

The Good, the Bad and the Boring

While the rest of art and entertainment has all but abandoned the romanticism championed in Arthurian Legend, movies for the most part, and American movies in particular, have kept alive the notion of the ‘good guys,’ often pinning good and evil against one another in epic battles that include a fire ball as an encore. This concept has kept the morality of cinema rather shallow and mired in Stone Aged thinking. It was the great post-modern movement that created the anti-hero and delved into the murky gray and often contradictory nature of humanity. While underground, independent and world cinema embraced this change and featured more well-developed and inwardly conflicted characters, many American films continue the tradition of Hero versus Villain to this day. It would seem from the amount of money made by Hollywood each year that most audiences prefer fairly one dimensional storylines, storylines that follow a formula; the good guy fights for their cause against an evil/bad counterpoint, fails and is almost destroyed, finds it within themselves to try again and then succeeds against the force or person that aimed to foil them. This is a story arc we’re subjected to twenty times a year as moviegoers, in every genre to varying degrees and sometimes in deceptively subtle forms. Some filmmakers find notes of originality within that formula and transcend it. Christopher Nolan’s “The Dark Knight” is an example of this. The formula is there, tried and true, but a thoughtful philosophy is interwoven into it and a more morally challenging ending is given to us as a reward. Nolan’s third and final installment in his Batman series “The Dark Knight Rises” is an example of the exact opposite, pandering to the formula and supplying us with nonsensical and obligatory choices that don’t service the characters, only moves them through the film with each scene’s goal being to get to the next scene.

Thankfully more and more films are finding a voice that supplies a less cut-and-dry view of the world. This year alone has had exceptional, risky films challenge the status quo, films like *Birdman*, *Boyhood*, *Gone Girl*, *Nightcrawler* and Darren Aronofsky’s *Noah*, which is a weird little art film wrapped in the clothes of a massive biblical blockbuster (and which may also be the most misunderstood film of the

decade). And in the past there have been countless films that cut themselves free from the shackles of mediocrity and have told compelling, unique stories. Films like *Raging Bull* went beyond the anti-hero and presented a protagonist with almost no redeeming qualities at all, forgoing the rampant intellectual and moral dwarfism found in Hollywood and making a flat-out cautionary tale, which found its roots in European films like *La Strada*. I'm confident in saying if De Niro's *LaMotta* looked into a mirror he would see Anthony Quinn's *Zampano* looking back at him. And there's an interesting dichotomy to discuss there. While those two characters I just mentioned were multilayered and richly complex human beings, philosophically they also represented absolutes – the bad of the world that only needed _____ to be good. It's almost as though all films need a good guy and a bad guy, but some movies simply take the time to peel back the top layer of these people and look inside them. Perhaps formula is impossible to avoid at its most base level, and maybe that says something about us as audience members and how we live our lives, but with enough care and consideration, perhaps, just perhaps, we can look deeper ...and inspire, dare I say, genuine curiosity. In the real world heroism is found in small gestures that only become poetic at a distance, when we've removed ourselves from them and taken the time to appreciate. I understand the escapism the public yearns for when life is as difficult as it is, the desire to see good triumph over evil, but perhaps movies too and the heroes in them can be subtle acts of poetry that at a distance are things to cherish.