Conclusion

Popular culture and apologetics, then, are no strangers. They work the same field, the discourse of human desire, and there they converge. If that is true, two conclusions follow.

First, Christians who truly want to understand popular culture must engage it apologetically. Popular culture may be fun to discuss, and it might open issues worthy of discussion, but its fundamental landscape of desire cannot go unchallenged. Otherwise, popular culture will succeed in "de-eschatologizing," delivering us into a world where the now is all that there is, and where the Christian hope sounds foreign and intrusive. A Christian analysis of popular culture must have an apologetical edge.

Second, any apologetics that seeks to connect at the level of desire would be wise to connect with the popular cultural context. For better or for worse, popular culture has become our school of desire. We as apologists need to be well schooled indeed if we are to present a counter-discourse of desire, revealing the gaps, deceit, and inevitable despair (i.e., a lack of real hope) that the messages of popular culture bring. But beyond polemics (the negative movement of apologetics), our apologetical counter-discourse can also reveal the hope of a Christ-centered, Spirit empowered alternative, where creation can be enjoyed without being worshipped, where there is a promise of desire fulfilled, even in suffering.

Allow me to close this essay with an example. I am a college lecturer, and every other week my wife and I invite students to our home to watch and discuss a current popular movie. Recently, we watched Lone Scherfig's An Education (Nick Hornsby wrote the script adaptation of Lynn Barber's autobiographical novel). At this point, the reader would be well advised to go see the movie before reading further, as my plot summary will contain spoilers. The plot concerns Jenny, a bright, Oxford-bound sixteen-year-old schoolgirl living in London in 1961. She meets and is gradually seduced by David, a charmer who lies with breathtaking skill, a man nearly twice her age. Jenny's father, Jack, an anxious social climber, is utterly taken in by David and provides no protection or guidance. His only concern is that Jenny succeed in life, and David presents himself as someone with important social connections. In fact, no adult provides any significant guidance to Jenny, even when Jenny begs Mrs. Walters, the school's headmistress, to tell her why she should persevere through the tedium only to end up in a boring job instead of dropping out to marry David.

> Studying is hard and boring. Teaching is hard and boring. So you're telling me to be bored, and then bored, and then finally bored again, this time for the rest of my life. This whole stupid country is bored. There's no life in it, or colour in it, or fun in it. It's probably just as well that the Russians are going to drop a nuclear bomb on us any day now. So my choice is either to do something hard and boring, OR to marry my... my Jew, and go to Paris and Rome and listen to jazz and read and eat good food in nice restaurants and have fun. It's not enough to educate us any more, Mrs Walters. You've got to tell us why you're doing it.[40]

Mrs. Walters mumbles something stupefyingly irrelevant. It is clear that she has no answer, and Jenny departs. Only her English teacher, Miss Stubbs, sees Jenny's potential and pleads with her not to give up on Oxford, no matter what. But David dangles before Jenny a life filled with excitement and aesthetic discovery. When he proposes, Jenny decides to give up on Oxford and marry him, only to find that he is already married and has a young child. Having been found to be a fraud, David abandons Jenny and disappears. Jenny is devastated. Jack, Jenny's father, apologizes to Jenny for his lack of guidance, for his being guided by fear and desire for success. But the fact is that Jenny was complicit, deceiving her parents along with David. Humbled, she goes back to her schoolmistress to request that she be allowed to repeat another year. The headmistress refuses, saying that a second

chance would be wasted on her. But Miss Stubbs agrees to help Jenny prepare for exams. Jenny studies hard and succeeds at entering Oxford. The final lines of the film are telling. Jenny narrates:

> I probably looked as wide-eyed, fresh, and artless as any other student. But I wasn't. One of the boys I went out with—and they really were boys, once asked me to go to Paris with him. And I told him I'd love to, I was dying to see Paris. As if I'd never been.[41]

The discussion that followed the film was fascinating because it was so penetrating.
We discussed the nature of evil, how it does not have to be chainsaw-wielding murderous hatred. There is a softer, weaker sort of evil, a duplicity, the refusal to act with integrity that David embodies. We talked about how Jenny, the wideeyed innocent, through her own foolish choices, is corrupted by just that sort of duplicity and learns to be duplicitous herself. At Oxford, she learns to play the part again of the wide-eyed innocent, even though she is not. We talked about Jenny's frustration at not finding any point to it at all, that no one could tell her what it all means. At this point, one of my students, a young French woman, burst out, "Perhaps Jenny's actions were justified because there is no point. Perhaps there's no meaning to life!" Here, the conversation turned to even deeper matters as we talked about the meaning woven throughout every aspect of human existence. We talked about the difference between love and being in love, sexual ethics, gay rights, whether desire and pleasure itself is sinful. We talked about the lack of grace shown by the headmistress to Jenny and about second chances. We talked about the grace shown by Jack's repentance. We talked about whether we could know God, and if so, how; whether God owns us; and what we owe him. We talked about a variety of other topics of deep human concern. One thing that I found deeply encouraging (and a sign that the Spirit was at work through our conversation) was the way the basis of the conversation shifted from cynical skepticism to an openness toward meaning and even toward God. Even my French student began phrasing her objections differently, saying, "Okay, suppose that God does exist. Does that mean…?" And we continued talking along this vein late into the night.

The moral of the story, the punch line if you will, is that this movie served as a screen for the projection of human desire, yearning, frustration, disappointment, and fulfillment (as good movies tend to do); and in so doing, that configuration of desire pointed beyond itself toward God and so provided an excellent arena for a stimulating apologetical discussion about the things that really matter to us humans.[42] This is what popular culture at its best always does.

In this way, apologetics and popular culture can combine to connect with desire in ways that lead gently toward God. The opportunity offered by all sorts of popular culture is that it acts as a sounding board for our friends' inner world of desire—a sonar map of the seascape of desire. Apologetics' role is to analyze and critique the answers to desire that popular culture provides and to show what real hope looks like. In this way, popular culture and apologetics come together in dialogue, with desire acting as a common language. And at that moment when the hopes, dreams, desires, and imagination of unbelievers are touched by the reality of the Kingdom and God's plans for the world, lives can be changed and hearts can be opened to grace. And that is what the apologist lives for.

40. Nick Hornsby, "An Education," draft dated April 4, 2007 (London: Wildgate Films and Finola Dwyer Productions, 2007), 88; [1] (accessed May 7, 2010).

41. Nick Hornsby, "An Education," dialogue transcript, "Drew's Script-o-rama"; [1] (accessed May 7, 2010). I consulted a dialogue transcript done by a fan because the end of the film was changed significantly from the draft script of 2007.

42. I also ought to mention that praying beforehand for the conversations played a huge role. Not all of our movie discussions go this beautifully. After more than a decade of talking with students, I am convinced that there is no simple formula for success. But prayer is vital if anything of significance is to be explored.

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