“Another View”

Op-Ed essays

THOMAS DAILEY, O.S.F.S.

Director of the Salesian Center for Faith & Culture

With truth in a device, we’ll all be lost

December 9, 2007

published in The Morning Call newspaper (Lehigh Valley, PA)

CENTER VALLEY - The “fight for freedom” has begun, at least according to the trailer for The Golden Compass, a new production from “Ingenious Film Partners.” Yet the fight is not just on-screen.

Cultural combatants have become energized by the movie’s religious depictions. The controversy encompasses not only the film version but the complete trilogy of “His Dark Materials” written by Philip Pullman. In this adventure series, an alethiometer guides a young child to the supposed truth needed to overcome the evil forces that control humanity.

It’s not difficult to glimpse a menacing message in these tales. Humanity, accompanied by the animal spirits ever close to our hearts, engages in a campaign against “the Authority” (God?) which exercises control over every world through its oppressive “Magisterium” (a proper term, in Catholicism, for the exercise of official teaching). The movie battle is less overtly religious, but victory still comes, with the help of an armored bear, after the destined child affirms “I’m not yours; I’ll never be yours.”

The cast is aligned in public support of the story. Daniel Craig (Lord Asriel) finds the book’s premises “phenomenal.” Eva Green (Serafina) defends the movie as being “about free will.” The director, Chris Weitz, avows that “part of the film’s message is to follow your own instincts as opposed to simply believing what you’re told.”

And there’s the rub - children being encouraged to cast off the shackles of authoritarian domination in pursuit of the truth of individualism. In Pullman’s plot, the compass of the inner self, unfettered by religious reckoning, provides the only real guidance on which we
need to rely. In an older, but more popular story - set in the Garden of Eden - acting on desire without consideration of a higher good creates humanity’s original sin.

But it’s just a movie, some will say. Films have always flaunted ideals and beliefs. The magic of Hollywood invites us to suspend belief and allows us to escape reality for a while in entertaining ways.

But literary or cinematic works marketed as “children’s fantasy” should not be considered harmless enjoyment. Two features of fantasy disclose art’s cathartic power, for young and old alike. Fantasy is fictional, imagining and presenting a world with new possibilities. And fantasy is enticing, drawing us through creative genius to inhabit that world, even if only for a time.

The story of The Golden Compass unfolds in a clearly fictional world, wondrously generated by state-of-the-art visual effects. Nevertheless, even fictional worlds refer to some reality, letting us “glimpse what is to come.” Though only imagined, the sought-for reality in this film is a world without divine authority. The author of the series on which the film is based defiantly admits that his books “are about killing God” and try to “undermine the basis of Christian belief.” Considering that these works are marketed for children (the movie’s heroine being a 12-year-old girl), is this the kind of world we want the next generation to inhabit, even for a few hours?

The movie is clearly enticing to young viewers. Its haunting musical score, enrapturing visual effects, and mysterious main characters all combine to engage a generation growing up amid SIMS and RPGs and avatars, a virtual world worthy of at least mental consideration, if not also an actual world to be inhabited with full agreement. It’s no fluke that the key to this possible world is a “golden compass” - a talisman whose ornamental design and jeweled character magically enhance its supposed ability to point to truth. But if the real meaning of our lives is found through a device, we are bound to get lost.

Not surprisingly, this cinematic fantasy is being released to the public during the Christmas season. A child of destiny guided by a star-studded meter gathers new forces with which to change the world - similar stories, but only one remains true! Because of the potential threat that ingenious co-marketing may surreptitiously lead parents to a bookstore to purchase the Pullman series as a child’s present, a public protest has ensued.

But picketing the picture will only stir more interest in seeing it. The better response would be for parents to provide the mature guidance that the movie’s PG rating implies - and to steer their impressionable children elsewhere. Like a pied piper, the author encourages parents to “trust the book and trust your children.” How ironic asking parents to trust a tale that foments rebellion against authority! Buying tickets to watch Alvin and the Chipmunks would be a better present.