon federal power to advance its own purposes in the campaign against standards.

The most obvious example is the outrageous abuse of the National Endowment for the Arts, which has played a major role in helping to underwrite and sanction the glorification of ugliness that we previously discussed. When someone like NEA grant recipient Karen Finley feels a deep compulsion to express her spiritual yearnings by taking off her clothes and smearing her genitalia with chocolate, then more power to her. If responsible adults choose to invest their money in paying for the opportunity to witness such enlightening displays, who are we to object? Nor should we attempt to interfere with the paying fans of another federally supported artist, Miss Annie Sprinkle, who delights members of her audience by urinating on them in the course of her act. But it is hardly reasonable to expect the taxpayers of America to subsidize the cost of those experiences for those who feel the need to share them. Whenever specific NEA grants are questioned, the media and the liberal mandarins invariably holler, "Censorship!" But the issue isn't censorship at all, it is *sponsorship*.

On another front in the war against standards, the assault on the family, governmental power is similarly deployed. For many years, perceptive critics have pointed out the

bigwigs in Los Angeles, or New York, or Washington, nothing will happen. We must

"What matters ultimately in the culture wars is what we do in our daily lives—not the big statements that we broadcast to the world at large, but the small messages we send through our families and our neighbors and our communities."

way that federal welfare policy promotes and subsidizes promiscuity and illegitimacy. In recent years, the genuine need for AIDS education has provided a new excuse for massive governmental support for radical sexual indoctrination. I am personally acquainted with one mother in the Chicago suburbs who felt compelled to withdraw her sixthgrader from the public schools because the required "AIDS Awareness Unit" featured approving and graphic descriptions of anal intercourse, oral sex, and male and female homosexuality—all presented to 11 year-olds! This particular mother could turn to private education as a refuge, but what about the millions who can't afford that alternative, or aren't even aware of what their children are being taught?

We have the right, we have the obligation, to protest such abuses of bureaucratic authority. While it is unreasonable to expect that government provide a solution to the crisis in fundamental values, we certainly should demand that it cease contributing to the problem. Strict governmental neutrality in the ongoing culture wars is not only a legitimate goal, but an attainable one if we fight for it intelligently.

Free Market Solutions and a Grassroots Revolution

In the final analysis, the key issues in the current conflict won't be decided in the halls of Congress or the offices of the federal bureaucracy. They will be settled, as fundamental questions are always settled most effectively in America, through the application of free market principles and displays of private-sector determination and resource-fulness.

Part of this process will no doubt involve sponsor boycotts, direct protests, letter-writing campaigns, and other forms of organized pressure. These tools are far more appropriate than new governmental regulation, which is, at best, a blunt, sloppy and ineffective instrument. A group called CLEAR TV—Christian Leaders for Responsible Television—has already enjoyed some notable success in this area. They recently pushed Burger King, one of the largest advertisers on network TV, to take out a series of newspaper ads in which the company pledged its support for family values, and promised to apply those values in judging any future television shows it will sponsor.

While environmentalists are employing all means available to persuade major corporations to stop polluting our air and water, we should use similar persuasion to prevent rely instead on a thousand different centers

the further pollution of our culture. It's high time to broaden our sense of corporate responsibility to include a serious consideration of the long-term impact of the entertainment that a company may produce or sponsor.

As part of the continuing struggle we must do more than protest the bad; we should also begin promoting the good, and providing uplifting alternatives to the trash that currently dominates the scene. It's a sad fact that talented individuals with traditional convictions or religious scruples have too often shunned active involvement in show business because of that arena's longstanding reputation for sleaziness. Unfortunately, this means abandoning the field to the sickos and sybarites, and you see the results on your television and movie screens. Let the call go out immediately: the outnumbered good guys in Hollywood desperately need reinforcements!

Keep in mind that the entertainment industry is one area of endeavor in which a few gifted individuals can still make an enormous difference. The American people have shown that they are ready to respond when given the opportunity, as witness the utterly unexpected, \$100 million success of a wholesome, life-affirming project like *Driving Miss Daisy*.

Even more recently, an unheralded, low-budget picture called *China Cry* demonstrated once again that good values can mean good box office. This off-beat production, funded by a determined group of evangelical Christians, may not be the greatest film ever made, but it's a heart-felt, passionate piece of movie-making about a young mother who undergoes a religious conversion while suffering persecution at the hands of the Chinese Communists. Without well-known stars or any promotion budget to speak of, this audacious little picture has drawn an amazing response from the public—averaging more than \$6,000 per screening in its first three weeks of release. This means that in multiplex theatres where it has played alongside big budget major studio productions, it has easily clobbered films such as *Rocky V* or *Goodfellas* or *Predator II*. We need more films like *China Cry*, but we'll only get them if concerned individuals are willing to roll up their sleeves, to dirty their hands, and to get to work—outside the mainstream, if necessary—to change the direction of the popular culture.

The change, when it comes, will amount to nothing less than a grassroots revolution. It won't flow from the top down, but from the bottom up. If we place all our faith in a few

of energy and dedication, in every corner of these United States, to make sure that popular culture will once again reflect—and

encourage—the fundamental goodness of our people.

As a film critic, it is sometimes difficult for me to acknowledge that movies aren't the measure of all things. I keep my own sense of perspective through my involvement with Pacific Jewish Center—an educational and religious institution in California I helped to found some thirteen years ago. People constantly ask me, "Why do you spend so much time on that place? You have access to television, to the world stage, and yet you devote every spare moment to your neighborhood, your synagogue, and your personal friends."

I know that supporters of Hillsdale College get the same sort of questions: "Why lavish all this attention on this one tiny school? It's in the middle of Michigan, for Heaven's sake, with only a thousand students! Wouldn't it be better to forget about this backwater institution and concentrate on the big picture?"

There's a ready answer to that challenge in George Roche's homely recollections of his own education in a one-room school house

high in the Colorado Rockies where they were short on money, books and facilities, but long on grit, determination and individual responsibility. What matters ultimately in

the culture wars is what we do in our daily lives—not the big statements that we broadcast to the world at large, but the small messages we send through our families and our neighbors and our communities. And those small messages, reinforcing each other from every direction across this country, can become a force powerful enough to change the world. The future of America will depend not so much on the movers and shakers in the centers of power, but on the hopes that we generate in our own communities, our schools, our churches, synagogues, and families. What we do there will count for even more, in the long run, than what celluloid shadows do on screen. 4