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Life: Movie or Movement?

Matthew 20: 20-28

If I say the words, “white Ford Bronco,” an indelible image instantly comes to mind; many of you flash back to that bizarre June evening of 1994, when former football great and television star O. J. Simpson – under the watchful eye of live television! -- fled his formal arrest and arraignment, taking flight on a California freeway in a white Ford Bronco driven by his friend and former teammate, Al Cowling – Simpson in the back, holding a gun to his head. Suddenly this mesmerizing scene became more bizarre: thousands of people, fans, really, who had watched and cheered OJ as he sprinted away from tacklers on the football field – who had grown accustomed to images of him leaping over suitcases and dashing through airports -- now began to line bridges and overpasses, cheering him on yet one more long run. These adoring throngs seemed not to have distinguished between O. J. the athlete, O. J. the actor and O. J. the murder suspect – the sight of O. J. running was all the same to them. Those of us watching this surreal scene unfold before us felt slightly disoriented, wondering, “Is this really happening?” A journalist covering the scene would look back upon the moment and say what was obviously on everyone’s mind: “It was unreal. It was like a movie.”

That’s precisely the point social critic Neal Gabler made in his 1998 book *Life: the Movie*. Modern life has been turned into a quest for celebrity and an insatiable thirst for entertainment. Only a fool would pretend that the trial of O. J. Simpson was only a court case. It was in truth the most celebrated TV series of the 1990’s, making stars out of every participant, from the cerebral Judge Ito to the flamboyant Johnnie Cochran to the hapless Kato Katelin. When the verdict was announced, news teams from across the world were present, not because the verdict was really news in the traditional sense, but because the jury’s pronouncement served to climax a long-running, highly-engrossing mini-series!

A few weeks ago, Vice-president Dick Cheney shot a friend while hunting on a Texas farm. It was a moment of miscalculation, completely unintentional. What it was not was news! Yet it attracted a media circus, which used to be a pejorative term -- yet we *like* circuses: it is much easier for us to sink our teeth into the story of an accidental shooting of friend wounding friend than sift through a substantive discussion of policy. We lust for the simplistic, pseudo-scandal. The media circus is giving us what we want, entertainment!

Noted historian Daniel Boorstin wrote a book entitled *The Image: a Guide to Pseudo-Events in America*. His basic point was that all around us the fabricated, the inauthentic, the theatrical, is driving out the natural, the genuine and the spontaneous from life; reality is being converted into stagecraft. Boorstin warned, “We risk being the first people in history to have been able to make their illusions so vivid, so persuasive, so ‘realistic,’ that they can live in them.”

If you think Boorstin is overstating the matter, ponder the career of a certain actress. This young lady’s beauty was such that she married a Turkish diplomat at age fifteen; she soon divorced him and married hotel magnate Conrad Hilton whom she met on a trip to Hollywood (naturally); then quickly divorced him to marry actor George Sanders.

The actress admitted, "In time I was to discover that I saw things not as they were but as a play within a play, in which I was always the heroine, waiting for the prince to awaken me with a kiss."

This woman, still young, was invited in the early 1950's to be a panelist on a program called *Bachelor's Haven*, in which she dispensed, ironically enough, advice on romantic relationships.

She gave loony, often inadvertently comic answers, to innocent questions and became an instant hit: within four shows, she was on the cover of *Life* magazine. Within a year she appeared in five films, though she had no training as an actress. In the 1960's her image was beamed into the homes of America each week dressed in fur and living on a farm and saying, "Dahling, I get allergic smelling hay."

Yes, even now the name Zsa Zsa Gabor is famous, though no one could say exactly why.

She simply caught the eye of the media. But that is just the point: Zsa Zsa Gabor stands as the poster child for modern celebrity: her fame rests not upon her achievement but her national exposure.

Her fame rests, amazingly enough, simply on the fact that she is famous. * (See footnote)

Zsa Zsa Gabor, I must admit, has done the world little harm, if little good.

Yet the notion that anyone can become famous if they can catch the media's eye, that is to say, if they can turn their life into a movie, has its sinister side.

If I say the name "Arthur Bremer," a few of you might recognize it: he is the man who shot former Alabama governor George Wallace. What you might not know is that Bremer's original target was President Nixon, whom he had been stalking and could have killed and didn't -- because he literally didn't think he was dressed right for the part of presidential assassin and ran back to his hotel room to change into a dark suit!

When the chance to shoot Wallace arrived Bremer wrote in his diary that he would then sell his story to the movies, wind up in Hollywood and "make my fortune on the old silver screen."

Mark David Chapman almost walked away from John Lennon with just an autograph, contenting himself with owning a sliver of celebrity; he opted instead for taking Lennon's life so he could become a permanent character in the movie of Lennon's story.

Ah, Dr. Kremer, you say, we are not unbalanced characters like Arthur Bremer or Mark Chapman. Perhaps not, but the lust for celebrity,

the desire to insert ourselves into the movie of life, is a strong impulse that is warping our culture.

Why do college kids rush the field after a football game to tear down goal posts?

Are they not trying to give themselves a bit part in the movie of victory?

The so-called "reality shows" that so saturate our airwaves: they feature people in competition as they eat worms or live in some contrived, competitive commune on a deserted island.

C'mon! There is nothing truly "real" about such exploitative dramas.

They simply feed our common lust to play voyeur and to give star status to ordinary people.

How appropriate that a TV show that attracts thousands of willing aspirants and millions of viewers should be called "American Idol," for the winners represent exactly what our public worships -- ordinary people who are famous for no other reason than because other ordinary people have voted to make them famous. The winner is an "idol," in the true theological sense of the word: worshipped as a god precisely because he or she is made of the same stuff as we ourselves. We see in their fame the potential of our own glory: after all, we helped make them famous. We had a bit part in their movie.

I find instructive the fact that among the temptations our Lord rejected was the invitation to celebrity. "Throw yourself off the temple," said the Tempter, "and revel in the glory the public will accord you when God's angels save His Son from harm."

Christianity has been a vibrant force for two thousand years precisely because of our Lord's answer.

He chose to live a very different kind of life than that of a celebrity.

Nothing our Lord did was designed to draw attention to himself.

His every action was designed to move people's vision beyond himself to the God he called Father. Everything about his life was geared not toward the aggrandizement of self but toward the furtherance of that eternal movement known as the Kingdom of God. He saw himself as part of a movement of justice, righteousness, compassion and reconciliation. His entire life was a pouring out of his life energy to embody God's purposes and personality. His entire ministry was a call to those around him to say: *This is how you are meant to live your life, recognizing that the world is defined by real needs that can be met by the pouring out of your talent and energy and cooperating with other people who feel the same call to embody the Kingdom of God on earth.*

How hard it is for us to maintain our focus that our purpose is to be part of God's transforming movement! It was hard for the disciples, too.

James and John had left everything to follow their Lord, but in the back of their minds there was the question, "What's in it for me?"

There are many people who think of their spirituality, who think of their church participation, who think of their worship of God as one more instrument for bringing them recognition and glory. Indeed, the other disciples are not angry at James and John for misunderstanding the purpose of Jesus.

No, they are angry at them for trying to elbow the rest of them out of positions of priority.

Our Lord's word comes to us as clearly as it came to them, 'That is not what I am about.'

Our Lord's word comes to us as clearly as it came to them,

'I pattern for you a different understanding of God, a revelation of God who pours the divine self out in love and compassion, expressed in utter weakness and vulnerability.

If you want to be great, you must embrace a life of servanthood, you must live as a slave to the eternal.'

"I came," our Lord says, "as a ransom." He comes as one who liberates and frees!

One who liberates and frees! That is how we are called to live.

I say again, it is so easy for us to lose the true focus of our lives!

It is so easy for us to become focused on one myopic commitment or another.

I read not long ago of a French tennis star's father who was convicted of manslaughter.

Authorities noticed that all of this man's son's opponents were becoming ill;

the man had been slipping a bit of poison into his son's opponents' water!

One had actually died by his hand.

Here was a man who saw his son's life as a movie of celebrity as a tennis player;

his was a supporting role meant to play a part in making it happen.

How can one become so warped that his values evolve in such a misshapen direction?

Surely, it couldn't happen to us! Yet how many of us have spent the last three weekends screaming at officials who cannot hear us through the television screen?

The social critics can describe in accurate detail just how superficial our modern life has become.

However, the social critics can offer no antidote. The Christian faith can.

The Christian faith offers us a Savior whose pattern of living and serving, as Philippians rightly noted, was to regard equality with God not a state to be attained,

but opened himself, emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, even unto death.

Our Lord's words come unto us as clearly as to his disciples, 'Life is not about aggrandizement, life is about achievement in the establishment of the eternal Kingdom of God.'

Life is an open invitation to pour out your time and talent in behalf of God's eternal movement, a movement that has been started by our Creator, who sustains it to this moment.

Spirituality is not more means to glory.

Spirituality is a constituent element of the eternal movement of righteousness, justice and compassion.

Our eternal glory comes in splicing our life into God's eternal movement.
Our immortality comes in rooting our story in the greatest story ever told, a story that has no end.
Life is no movie. But it is meant to be a movement of the Kingdom of God in which we play our part.

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*I have been informed that it was Eva Gabor, not Zsa Zsa, who appeared on *Green Acres* !