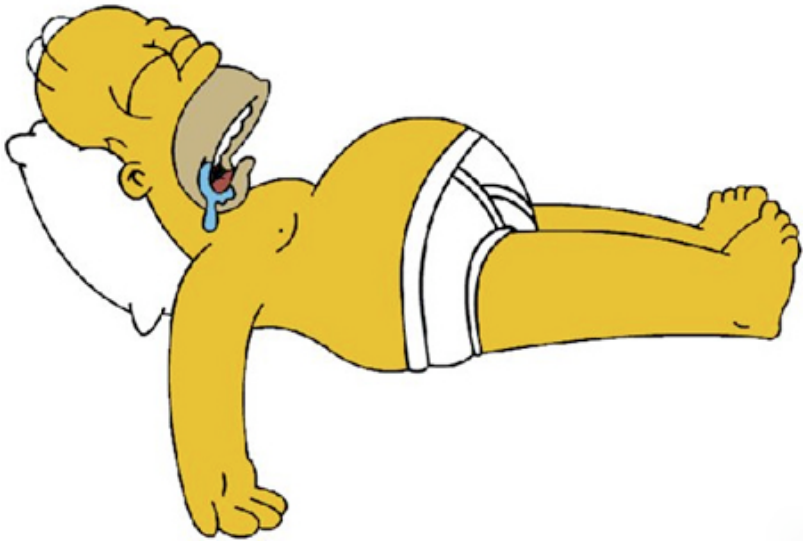
On "Engaging Culture": How Culture and Entertainment Are Different than Air

Submitted by admin on Mon, 09/26/2016 - 14:45



I woke up this morning to see 19 notifications on my Twitter account. Usually it means that someone included me in a conversation of which I was unaware, probably because I live on the other side of the Atlantic, and I was asleep. And so it was. Karen Swallow Prior, whom I genuinely admire, made a comment [1] about Trevin Wax's piece on why some Christians are leery of the term cultural engagement. [2] And many people jumped in on the Twitter conversation. Not a tweetstorm, and not bad natured. Just folks brainstorming about what should replace the term "cultural engagement." Some submissions were serious, others snarky. And a good time was had by all. Except me, 'cause I


was sleeping.

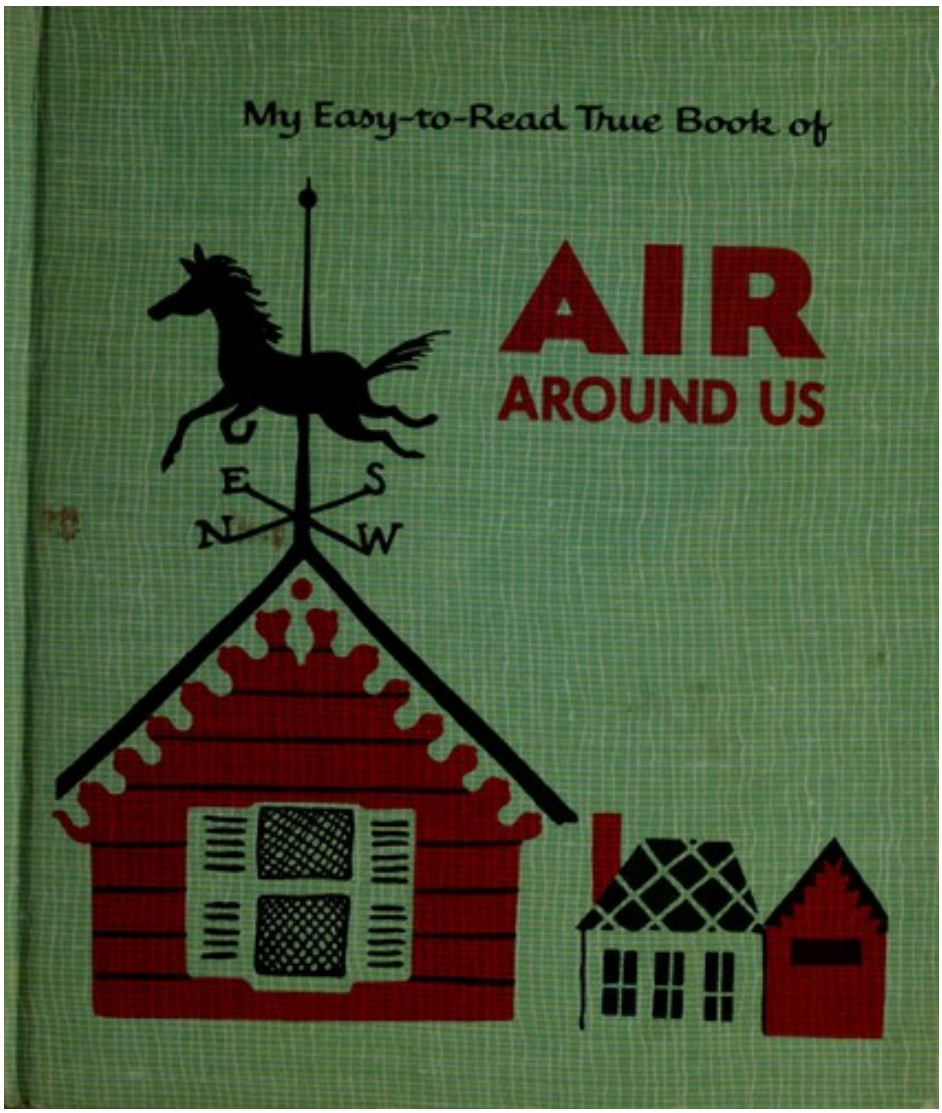
The relevant comment that Karen made was that she felt that the term cultural engagement "doesn't make semantic sense." She raises similar concerns in a recent article she did for *First Things* [3] in which she argued for a careful, reflective enjoyment of entertainment. It was nuanced and insightful (I mean, she quoted me, so that right there shows impeccable taste). And then she ended with a warning about not "fetishizing," making an idol out of entertainment by either "engaging" it or abstaining it.

> Both extremes ignore the reality that culture is like air: We can't exist apart from it. We might as well speak of "engaging the air" as of "engaging the culture"—or of separating ourselves from either.

I found the ending quixotic, hard to Swallow, so to speak (sorry: I couldn't resist). I DMed her to tell her so. She responded (and I asked her beforehand, so I'm not betraying a confidence):

> I will have to think about the air/culture analogy more. I think we should take care with the air we breathe, too. We can't exist without either (like food) but we can be careful or not in how we partake.

Here's my attempt at helping her think through that analogy, and in the meantime, rehabilitate the term "cultural engagement." In terms of the similarities, she's dead right. Culture is around us whether we want it to be or not. It is a necessity for survival. Even separating yourself Amish or Fundamentalist-style only ends up creating another



culture, a subculture, with its own weirdnesses, graces, and idolatries. And like air, we often don't consider what it is we're breathing in. So far, so good.

But there are also profound differences between culture (and entertainment), and air or food. Unlike air (but somewhat like food), culture has a meaning-structure that invites and requires some level of interpretation. Any entertaining television show requires us to know some language, understand plot, character, context, etc. I graduated with a B.A. in English (like Karen), so I tend to think of culture in terms of texts that I can enjoy and unpack. There's a deeper understanding to be had. It is a meaning-structure that can be engaged.

The weird thing is that Karen's words, and indeed, her whole article, sends clear signals that she knows this already. Be careful. Be intentional. Yes, we can be careful how we breathe and eat, but being intentional regarding culture and entertainment is a whole different beasty because of the meaningful structures to be engaged. So, in defense of cultural engagement, I'd have to disagree. The syntax adds up; culture is something that can be engaged like a text.

Maybe the problem is the words "culture" and "engage" are slippery and mean different things to different people. Certainly, Andy Crouch has a point when he objects to people engaging culture as an undifferentiated mass which passes over what's happening locally, in one's own neighborhood. Culture is not an undifferentiated blob. But (*pace* Crouch), culture is a network that functions on various levels: local, regional, national, global, etc. And the larger networks can wield a decisive impact on the intellectual, emotional, and spiritual profiles of individuals. So it's worth engaging. Local action is necessary to be sure, but so is engaging the larger networks of texts (shows, movies, songs, games, etc.).

Some object to the activist texture that some give to "engage," as if engaging were a matter of

gathering political resources and using them as a club to force the culture into the shape we'd like it to be (God-honoring, family-friendly, etc.). I think this is what



Trevin Wax sees as the "dangerous trajectory" inherent in the term. Cultural engagement in this sense means culture-warring until the culture sings our tune. The problem with this path to engagement is that culture is a mishmash of many tunes, and short of outright totalitarian dictatorship (or theocracy), you can influence culture only so far. And in a democracy, you cannot influence it against the will of the people held in its sway.

And certainly, Carl Trueman has a point when he says that …scratch that. Actually, he doesn't have a point. He is an illustration of what happens when a theologian-cum-curmudgeon employs too narrow a definition of culture. Trueman asserted that because culture has gone definitively against the democratic, Christian consensus that we so long enjoyed in the States, it is now no longer democratic nor a culture. It is an "anti-culture." [4] This is a bald-faced Thwackumist definition.



Parson Thwackum, the famously dour killjoy priest from Henry Fielding's *Tom Jones*. He had a peculiar way of defining religion: "When I mention religion, I mean the Christian religion; and not only the Christian religion, but the Protestant religion; and not only the

Protestant religion, but the Church of England." Trueman, in effect, says much the same, but with a more dismissive sneer concerning popular culture. "I can't recognize myself and my values in the culture anymore. It's even inimical to my faith and way of life. Ergo, it's not culture." To my mind, that essay epitomizes why theologians should be required to take at least one cultural studies class, to avoid this kind of foolishness. This is our culture to which God has called us. Now. Not 50 years ago. Not pre-Obergefell. Now. As the *cultural* phrase goes, "Deal with it." And when I mention dealing with it, I mean, engage.



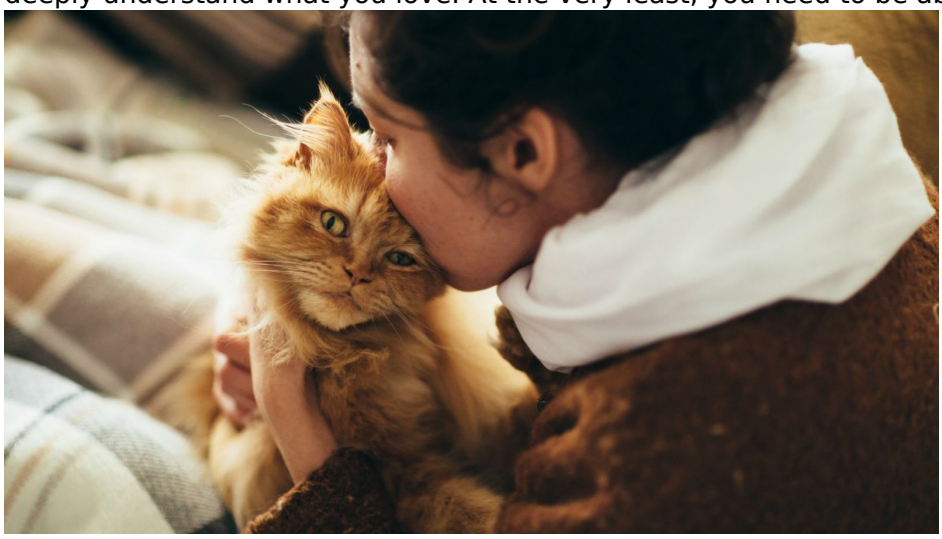
But Trueman's right when he says in another piece that the "church is not combating meaninglessness so much as offering an alternative meaning in a competitive marketplace. And the idioms of plausibility in that marketplace are themselves part of the problem." [5] I don't think he knows what he's talking about when he trivializes the cultural moment we find ourselves in by saying we're trapped in a pleasure dome, an "anti-culture of immediacy" in which people simply crave orgasmic pleasure as a substitute for meaning. Such sentiments border on misanthropy that is unworthy Christian charity. And they're just wrongheaded. Those involved in youth culture are finding meaning in and through the cultural forms (and yes, Carl, they're *cultural* forms) available to them, and Christians must learn to be savvy regarding those forms. We need an extra dose of imaginative insight into culture, not so that we might be wise and slick in our worship/entertainment sessions, but so that we might understand the cultural moment enough to present something that is at once biblically faithful, culturally challenging, and winsome. Cultural engagement, at this moment, is more necessary than ever.

So how would I like cultural engagement to be understood? As I understand it, it would require exactly what Karen Swallow Prior encourages: careful reflection and discernment. I really liked how she brought in a social ethical dimension into the mix. It's not just about, "Will this stain me and my children?" but "Were other living creatures—human and animal—harmed in making this piece of entertainment." That's worth considering. Along with that ethical dimension, I'd like to see Christians practice engagement via hermeneutic, that "unpacking the meaning" that Popologetics and Karen's essay advocate. This is not something that comes naturally, particularly to Evangelicals. We like the certainty of bright lines and rules. Engaging



in something as nuanced as cultural hermeneutics makes some queasy, but it's absolutely necessary to treat culture, and culture-makers, fairly. Figure out what they're trying to say fairly and with integrity before speaking out.

I think one ingredient that's necessary for this kind of engagement is affection. You can only truly, deeply understand what you love. At the very least, you need to be able to



understand why others have a deep affection for this or that piece of culture. This may strike some as counterintuitive. After all, doesn't love blind? Doesn't it skew our interpretations? To the contrary, only the lovers will be able to unpack what makes a cultural work attractive and powerful. Only they will be able to peer into the depths of how it means. Objective distance, that alienating doctrine of the Enlightenment, is what will truly warp an interpretation, freezing it under its dispassionate scalpel. If you have no affection but only contempt, you will never understand why a certain cultural work moves people so.

Let me give you a personal (if a bit silly) example. This weekend, our family began a Godzilla movie marathon. We watched *Godzilla Raids Again* (1955), *Destroy All*

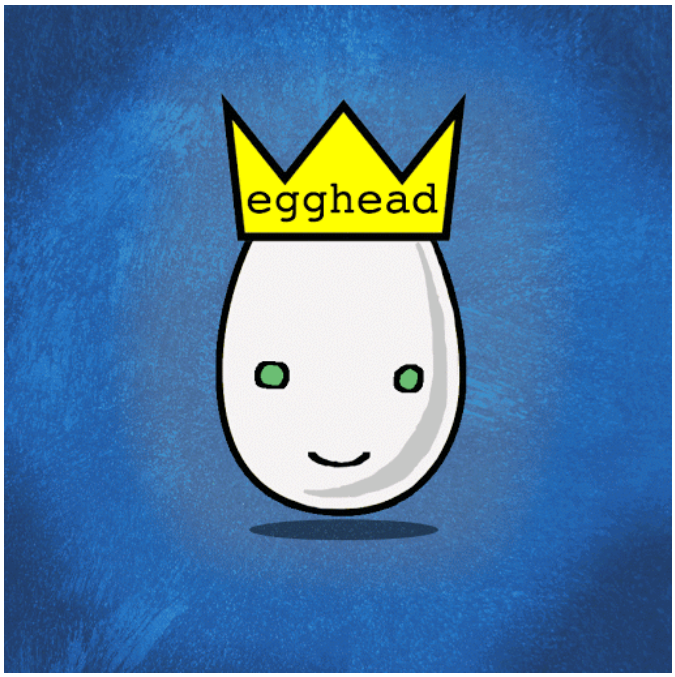


Monsters (1968), and *Godzilla vs. Mothra* (1964). We weren't looking to "engage." It was relaxing family fun. Nevertheless, we were engaging, commenting on the suits, how Godzilla's mouth giggled slightly because of the lighter suit construction in the later movies, the stilted dialogue, plot holes, delighting in the fight choreography, noticing the heavy-handed messages (especially in Mothra), the special effects. It was fun. And at one point, my youngest (17) said, noticing the stereotypical island natives bowing to Mothra, "Why do some of the monsters have cults?" It just struck her as odd that a giant moth would have its own religion. It didn't strike me as odd at all, and I replied, "Because they're huge and awesome creatures." I mean, if you were a hundred feet from a giant moth who protected you from all manner of harm, wouldn't you be tempted to fall down in obeisance? Wouldn't you? After all, people of all stripes in effect fall down and worship things that are far less spectacular and beautiful than Mothra? And doesn't it underline the temptation to make God seem distant and uninvolved and serve things that are closer and more immediate? We didn't get to all of that



everyone had school the next morning. But the question is out there, and I'm sure it will be picked up again. But all of these questions are only understood by those who have some affection for these goofy, low-budget Japanese kaiju movies. The meaning structures remain opaque to the disinterested or dismissive onlooker. Cultural engagement means affection.
because it was late and
Of course, our deepest affection is reserved for our Lord, so it's not just affection, but a critical affection as well. We bring to bear biblical truths and our experience of walking with Jesus into the mix as well. It's natural that we should do so, even if the mainstream culture thinks of Christianity as a weird add-on. It's woven into our very identity. We watch *Godzilla vs. Mothra* as Christians, which means not just affection, but a critical awareness that is able to sort out common grace from idolatry, truth and beauty from distortion and deception. We need a Christian-critical imagination for engaging culture in this way.

This is what Andy Crouch dismissed as "the academic fallacy" in *Culture Making*. It's the mistake that "once you have understood something—analyzed it and critiqued it—



you have changed it. But academic libraries are full of brilliant analyses of every facet of human culture that have made no difference at all in the world beyond the stacks," (Crouch, 69). I get his point, but I think he's dead wrong on two fronts. First, in cultural critique, we're not seeking to change "it" (culture); we're seeking to change us. The change is internal, and devotional. We learn to think through issues presented, what truly reflects God's glory, what dims it. And we share those thoughts with our friends and family. The process gives us insight into the cultural meaning structures around us, and we can speak to others in a more nuanced, winsome way. Cultural critique is both necessary for our own worship and for evangelism and missions.

Second, this sort of critical work has a massive *indirect* influence. All cultural creation begins with cultural critique. It begins with someone responding to something in their culture, and creating out of that awareness. There's a lot of academic criticism that goes unnoticed, but some of it lodges in the minds of university-trained students who go on to become writers and producers in Hollywood, or the BBC. And the less academic stuff, the reactions that are broadcast through mainstream media and social networks, also shape the minds of the creators. Cultural interpretation is properly cultural engagement.

However, I think he's right in insisting that those who can move past critique into



creation. And this brings me to a second aspect of cultural engagement: creatively speaking into culture through your specific craft. Again, this operates at different levels, from the very local (entertaining guests with food and conversation) to the national and international (directing a blockbuster movie, or creating a new technology). It means that Christians have to look for opportunities to share the gifts God's given them for the common good and to change the shared "imaginary landscape" of their society. Unlike the political path, this type of engagement seeks not to coerce, but to invite, to become part of the broader cultural conversation. I've written on this already [6] and am working on a book on this type of cultural engagement, so I won't say more here. Suffice it to say, cultural engagement means employing the creative imagination into the cultural networks that surround us. Makoto Fujimura's "culture care" [7] idea runs along the same lines, though I'd like to see more Christians contributing in mainstream popular culture, changing the texture and atmosphere there.

So, Karen, that's why I think a term like "cultural engagement" makes perfect syntactical sense, given the semantic domains involved. On the one hand, it means employing a Christian critical imagination to engage the meaning structures that are there. On the other hand, it means employing a Christian creative imagination to add to the overall cultural mix. And, of course, the opposite of cultural engagement is cultural *disengagement*, which is where too many Christians are today. They either consume without reflection, or withdraw reflexively. Neither, to my mind, fulfills Jesus' call whereby he sends us out into the world (Jo. 17:18). There's so much more here to engage than simply air. It requires a bit more attention than breathing. It requires exactly the kind of careful reflection that you call for. As she said so in her essay,

> Every culture includes entertainment. It is a gift (literally, "that which is given") of the human condition. If it is a gift that our age (including the church) has misused, then its misuse is the result not of caring too much about entertainment, but of caring too little.

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