WEEK 14, 2020
THE EPOCH TIMES

ARTS & TRADITION

PUBLIC DOMAIN

Dante shows us a way beyond hell to purgatory. Allegorical portrait of Dante Alighieri, late 16th century, by an unknown master. National Gallery of Art.

Dante and the CCP Virus:

What Do We Learn? ...4

SACRED ART

GLIMPSES OF HEAVEN:

Icons, Paintings, Prayer, and Meditation

Recollections and Reflections

In the spring, just before my homeschooling seminars closed for the summer, my Latin students and I would head to the Basilica of St. Lawrence in Asheville, North Carolina. We would gather in the courtyard outside the church, and I would issue my usual admonitions: Whisper, don't disturb those praying in the side chapel, walk, don't run, and be respectful.

I then divided the students into teams, equipped each team with a Latin dictionary, and turned them loose inside the Basilica, where they engaged in a scavenger hunt, copying down the Latin inscriptions they found there and then translating them. I roamed from team to team, giving a hand with the translations or pointing them to a site they had missed. Most were a little shocked when I pulled open a heavy metal door in the wall, showed them the tomb of Rafael Guastavino, the architect who had designed the Basilica and donated money for its construction, and had them translate the Latin on the coffin.

Some of my students were Roman Catholics, and some were unaffiliated with any religion, but the great majority were devout Protestants, many of them members of the traditional Presbyterian Church in America. On first entering that sanctuary with its statues and paintings, its bank of votive candles, and the handful of people kneeling in prayer in Eucharistic adoration, my Protestant students inevitably paused while they absorbed these strange sights.

Art and Religion: Different Interpretations

Later, they would pepper me with questions: "Why were all those candles lit?" "Do Catholics worship statues?" "Why are there so many pictures of Mary?" "Tell me again why that guy is buried in the church?"

Religious statuary and paintings have in the past roused conflicts among Christians. In the eighth and ninth centuries, citing the injunction in the Ten Commandments against the worship of "graven images," and after Emperor Leo III began banning icons, Byzantine iconoclasts (image breakers) declared war on paintings with human images inside churches and destroyed many works of art. Occasionally, this fierce battle over icons led to bloodshed.

During the Reformation, Protestants practiced a similar iconoclasm, stripping churches of their statues, burning paintings, destroying altars, and smashing stained-glass windows. The cross replaced the crucifix, and white plaster erased various mosaics.

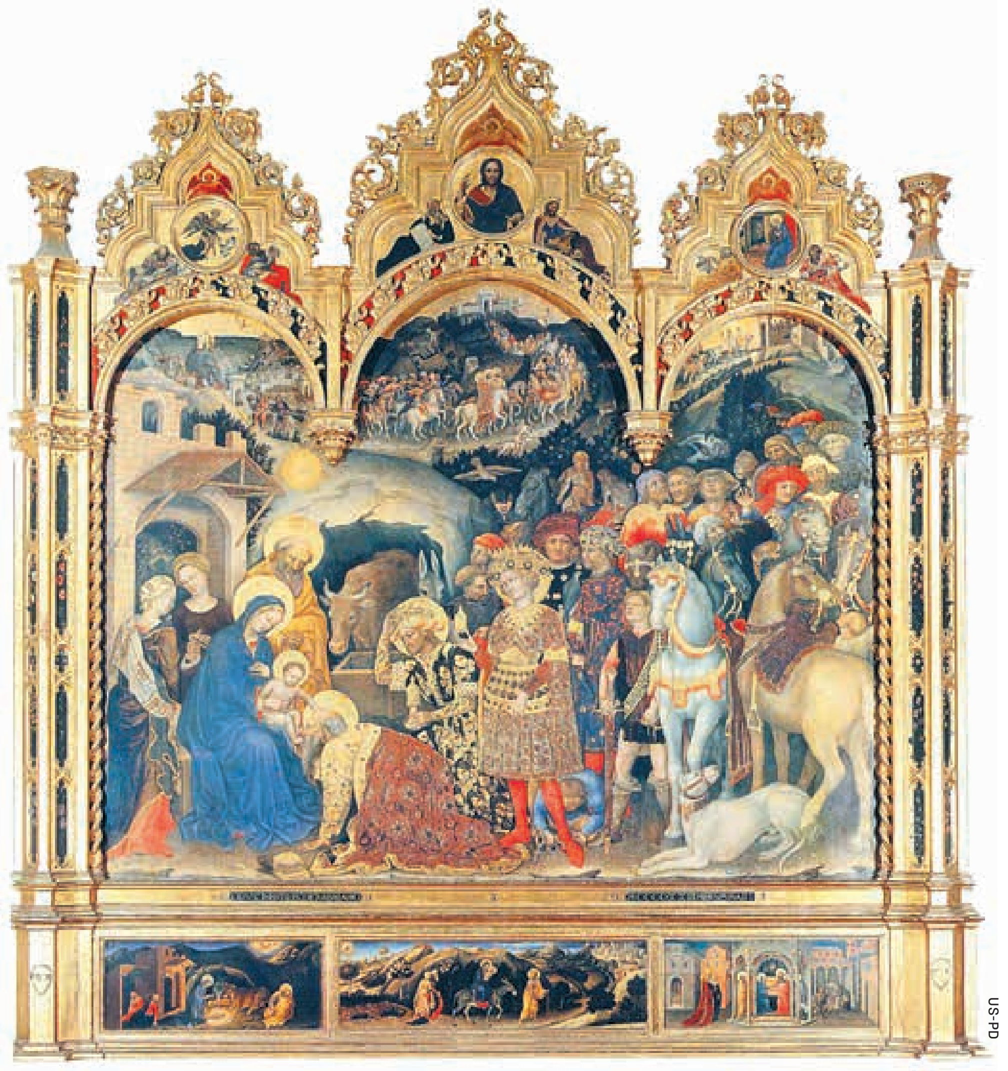
Even today, some take sides in this ancient war. After coming back from Europe, where he had visited a number of churches, a friend told me that he could never belong to a church where the devout kissed their fingers and touched them to a painting, or knelt before a statue of Mary. And certainly it's tempting to regard that gesture, or kneeling in prayer before a statue, as idol worship.

Russian Icons

Yet those who engage in these practices are not worshiping the art itself, but what it represents. The Russian Orthodox, for example, have long regarded icons as sacred objects not because of paint and brush, but because these pictures open a window into heaven.


US-PD

Russian icon of Christ Pantocrator, late 19th century. Tempera on wood panel.


US-PD

"The Adoration of the Magi" by Gentile da Fabriano.

On the online site Russia Beyond the Headline, the article "How to Read and Comprehend a Russian Icon" by writer Irina Osipova and designer Ekaterina Chipurenko provide a splendid introduction to the art of the icon. Every detail on these wooden panels—color, perspective, dress, the most insignificant image—serves a purpose and has meaning. Osipova tells us, for example, that the color gray is never used in an icon, as it is a mixture of white and black, symbolic of good and evil. The eyes, the windows to the soul, are deliberately enlarged. We Westerners find icons stilted and strange in part because their artists use reverse perspective, "a drawing with vanishing points that are placed outside the painting," creating an "illusion that these points are 'in front of' the painting" and so focusing the viewer's attention on the religious figures depicted.

Western European Religious Art

Like their Russian counterparts, for over a thousand years Western European painters largely devoted themselves to religious themes, producing paintings, statuary, glass, and even volumes of literature like the "Book of Kells," psalters, and Bibles, all as objects whose beauty reflected what they took to be the glory of God.

For over 1,000 years, Western European painters largely devoted themselves to religious themes.

Some of us might consider these artists obsessed by religion, but that was not the case. No—they lived in a culture we can barely imagine today, an age when faith encompassed all of life, commanding morals, setting out the calendar of feast days, and formalizing cultural rituals ranging from coronations to baptisms, marriages, and funerals.

This art also served to educate a preliterate people in biblical tales and the life of Christ. Giotto's "The Kiss of Judas," Gentile da Fabriano's "The Adoration of the Magi," "The Dead Man Before His Judge" by the Master of the Rohan Hours; Jan van Eyck's "Annunciation," Rogier van der Weyden's "Deposition": Here were visual stories for king and commoner alike, lessons and carols in paint rather than in music and words. In the last 500 years, the secularization of culture diminished this passion for sacred art.

PUBLIC DOMAIN


"The Angelus," 1857–1859, by Jean-François Millet. Orsay Museum.

US-PD


PUBLIC DOMAIN


(Left) "Book of Kells," Folio 32 v, Christ Enthroned, from "Treasures of Irish Art, 1500 B.C. to 1500 A.D." From the Collections of the National Museum of Ireland, Royal Irish Academy, & Trinity College, Dublin.

(Above) A self-portrait of Rembrandt, 1659. The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

We still see some moderns producing religious works—St. John the Baptist Catholic Church in Front Royal, Virginia, for instance, boasts four paintings by Henry Wingate depicting scenes from John's life—but for the most part, representational artists now turn to landscapes, portraiture, and other subjects rather than exploring religious topics.

Art and Contemplation

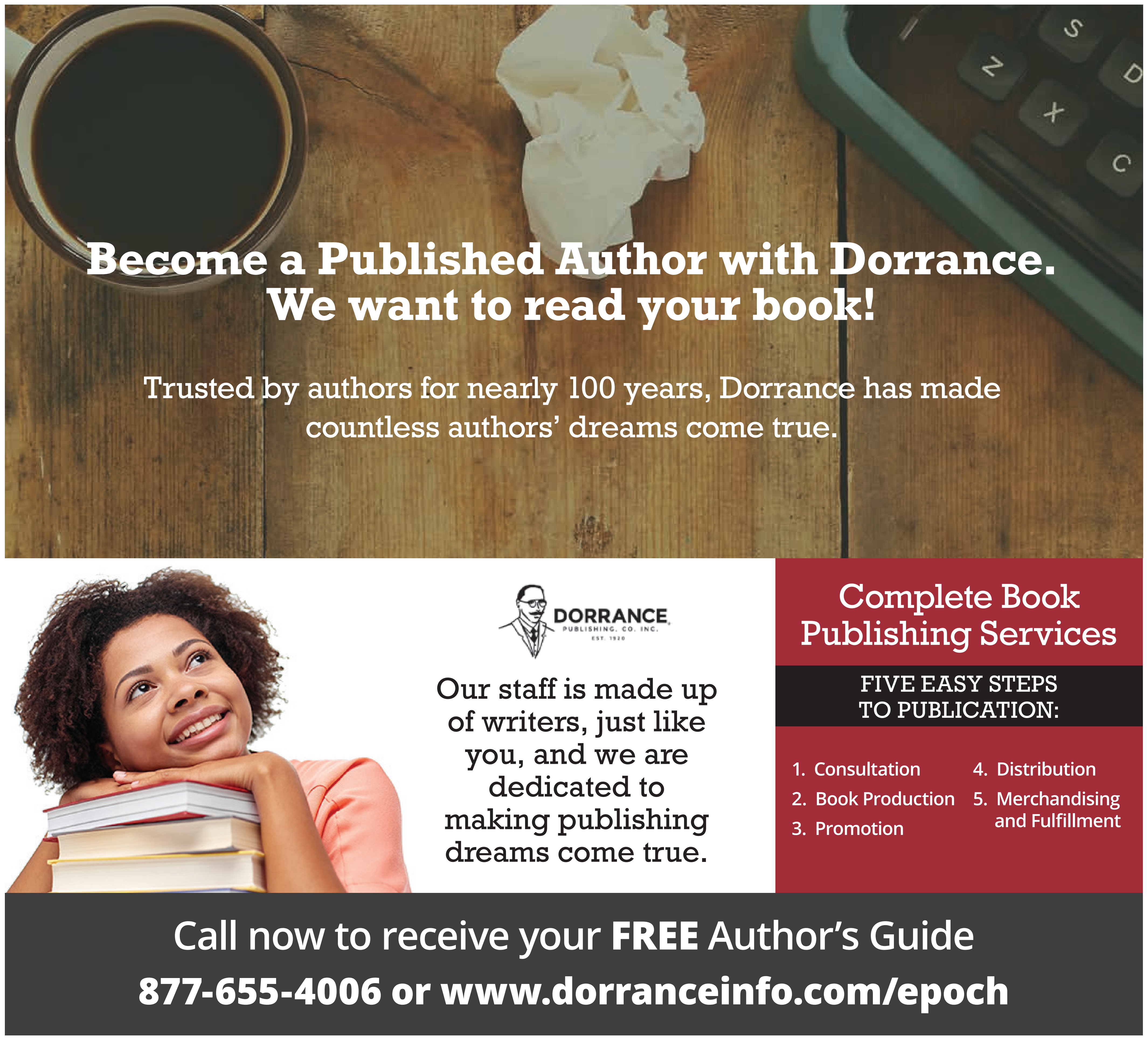
Anyone—not just those of a particular religious faith—can use art as a tool to enhance meditation, a focal point for wandering attention. The mysteries found in Giorgione's "The Tempest," the beauty of Botticelli's "Birth of Venus," Rembrandt's "Self-Portrait, 1629": When we sink into such paintings, they can lead us away from ourselves and into contemplation of the sublime and the beautiful. The Rembrandt "Self-Portrait," for instance, might arouse in us thoughts about the triumphs and defeats accompanying a life fully lived.

And we needn't visit a gallery to explore this option. Both online and in our libraries, we can find beautiful reproductions worthy of such mediation.

Let me end with a personal example of this power of art. This month found me sitting in a chair in the office of Dr. Hsu, an ear, nose, and throat specialist here in town and a man of excellent reputation. Because I had a growth in my throat—the growth turned out to be real, but harmless—I was nervous. Across the room from me was a handsomely framed reproduction of Millet's "The Angelus." While awaiting the doctor's arrival, I studied that lovely piece: the soft colors, a man and a woman standing in a field, heads bowed in prayer. As my eyes absorbed that painting, a calm came over me.

I found peace.

Jeff Minick has four children and a growing platoon of grandchildren. For 20 years, he taught history, literature, and Latin to seminars of homeschooling students in Asheville, N.C., Today, he lives and writes in Front Royal, Va. See JeffMinick.com to follow his blog.



PUBLIC DOMAIN

Dante holding his "Divine Comedy," next to the entrance to Hell, the seven terraces of Mount Purgatory and the city of Florence, with the spheres of Heaven above, 1465, in a fresco by Domenico di Michelino. Cathedral of St. Mary of the Flower, in Florence, Italy.

TRADITIONAL CULTURE

Dante and the CCP Virus: What Do We Learn?

Let's take a step from hell to purgatory

JAMES SALE

When we look at the world today, we see a world of trouble, turmoil, and an increasing sense of hysteria and panic threatening to rage out of control. We seem to be victims of forces beyond our control. For the West, the CCP (Chinese Communist Party) virus, commonly known as the novel coronavirus, is perhaps a supreme example, though we may well have cited global warming, catastrophic natural phenomena, or even our own wars that never seem to end.

For most, we've never seen or experienced anything like this pandemic. Those who fought in or experienced World War II are mostly dead now, and the Baby Boomer generation is the generation of affluence the likes of which the world had never experienced before—but heck, it seems as if someone has to pay the piper today!

Of course, surely we were expecting this, weren't we? We have had it before, haven't we? Why, the Black Death in the 14th century was a particularly nasty epidemic, sometimes called the Great Plague. It is estimated that it killed well over 30 percent of the European population and that it took over 200 years for the population numbers in Europe to recover.

Furthermore, by another irony, it is reckoned that the Great Plague (from China most likely) entered Europe via the Italian peninsula. Today, of course, it would appear that the CCP virus began its attack on Europe in Italy too.

It would have been, perhaps, a small consolation to those who died of the plague to learn that
there was a rather large benefit accruing from their deaths: Namely, the modern world is almost inconceivable without this tragedy, for it was the Black Death that led inexorably to the demise of the feudal hierarchies that had held sway in Europe for so long.

PD-US

An illustration of Canto 29 from Dante's "Inferno" by Gustave Doré.

The truth is, workers became in such short supply that they could almost name their prices to go and work anywhere. Mobility and communication increased massively. And so a new model of society—protocapitalism—began, and the grip on power by the lords and ladies started to weaken.

The Falsiers: Then and Now

But that is such a long-term perspective; what we really need is hope now, real hope. It is interesting that in Dante's "Divine Comedy," one of the many punishments meted out to the unsaved and unredeemable is a hideous and loathsome disease that never heals.

Dante meets these victims in Canto 29 of "The Inferno" (Dorothy Sayers's translation):

> So step by step we went, nor uttered sound,
> To see and hear those sick souls in their pains,
> Who could not lift their bodies from the ground

And their crime? They are all falsifiers, alchemists of one sort or another, who led their fellow human beings to hope that they could transmute base metals into gold.

In a funny sort of way, doesn't this echo our modern world? We certainly now have a hideous disease that eats our lungs, but isn't a characteristic of our times also that we are attempting at every level to turn base metal into gold? Governments are printing money via quantitative easing, cryptocurrencies abound promising free money for those who invest, but real saving—what traditionally was considered common sense—is actively discouraged by absurdly low and abnormal interest rates. As Bill Bonner said as recently as January this year, "A huge crisis—caused by fake money and fake thinking—is coming." Fake thinking, too? Like the alchemists in Dante?

It's Your Choice

We are, then, at a huge crisis point. But if Dante can accurately depict hell, maybe he can also provide us with hope in terms of how we think about and conceptualize this drama. For the starting point is this: The whole "Divine Comedy" has as one of its central tenets a key principle of Western thinking until, perhaps, the 20th century—namely, freedom of will.

Freedom of will means that people can change: their beliefs, their attitudes, their thoughts, their feelings, their choices, and so their decisions too. The point about Dante's hell is not that it is a place where God—the big Man in the sky, as it were—rains down punishment on people for major or minor infractions of some code they may or may not follow. Rather, hell is the place where people get what they want.

As Dorothy L. Sayers expressed it: "Hell is the enjoyment of your own way forever." It is in one sense the meaning of that old Frank Sinatra song "I did it MY way." Not God's way, not Christ's way, not the eightfold path Buddhist way, and not the Way of the Tao—not the ways of the ancient masters with their focus on love, compassion, fellowship, and each other. No, but MY way: the totally selfish way.

And here is the consequence of that: What we find in hell is the inability for all its inhabitants to go beyond solipsism. In other words, they cannot communicate except in what seems to be repetitive monologues within themselves. I hesitate to say "dialogue" within themselves, since the soul with which one does dialogue, they now have lost. In essence, their situation is exactly analogous to that of a drug addict (or any addict): They cannot be reasoned with because they have lost their will, their free will. They have given it away, which is what it means to lose one's soul.

In this sense, they are trapped and isolated. Isolated? That word—now applying to the CCP virus as we all start self-isolating to avoid contamination by each other! How like hell that sounds: each trapped with himself or herself forever.

PD-US

God does not punish us for breaking rules; instead, hell is where you get exactly what you want. Sandro Botticelli's depiction of Canto 28, part of the Eighth Circle of Hell. Dante and Virgil are each shown six times as they descend through the chasms.

Isn't a characteristic of our times also that we, as those in Dante's hell, are attempting at every level to turn base metal into gold?

PD-US

Illustration for Dante's "Purgatory "by Gustave Doré.

PUBLIC DOMAIN

"The Triumph of Death," circa 1562, by Pieter Bruegel the Elder. The Prado Museum, Madrid.

A Way Beyond Selfishness

But, of course, the "Divine Comedy" does provide us with a way out of hell, just as in this life even addicts can regain their free will and once more enter the world of light. What is the first step, then, in moving from hell at least to purgatory where there is hope?

First, one must recognize and accept the problem, the real problem. And the real problem is always Me: I am the problem; that is, not other people or other races, not officials, and not governments. No, I am also causing problems and now I acknowledge it; I need to turn from my habitual modes of being to a new and better way.

Second, as I turn from justifying myself, I also reach out to others; my own existence not only depends on but also is for others. We are a community, and we need to look after each other. This is something that becomes very apparent in Dante's purgatory. Whereas in hell everyone seems to blame everyone else and deny any personal responsibility, in purgatory all are taking pains to give each other credit and to encourage each other.

Purgatory does not get us directly into paradise, but it is a great start. We are on the journey. So, although we may be self-isolating at this time, we need to consider our own responsibilities, reassert the freedom of our wills to be agents for positive change, and to use the technologies we have to reach out to others and support them. In this way, we can break through the entrapment of hell—the place where we do not want to be!—and not be victims of forces beyond our control.

The Epoch Times refers to the novel coronavirus, which causes the disease COVID-19, as the CCP virus because the Chinese Communist Party's coverup and mismanagement allowed the virus to spread throughout China and create a global pandemic.

James Sale is an English businessman whose company, Motivational Maps Ltd., operates in 14 countries. He is the author of over 40 books on management and education from major international publishers including Macmillan, Pearson, and Routledge. As a poet, he won the first prize in The Society of Classical Poets' 2017 competition and spoke in June 2019 at the group's first symposium held at New York's Princeton Club.

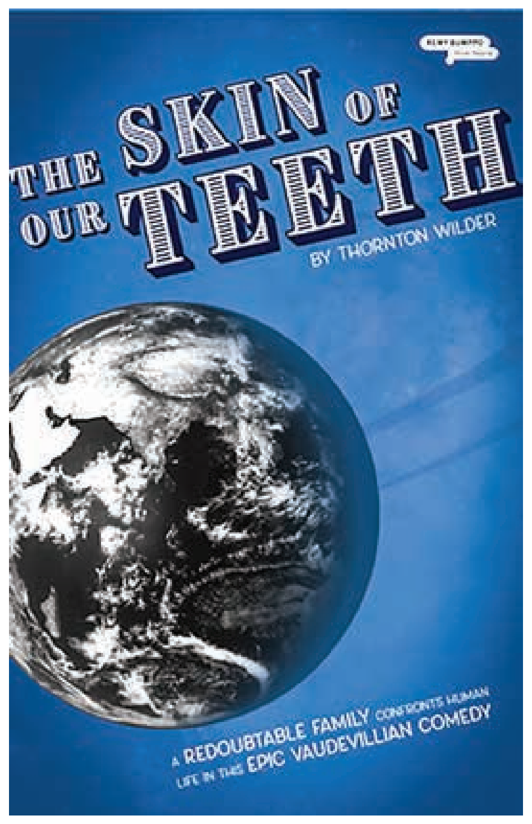
BROADWAY IN CHICAGO

STEVEN GROSS/GOODMAN THEATRE

CHICAGO SHAKESPEARE THEATER

STEPPENWOLF THEATRE

REMY BUMPPO THEATRE



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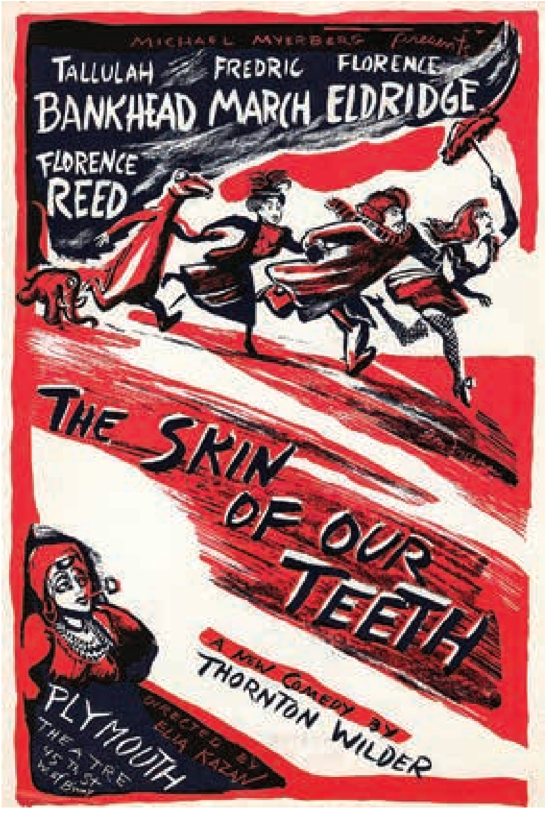


(Counterclockwise from above)

Chicago's Goodman Theatre now sits empty.

Cadillac Palace auditorium.

Chicago Shakespeare stage.

Steppenwolf Theatre marquee.

"The Skin of Our Teeth" playbill for Remy Bumppo's production in 2017.

Handbill for the original 1942 Broadway production of Thornton Wilder's "The Skin of Our Teeth."

THEATER

Chicago's Empty Stages

BETTY MOHR

CHICAGO—A few weeks ago if one walked into a theater lobby in Chicago, one would hear the sound of people talking, laughing, and socializing in a festive mood. As patrons entered the auditorium and found their seats, one could hear the palpable silence of excited theatergoers as they looked to the stage in anticipation. Now, though, Chicago theaters are quiet, lonely, and dark places with empty stages. That new reality is the result of the pandemic caused by the CCP (Chinese Communist Party) virus commonly known as the novel coronavirus.

The Chicago theater scene has been severely challenged as theaters have had to close their doors. Some theater groups were fortunate in that their shows were near the end of their run when the governor of Illinois and Chicago's mayor pronounced a directive that would stop crowds from coming together in an effort to stem the spread of the virus. Theaters had to postpone, reschedule, or cancel shows, and are responding by offering gift certificates, credit for future productions, or refunds.

While Steppenwolf Theatre's production of "Bug" closed with only a few days remaining, the company—which had slated "The Most Spectacularly Lamentable Trial of Miz Martha Washington" for April 2—decided to push the play into next year.

The Goodman Theatre was ready to open "School Girls; Or the African Mean Girls Play" when, after weeks of rehearsals, it had to cancel the production. Its presentation of Irish playwright Brian Friel's "Molly Sweeney," which was to open on April 10, has been delayed to April 20, according to a press release.

Broadway in Chicago, which operates the largest theaters in the Loop, reluctantly rearranged the dates for "The Bachelor Live on Stage" at the Cadillac Palace Theatre for fall, and the anticipated "My Fair Lady" was pushed back to May 12. "Once Upon a One More Time," a musical with songs by Britney Spears, which was supposed to open April 14 at the Nederlander Theatre, has been scrapped.

The Chicago Shakespeare Theater on Navy Pier shut down its last three productions of "Emma," and the theater is crossing its fingers that it will be able to mount Shakespeare's "As You Like It" on April 30.

The closings have also impacted other entertainment venues, such as The Joffrey Ballet, which put off its April 22 opening of "Don Quixote; Cirque du Soleil's "Alegria," set for June 5, was shelved with no further plans to mount it; and Blue Man Group Chicago has suspended its performances indefinitely.

While theaters have been slammed hard by the closings, some remain hopeful.

Will Theater Survive?

With theaters shuttered across the country and some able to pay short-term wages but most unable to, and with the first theater luminary—Terrence McNally—succumbing on March 24 to the pandemic, many are asking: What will be theater's fate?

The shutdowns have also been a strain for opera lovers. The Lyric Opera performances of the Wagnerian "Ring Cycle," planned for April 13, have been dropped, as has "Götterdämmerung." Anthony Freud, the Lyric's general director, wrote: "We are, of course, heartbroken to lose the 'Ring' cycle. For the past six years, more than 300 artists have put their hearts and talents into the development of this event, and the excitement about bringing it to audiences from all 50 states and nearly 30 countries has been mounting since the moment the production was announced. The cycle performances themselves, and a large range of festival programming, promised to be a high point in Chicago's cultural season."

While theaters have been slammed hard by the closings, some remain hopeful. Nick Sandys, the artistic director of the Remy Bumppo Theatre Company, wrote inspiring words to subscribers at the same time he announced the theater had not yet decided when it would present "The Agitators," originally billed for April 30. "No matter the difficulty we face as a society, theater has always provided perspective and compassion. ... So take a breath, take a moment and know that theater will return in the future."

One Play We Could Have Benefited From

Indeed, that uplifting message mirrors the theme of "The Skin of Our Teeth," which Remy Bumppo mounted in Chicago three years ago. The comic drama by American playwright Thornton Wilder (1897–1975) premiered in 1942 as the savagery of World War II raged. It is the kind of work that in difficult times, theaters might consider reviving. But since they schedule their programs a year in advance, there was no way anyone could have predicted the CCP virus. If they had, they might have considered producing, a few months ago, the most appropriate play for our times.

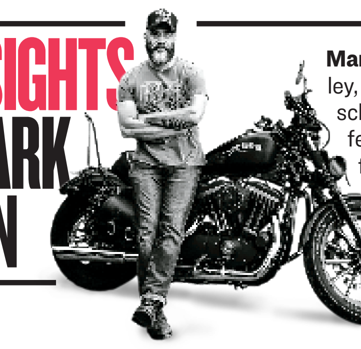
That's because the Pulitzer Prize-winning work is a satirical farce that focuses on the survival of humanity in the face of overwhelming disasters. In Act 1 of the play, which is set at the dawn of the Ice Age, a father is inventing the lever, the wheel, and the alphabet. His family and the upper United States face extinction by a wall of ice smashing everything in its way as it moves in from Canada. Act 2 features a modern take on the story of Noah's ark, in which the desperate family attempts to bring animals into a boat as they try to survive a worldwide flood. The third act takes place after a devastating war in which the family wonders whether the human race can endure catastrophic events that repeatedly threaten to wipe it out.

In a parallel to "The Skin of Our Teeth," Beth Silverman, a Chicago theatrical agent, expressed to me the importance of standing strong and fighting against unexpected disasters when she said, "I'm confident it will come out all right in the end." Thornton Wilder would certainly have agreed.

The Epoch Times refers to the novel coronavirus, which causes the disease COVID-19, as the CCP virus because the Chinese Communist Party's coverup and mismanagement allowed the virus to spread throughout China and create a global pandemic.

As an arts writer and movie/theater/opera critic, Betty Mohr has been published in the Chicago Sun-Times, The Chicago Tribune, The Australian, The Dramatist, the SouthtownStar, the Post Tribune, The Herald News, The Globe and Mail in Toronto, and other publications.

FILM INSIGHTS
WITH MARK
JACKSON



Mark Jackson grew up in Spring Valley, N.Y., where he attended a Waldorf school. At Williams College, his professors all suggested he write professionally. He acted professionally for 20 years instead. Now he writes professionally about acting. In the movies.

ALL PHOTOS COURTESY OF UNIVERSAL PICTURES

The most enchanting character in "The Milagro Beanfield War" is Coyote Angel (Robert Carricart), a local deity.

'The Milagro Beanfield War': A Vastly Underrated Magical Comedy

MARK JACKSON

'The Milagro Beanfield War'

Director
Robert Redford

Starring
Chick Vennera, Julie Carmen, Sônia Braga, John Heard, Carlos Riquelme, Robert Carricart, Daniel Stern, Rubén Blades, Richard Bradford, Christopher Walken, Melanie Griffith

Rated
R

Running Time
1 hour, 57 minutes

Release Date
March 18, 1988

★★★★½

In this time of the CCP (Chinese Communist Party) virus, commonly known as novel coronavirus, we need some uplifting-ness! Something magical, with mirth and miracles. And so in this episode of Popcorn and Inspiration, I give you 1988's comedy "The Milagro Beanfield War," about a jack-of-all-trades named Joe, who's mad as hell, not gonna take it anymore, and steals government water to irrigate his dad's old beanfield. A most excellent pandemonium ensues!

It's a whimsical, rustic, Americana fable about an outback, dirt roads, sage and scrub-brush, New Mexico-Chicano community with red rocks and snowcapped mountains ringed round, that's got roots in the realistic and its heart in the mystical.

It is, IMHO, Robert Redford's best directorial work, or at least neck and neck with "A River Runs Through It." If you missed it all these years, now's the time to Netflix it and have yourself a happy time.

Joe Starts a Revolution

Joe Mondragon (Chick Vennera), in his own words, can run a backhoe, lay pipe, and is a good finish-carpenter. But the local jobsite that's fixing to build a big, sprawling golf course smack dab in the middle of the quaint, sleepy, Chicano hamlet of Milagro in northern New Mexico is not hiring.

Joe's mad as hell! Driving home in his 1948 Chevy pickup truck, he stops at the site of his dad's old, barren, parched beanfield.

Joe's wrath at his helplessness (and encroaching poverty) leads him to take a running drop kick at the rusted sluice gate on the land-development-owned irrigation ditch, which runs along the elevated crest. As water trickles down into the beanfield of his forefathers, Joe has the following conversation with 90-something Amarante Cordova (Carlos Riquelme), the oldest man in Milagro, whose adobe hovel abuts the field:

> Amarante: Jose, I was just talking to your father the other day, and he told me he's going to have the squash all near the house, and the corn over near the chicken coop …
> Joe: Amarante, my father died six years ago!
> Amarante: Yes. I know …

Joe considers shutting the water off but then decides that maybe he'll sleep on it. Arriving home, Joe's pretty wife Nancy (Julie Carmen) is already furious—word travels like lightning in small towns!

Now, it just so happens I copied out their following argument to rehearse in acting class, years ago. Still had it on the computer:

> Joe: (Enters front door) How come you kids are watching TV? Get out! We never watched TV when I was a kid.
> Nancy: That's because you never had a TV.
> Joe: What do you say? ... You wanna take a nap?
> Nancy: (Glares at him. Phone rings)
> Joe: Aren't you going to answer that?
> Nancy: I don't need to.
> Joe: You … know already?
> Nancy: Everybody knows already. I heard it from Stella Arnico, and Betty Aporata, and Lucy Hernandez, and Gloria Martinez, and everybody else who has telephone!

Rural Americana Versus Urban Sprawl

"Milagro" describes the dilemma of any number of regional cultures, heritages, customs, and mom-and-pop businesses across small-town USA threatened with insidious, creeping death by urban sprawl.

But while some have criticized the film for being wishy-washy and Capra-esque, Redford does an excellent job of showing the complexity involved in such situations: Certain townspeople back Mondragon's rebellion, some are terrified by it, and some do the three monkey thing: see no evil, hear no evil, speak no evil.

Ruby Archuleta (Sônia Braga), the firecracker owner of the local auto-body shop, has the requisite activist passion to stand up to the land developers. As she says, ''I always knew Joe Mondragon couldn't go through life without attempting one great thing.''

A good-sized slice of the film's fun involves her using an arsenal of tactics, including feminine wiles, withering criticism, major guilt-tripping, and general nosiness to badger local newspaper editor and erstwhile progressive lawyer Charlie Bloom (John Heard).

Bloom's a former 1960s East Coast hippie radical, who became disillusioned and trekked west to get away from it all. He's reluctant to weigh in. Ruby thinks Bloom should run an article in the paper backing Joe's beanfield revolt. Bloom knows that the Miracle Valley development will bring higher taxes and force the Milagro Chicanos to migrate north, seeking work.

Meanwhile, Ladd Devine (Richard Bradford), owner of the development company, who's already bought off most of Milagro's inhabitants to clear the way for his "Miracle Valley Recreation Area," wants to smash Joe's beanfield and cut off the water supply. He hires union-busting state police agent Kyril Montana (Christopher Walken) for intimidation purposes.

Joe's cousin, the town sheriff (Rubén Blades), is caught in the middle trying to assuage the outrage felt on both sides. He has a sleepy, soothing, unruffled, smarter-than-he-looks ability to keep the powder keg from igniting.

Other colorful characters include Herbie Platt (Daniel Stern), a New York University sociology student who comes to study the locals. At first he's skeptical and scientific regarding the local mixture of Spanish Catholicism and Native-American paganism, with their candle-laden shrines and offerings of tamales and beer to various saints, but after awhile he grows some faith and comes around to their way of thinking.

His best scene is when he's offered a cup of lizard-tail tea by Amarante, whose adjacent hut he's more or less couch-surfing on. Highly suspicious of the taste and attempting to make polite small talk, he says, "Oh wow, this must have been in your family for generations."

Amarante: "No, I found it on the highway this morning."

Realistic Versus Mystic

Redford does a fabulous job of juxtaposing the modern, cutthroat land developers with the rural culture that's populated with hilarious characters, such as the wizened "vieja loca" (crazy old lady) who hides in the town square and throws pebbles at people.

Probably stemming from his "Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid" and "Jeremiah Johnson" days, Redford obviously loves the northern New Mexico Spanish-Native-American-Mexican culture. He also loves actors, being one himself, and you can feel the infectious sense of fun throughout.

A little-known fact about Redford is that he trained as a painter before becoming a movie star, and his vision for this film is downright painterly. In fact, if you've ever seen the work of Southwest painters Ed Sandoval and Tracy Turner Sheppherd, "Milagro" is like a number of their paintings come to life, especially the old man with the walking stick (that's Amarante Cordova exactly) who wanders through almost every one of Sandoval's breathtaking landscapes. Like the best paintings, you want to step inside their magic.

The most enchanting character of all is Coyote Angel (Robert Carricart), an ancient, kindly, slightly irreverent, very funny, minor Mexican deity, who does a loping dance around the town at dusk and dawn, causing mischief by stirring up dust devils, playing his accordion, and dispensing elder advice to those who are clairaudient enough to hear him. Amarante can see and hear him loud and clear, and they bicker like crotchety old men-friends. Ruby can only hear his accordion. Charlie Bloom can't hear him at all.

Various and sundry magical and idyllic moments are captured by cinematographer Robbie Greenberg: for example, Coyote Angel sitting in an antediluvian rusted-out Ford deuce coup, with his giant sombrero, chatting with Amarante. Later on, we see the NYU sociology student and old man Cordova playing chess in a field, with Lupita the pig dozing, and the snowcapped mountains framing them. Such moments abound.

A Tribute

"The Milagro Beanfield War" captures the coziness of the inherent naiveté of the liberal 1960s sentiment of power to the people. It captures the rustic atmosphere of a New Mexico culture that's fading into memory. It's hilarious, haunting, incredibly warm, laden with atmosphere, but also wistful in that the film seems to bow to the inevitable: that the golf resort will eventually manifest and will most likely assuage the pain of traditional culture loss by handing out gain in the form of service-industry employment possibilities.

The film is a tribute to a rich but fading culture, but it also leaves one with a slight ache, knowing that soon nobody will be able to hear the wisdom of the Coyote Angel.

The Epoch Times refers to the novel coronavirus, which causes the disease COVID-19, as the CCP virus because the Chinese Communist Party's coverup and mismanagement allowed the virus to spread throughout China and create a global pandemic.

(Left) Lupita the pig and Amarante Cordova (Carlos Riquelme), who can talk to those who have passed away.

(Bottom left) Julie Carmen and Chick Vennera play Nancy and Joe Mondragon. Joe decides to fight land developers.

(Right) Feisty Ruby Archuleta (Sônia Braga) convinces newspaperman Charlie Bloom (John Heard) to take a stand.

(Bottom right) A church meeting with "The Senile Brigade" in the front row, who add local color to the film.

Does the comparison simply remind active imaginations that life isn't a movie, or does it reveal that epidemic films are more than harmless, entertaining fantasy?

CORONAPHOBIA AND FILMS:

How Epidemic Films Could Contribute to CCP-Virus Panic

TIFFANY BRANNAN

Throngs of masked people. Locked-down cities. Abandoned theme parks. Infected cruise ships. Schools closed indefinitely. Public gatherings restricted. Annual events postponed. Sporting events played to empty stadiums. Flights canceled. Restaurant dining forbidden. Empty market shelves. Millions self-quarantined at home. "It sounds like a scary movie," an 18-year-old says after reading the news about the global pandemic caused by the CCP (Chinese Communist Party) virus, commonly known as novel coronavirus. She couldn't be more right.

When the rapid spread of a new Chinese illness of undetermined origin hit the news, it sounded like a frightening epidemic film's premise. However, as the cases move closer, many Americans feel like they are in a horror film. As few facets of life remain unchanged, no one knows how long the panic will last.

Is the widespread fear a normal reaction to this dangerous situation, or is erratic behavior and irrational terror resulting from more than cautiousness?

TWENTIETH CENTURY FOX

John Steinbeck's "The Grapes of Wrath," released as a film in 1940, documented another tough period in American History: the Dust Bowl, when families were forced to uproot themselves and migrate from the heartland.

Decades of Disease

A current popular reassurance is "This is not a movie." This statement is intended to reassure us that the pandemic isn't an apocalyptic nightmare, although it sounds more like a bulletin that we haven't slipped into the parallel universe of a pandemic horror film. Why are people comparing COVID-19 with diseases in films? Does the comparison simply remind active imaginations that life isn't a movie, or does it reveal that epidemic films are more than harmless, entertaining fantasy?

For decades, epidemics have been a popular film genre. This category includes depictions of realistic illnesses that threaten humanity, stories about less-believable sicknesses that somehow wipe out civilization, and absolute fictions in which bizarre viruses turn most of earth's inhabitants into zombies. While the last subcategory is hardly confusable with reality, movies about realistic viral outbreaks evoke fear because they seem feasible.

One famous epidemic film is "Contagion" (2011), about an airborne virus which, due to scientific consultation during filmmaking, is unsettlingly realistic. In fact, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention found that "there is much in the film that relates to real life."

Another such film is "Outbreak" (1995), which follows an epidemic of a zoonotic virus that enters the United States through a monkey's bite. In his 2003 essay "Infectious Diseases in Cinema: Virus Hunters and Killer Microbes," Dr. Georgios Pappas called this film "the most important film about an outbreak of infectious disease" and "the most sincere attempt to accurately portray the science of clinical microbiology in cinema." Many assume that real pandemics could be as devastating as these fictional ones.

RKO RADIO PICTURES

Carole Lombard plays a selfless nurse in "Vigil in the Night."

Many popular outbreak films are decades old. Films like "The Last Man on Earth" (1964), "The Satan Bug" (1965), and "Night of the Living Dead" (1968) popularized the genre in the 1960s, while "The Andromeda Strain" and "The Omega Man" continued the trend in 1971. Since then, epidemic, outbreak, and post-apocalyptic films have only increased. In the 21st century, more plague films are released than ever before.

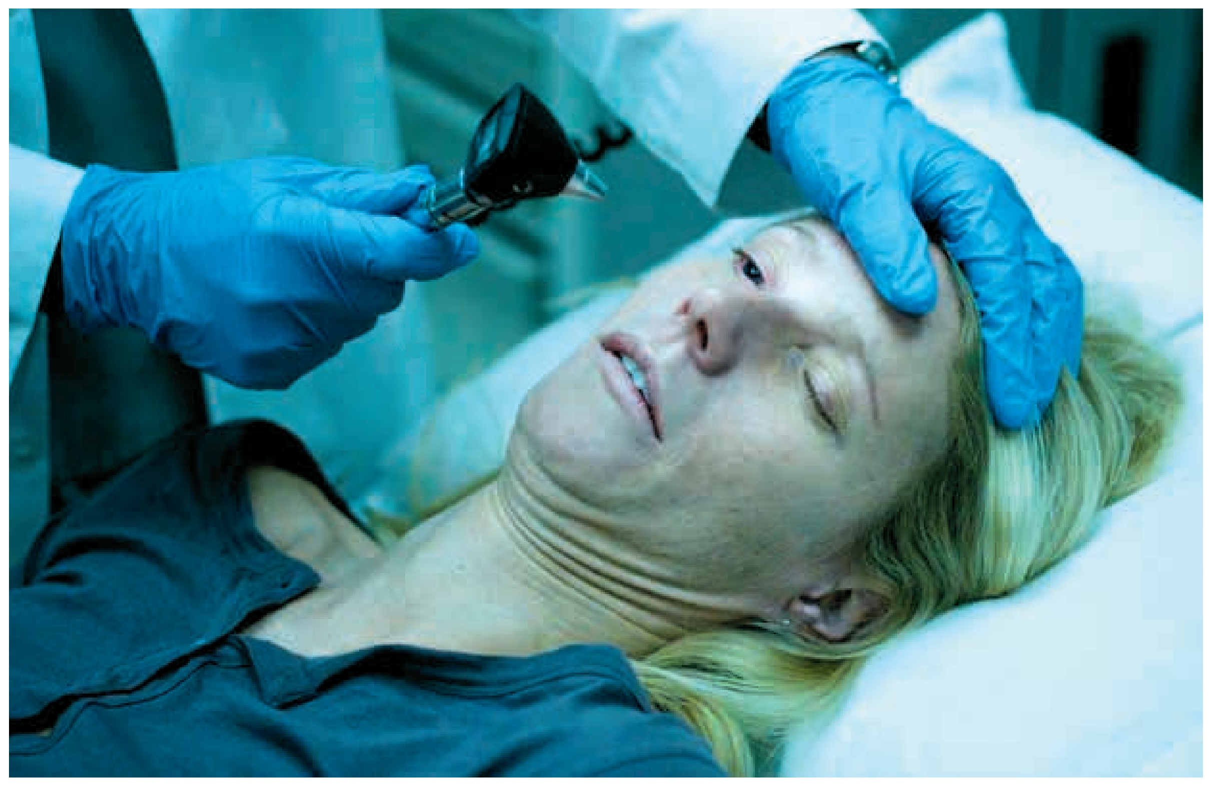
However, one doesn't find such films made before the late 1950s. What sort of epidemic films existed in earlier decades?

History, Not Hysteria

Few movies from the 1930s, the '40s, or the '50s focused exclusively on epidemics, but some featured outbreak subplots, like "The Painted Veil" (1934), "Jezebel" (1938), "Prison Nurse" (1938), "The Rains Came" (1939), "Vigil in the Night" (1940), "Wagon Tracks West" (1943), and "Elephant Walk" (1954). Most of these films' epidemics occur in foreign countries or past ages. Those in modern America are in isolated locations like prisons, hospitals, or remote towns.

None of these classic epidemic films are apocalyptic horror stories about lone survivors on a ravaged globe. There are no plague-ridden zombies. There are no mysterious viruses that destroy most of humanity. These films' diseases are real ones that are depicted realistically. Unlike later films, they don't feature fictional viruses with implausibly devastating consequences. While "Contagion" and "Outbreak" seem realistic, these older films are even more so, since they don't exaggerate illness for drama's sake.

WARNER BROS.



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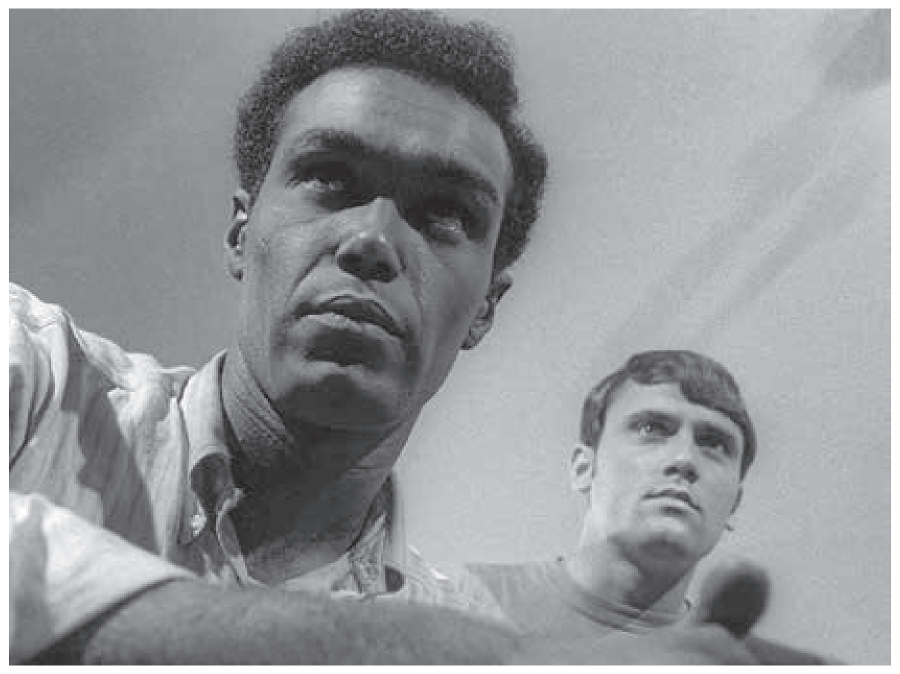


(Above) Duane Jones (L) and Keith Wayne in "Night of the Living Dead," which became a cult favorite.

(Left) Gwyneth Paltrow in "Contagion."

UNIVERSAL PICTURES

Paula Kelly and James Olson in "The Andromeda Strain."

Classic films are different for a reason. Between 1934 and 1954, the Motion Picture Production Code held American films to high standards by keeping filmmakers from putting profits above ethics and audience well-being. Code movies followed guidelines, which kept them acceptable for all.

While the Code doesn't forbid fictional pandemics, certain guidelines limited apocalyptic possibilities. The Code section that applies most to horrific illnesses is Section III, Vulgarity: "The treatment of low, disgusting, unpleasant, though not necessarily evil, subjects should always be guided by the dictates of good taste and a regard for the sensibilities of the audience."

Modern epidemic films violate the Code by irresponsibly causing terror. The Code's preamble recognizes producers' "responsibility to the public," since films are harmful when they become "[e]ntertainment which tends to degrade human beings, or to lower their standards of life and living."

Some scientists acknowledge Hollywood's influence on reactions to outbreaks. In "Infectious Diseases in Cinema," Georgios Pappas said films can have effects "on the public's perception of infection … that, when misguided, could prove to be problematic in times of epidemics." He stated that "the public's perceptions—and, accordingly, their reactions—are significantly influenced by their view on scientific truth as presented by the media." Epidemic film trends "have subsequently been adopted by the public as facts, and, therefore, they act as determinants of public reactions to possible future infectious outbreaks and, perhaps, government policies." He concluded that "the premise of epidemics involving unknown viruses of dubious origin that cause apocalyptic events serves to instill the public with fear, which may turn to panic when similar situations arise."

For decades, epidemics have been a popular film genre.

Another Victory for the People

The CCP virus is certainly not the first crisis America has faced. During the Code years, America experienced two epochs: the Great Depression and World War II. Our country withstood these challenges, emerging stronger. Those crises happened decades ago but are too important to forget. A good way to relive them is through films made during those times, that show their harsh realities. Two such excellent films are "The Grapes of Wrath" (1940) and "Since You Went Away" (1944).

"The Grapes of Wrath," a story about the Dust Bowl, paints a realistic, uncompromising picture of a family of sharecroppers. After losing their Oklahoma land, they travel to California in search of jobs and prosperity, which aren't to be found. The film makes one realize how far from real hardship most are during this pandemic. It also shows the indefatigable American spirit, which endures despite all adversity. As Ma Joad (Jane Darwell) says at the film's end: "They can't wipe us out; they can't lick us. We'll go on forever … 'cause we're the people."

World War II brought a new kind of hardship and need to prosperous Americans. "Since You Went Away" shows the battle on the American home front, which was fought and won by those who supported the war effort at home. It is the story of a mother (Claudette Colbert) and her two daughters (Jennifer Jones and Shirley Temple) who help "Pops" during the war by rationing, collecting scraps, growing victory gardens, volunteering at the Red Cross, and working at munition plants. These women must find new bravery and faith to keep their home strong as national hardships and personal tragedies try their souls.

If you feel depressed and hopeless because the CCP virus has completely changed our country at present, don't fall prey to fear and despair. Films like "The Grapes of Wrath" and "Since You Went Away" remind us that America endured greater hardships in the past. We'll be victorious over this too if we remain calm and keep faith, "cause we're the people."

In the meantime, take a vitamin D supplement, unwrap an elderberry lozenge, and watch a Code film!

The Epoch Times refers to the novel coronavirus, which causes the disease COVID-19, as the CCP virus because the Chinese Communist Party's coverup and mismanagement allowed the virus to spread throughout China and create a global pandemic.

Tiffany Brannan is an 18-year-old opera singer, Hollywood historian, travel writer, film blogger, vintage fashion expert, and ballet writer. In 2016, she and her sister founded the Pure Entertainment Preservation Society, an organization dedicated to reforming the arts by reinstating the Motion Picture Production Code.

SELZNICK INTERNATIONAL PICTURES

(L–R) Shirley Temple, Jennifer Jones, Robert Walker, and Claudette Colbert as they appear in "Since You Went Away," set in America during World War II.

Ask Yourself: Are You Lonesome?

Book review: 'You're Not Listening: What You're Missing and Why It Matters'

LINDA WIEGENFELD

"Who listens to you?" Ask yourself that question and then answer it honestly.

That question is what Kate Murphy, the author of the book "You're Not Listening: What You're Missing and Why It Matters," asked when doing her research. She put this question to people of all ages, races, and classes. Almost without exception, what followed was a pause. The lucky ones could come up with one or two people, but most respondents didn't feel like they had anyone who truly listened to them, even those who were married or claimed a vast network of friends and colleagues.

People get lonely for lack of listening. Murphy says:

> **The negative health impact is worse than smoking 14 cigarettes per day.**
>
> *Kate Murphy*

Psychology and sociology researchers have begun warning of an epidemic of loneliness in the United States, calling it a public health crisis, as feeling isolated and disconnected increases the risk of premature death as much as obesity and alcoholism combined. The negative health impact is worse than smoking 14 cigarettes per day. Indeed, epidemiological studies have found links between loneliness and heart disease, stroke, dementia, and poor immune function.

Murphy's book is more than a warning about this problem. She defines the problem, suggests solutions for it, and ends up encouraging readers to become better listeners with renewed curiosity for what a speaker, always a unique individual, has to say.

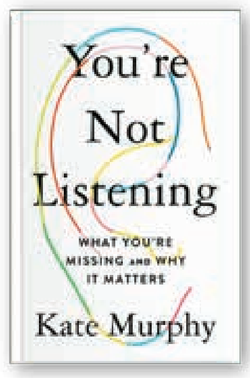
MPH PHOTOS/SHUTTERSTOCK

The screen generation now coming of age may have greater difficulty connecting with others.

Defining the Problem

Today we live in hurried times, Murphy says. We're bombarded by technologies such as websites, apps, video games, and social media platforms. The mere presence of a phone on the table—even if it's silent—makes those sitting around the table feel more disconnected and disinclined to talk about anything important or meaningful, knowing that if they do, they will probably be interrupted. Murphy points to research conducted by Microsoft that found that since the year 2000, the average attention span dropped from twelve to eight seconds.

Murphy also states that several studies of caregiver-child interactions in public spaces like playgrounds and fast-food restaurants found that the vast majority of caregivers ignored their children in favor of their phones. Pediatric experts say that such behavior impairs children's development, which depends on being attended to by their parents. People tend to listen as they were listened to as children, and that means the screen generation now coming of age may have greater difficulty connecting with others.



'You're Not Listening: What You're Missing and Why It Matters'
Kate Murphy
Celadon Books
288 pages

Solutions

Active Listening

Murphy promotes active listening. She paraphrases the ideas of Carl Rogers, one of the most influential psychologists of the 20th century, who says that in conversation, people rarely tell you something unless it means something to them. Therefore, the listener should work on understanding the intent and meaning beneath the words. Good listeners, rather than getting mired in their own thoughts, insecurities, and superficial judgments, pick up on the subtext of what people say.

Learning Through the Examples of Others

Sprinkled throughout the book are fascinating examples of good listeners. Among these are a CIA chief interrogator, those in focus groups, marriage counselors, superior salesmen, and improvisational actors.

Cultivating the Right Environment

If you want to truly listen, have a receptive physical space as well as a receptive state of mind. Put your computer to sleep, choose quiet restaurants, silence your phone and keep it out of sight when you want deep talks. You can find a park bench, take a walk on a quiet street, or just duck into a doorway away from the stream of pedestrian traffic to have a word. These are ways of signaling your willingness to listen.

Practicing the Right Kind of Talking About Others

There's a world of difference between talking about other people's observed behavior to try to understand it and betraying someone's trust by divulging private matters. People will not confide in a person who divulges what the speaker wants kept secret.

Taking Into Account Who You're Talking With

The speaker needs to take into account that not everybody has the same interests or level of understanding. You need to discern and respect those differences or risk boring or aggravating people or making them shut down.

When listening, it is better to listen to how people feel than try to convince them to feel differently. Listening to opposing viewpoints is a good way to grow as an individual: Accept the legitimacy of the other person's point of view and that you might have something to learn from it.

The listener should try to give the speaker a chance to get a point across. Don't shut down the speaker too soon.

Murphy's book is timely: The more connections made in a disconnected world, the better. Especially in this moment of social distancing, social support networks are crucial. Just because people are apart physically does not mean they need to be separated mentally or emotionally. Now more than ever, we need to find ways to listen to each other.

Linda Wiegenfeld is a retired teacher with 45 years' experience teaching children. She can be reached for comments or suggestions at LWiegenfeld@aol.com

POPCORN AND INSPIRATION

A Swashbuckling Nautical Adventure Showcasing a Great Leader

IAN KANE

ALL PHOTOS BY TWENTIETH CENTURY FOX

Russell Crowe as Capt. Jack Aubrey gives a master class in effective leadership in "Master and Commander: The Far Side of the World."

An inordinate number of naval films are set during World War II or periods of conflict thereafter, such as the many Cold War submarine films that we've all probably seen. One of the few exceptions was 1966's surprise hit, "The Sand Pebbles," in which Steve McQueen played an engineer on board a patrol boat traveling up a river during revolution-wracked 1926 China. But besides that excellent film, little really comes to mind for maritime warfare drama.

Director Peter Weir (1993's "Fearless," 1998's "The Truman Show") seemed to notice this strange lack of historical cinematic exploration. He chose to co-write a screenplay adaptation of Patrick O'Brian's 1969 novel "Master and Commander," set during the Napoleonic Wars, which centered on the close friendship between Captain Jack Aubrey of England's Royal Navy and his ship's surgeon, Dr. Stephen Maturin.

Weir also helmed the film version, re-titled "Master and Commander: The Far Side of the World." The film is set later than the book series begins; the year is 1805, and it's already a couple of years into the Napoleonic Wars.

Likewise, Captain Jack Aubrey (Russell Crowe) is already a seasoned officer and seaman in command of the English warship the HMS Surprise, and Dr. Stephen Maturin (Paul Bettany, "Avengers: Infinity War," "Solo: A Star Wars Story") is the ship's doctor and resident philosopher.

> **Aubrey's multifaceted character is a combination of shrewd intellect, martial prowess, subtle sophistication, and an indefatigable spirit.**

Known as "Lucky Jack" by his almost-200-man crew—a motley assortment of both young and old from various social stations—Aubrey and his men have been ordered to seek out and destroy the French privateer vessel Acheron, which was last spotted near Brazil. The Acheron is after whatever supplies and booty it can scrounge up in order to feed the French Empire, and therefore, the powerful war engine of Napoleon Bonaparte.

A scene from "Master and Commander: The Far Side of the World."

The film starts with a considerable amount of sound and fury as the HMS Surprise has caught up with the Acheron and the two ships are locked in an incredible battle of life and death. Although Aubrey is a highly skilled captain, his vessel can't match the larger, sturdier, cannon-bristling French ship, and he and his crew barely manage to survive the nautical duel.

We get a rare lens into the lives of the crewmen and their officers to see just how they interact with each other after they spend some time licking their wounds. Aubrey is a highly inspiring figure who seems to be wrought of iron—so reverent are his men of him.

Aubrey doesn't do the typical thing and stay secreted away in the captain's quarters. He likes to be out and about on deck among the rest of the crew. And since he spent many hard years working his way up the ranks, he has an easy way with them, including enjoying lots of lewd humor, backslapping, and guffawing.

All of this manly bonding is eventually put to the test as Aubrey becomes increasingly laser-focused on tracking down the Acheron and its wily French captain. Even his good friend, Dr. Maturin, begins to suspect that Aubrey may be exhibiting symptoms of unnatural obsession. One of the examples of this is when Aubrey orders the crew to take the ship directly into a cataclysmic storm in order to get a shot at finally taking out the Acheron.

It's not all bromances and action, however, as we also get to see the men during their downtime. For instance, in one scene the men get some away time in South America, and we see how they interact with the locals. There are also some touching moments as the men dine at the officers' table and wax both philosophic and bawdy in equal measure.

One of the main draws here is the superb acting, with both the lead and supporting actors (and even the extras) earning their keep with realistic depictions of early-19th-century English naval men.

The cinematography (by Russell Boyd) is likewise phenomenally handled, with sumptuous aerial shots of the ship and its crew, along with incredibly visceral combat scenes that will get anyone's blood pumping.

Aubrey leads his men naturally—he's a multifaceted character who is a combination of shrewd intellect, martial prowess, subtle sophistication, and an indefatigable spirit that sums up some of the best aspects of masculinity. In fact, Crowe's performance almost functions as a master class for men on how to lead.

"Master and Commander: The Far Side of the World" is a beautifully crafted, nautical adventure film that is great viewing for everyone and is perhaps the greatest Age of Sail naval film ever made. It's a shame that it didn't beget a healthy series of sequels, just as O'Brian's original novel did. (It spawned 19 additional books.)

Oh well, we can only hope that this film is revisited sometime in the future.

'Master and Commander: The Far Side of the World'

Director
Peter Weir

Starring
Russell Crowe, Paul Bettany, Billy Boyd

Running Time
2 hours, 18 minutes

Rated
PG-13

Release Date
Nov. 14, 2003 (USA)

★★★★⯪

Ian Kane is a filmmaker and author based out of Los Angeles. To see more, visit DreamFlight-Ent.com