

*Two movie recommendations... with some reservations*  
Ruminations on “The Class” and “The Reader”

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I’m not a movie buff. I don’t know much about Hollywood and I don’t care much about celebrity film stars, and I probably see less than a dozen new movies in a typical year. I might be tempted to see a few more if it weren’t for the inflated ticket prices and the unpleasant prospect of having to sit through the previews for upcoming (mostly bad) movies and subject one’s sensibilities to a constant barrage of frenetic quick-cut scenettes amid thunderous music and sound-effects. It’s quite mind-numbing, and I don’t find it mentally or spiritually healthy. (We’re subjected to enough noise pollution and visual over-stimulation in the course of normal life without having to endure this kind of artificial and unnecessary abuse.)

Many of the movies that my wife and I see are foreign films and independent productions rather than Hollywood blockbusters with big-name stars, which I find generally shallow and superficial. I prefer intelligent scripts with sensible plots and good character development, adept acting, interesting and believable (and hopefully, somewhat admirable) characters, and movies that challenge me to think about the issues of life. And while few movies have anything to offer in terms of any theological insights, at least some offer thoughtful reflections on the human condition.

In other words, I much prefer art to entertainment – although a creative mix of the two is most satisfying. I’m not very impressed by special effects, big explosions and heart-pounding car chases, and I don’t want to be exposed to a lot of vile obscene language or gratuitous sex. I don’t like movies that glamorize or glorify gangsters, thugs, con artists, greedy capitalists, mindless materialists, self-absorbed hedonists, or sadistic psychopaths. (As C. S. Lewis noted in *Mere Christianity*, “bad” people are typically and boringly similar, while “good” people are refreshingly and interestingly different.) I don’t object to realistic depictions of violence if it’s contextually appropriate (for instance, in a war movie), but I don’t like gratuitous violence. I enjoy witty and intelligent comedy, but not the kind of mindless and obscene idiocy that mostly passes for comedy today. Needless to say, not many movies come out that interest me.

### “The Class”

Having said that, I recently saw two films currently playing in the Atlanta area that I’d like to recommend (with some reservations): *The Class* and *The Reader*. Both are “foreign” films in a sense: *The Class* is a French film with English subtitles, and *The Reader* is in English but is set in Germany and has mostly German actors.

*The Class* is a disturbing microcosmic metaphor for the breakdown of what’s left of Western Civilization in Europe, specifically in France. Having read a brief review of it, I was attracted to the movie because it sounded somewhat similar to the 1967 film, *To Sir With Love*, which was released when I was in high school and was the first generational movie that made an impression on me. *To Sir With Love* was set in London, and the plot revolved around a dysfunctional inner-city high school and an idealistic teacher, played by Sidney Poitier, who inspired his students and made a difference in their lives. Incorporating the styles and music of the era, the movie effectively portrayed the chaotic but still optimistic spirit of the youth culture circa 1967. Prior to *To Sir With Love*, the only generational movies I’d seen (other than the Beatles’ film, *A Hard Day’s Night*) were silly *Beach Party*-type movies and cheesy Elvis Presley flicks. After *To Sir With Love*, the movie industry zeroed in on the burgeoning youth culture market with offerings such as *The Graduate* (1968), *Easy Rider*

(1969) and *Alice’s Restaurant* (1970), but for me none of these captured the spirit of the times quite like *To Sir With Love*.

*To Sir With Love* had a radical but optimistically progressive humanistic message. A gifted teacher, a black man from West Africa, took a class of dysfunctional high school seniors and, through force of personality and total dedication, prepared them for life after high school in the real world. Realizing that these kids didn’t need a classical education so much as preparation for life, he abandoned the traditional curriculum and emphasized character development and practical life-skills, and in the process he eventually earned their respect and admiration. One was left with the impression that, at least for the “under-privileged” classes in society, the whole philosophy of education needed drastic change, but that there was hope in the values and methodologies of progressive humanistic education.



In some respects, *The Class* is *To Sir With Love* forty years later, and although the scenario is similar there are also some stark contrasts. While still secular and “progressive” in the John Dewey tradition, Parisian inner-city schools have virtually abandoned any pretense of teaching moral values and character development. Now, it’s mostly a matter of crowd control. Paralyzed by political correctness and overwhelmed by the demands of multiculturalism and ethnic diversity, schools like this barely function at all. As in the early scenes in *To Sir With Love*, there is still little discipline in the classroom, but now the schools are filled with students who have no respect for France and its cultural heritage – including many African, Asian, and Muslim kids. (When one student is asked, “Aren’t you French?” he replies, “Yes, but I’m not proud of it.”) In her review of

the film in the *New York Times*, Manohla Dargis noted that “*The Class* isn’t directly about civil unrest and French identity as a republican ideal, though these issues run through it like a powerful current, keeping the children and adults... on edge.”

Teenage culture, often driven by American pop culture trends and Hollywood values, has become ruder and cruder over the decades, and now the conflict between students and teachers isn’t so much a matter of personal rebellion as cultural hostility. The result is that the public school environment is far more cynical and nihilistic than before, even to the point of making the youth rebellion of the Sixties appear quite quaint and naive by comparison. Intentionally or not, this film reinforces the fear of many that multiculturalism is in essence anti-culturalism.

There is no redeeming message in *The Class*, and the teacher never wins the trust, the support, or the respect of the students. The culture war is a war of attrition, and it is clear that Western values and traditions are being overwhelmed on every front. Whereas *To Sir With Love* ended somewhat satisfactorily on a note of optimism, *The Class* is totally unsatisfactory and reflects the sense of defeatism that characterizes the disintegration of contemporary Western culture.

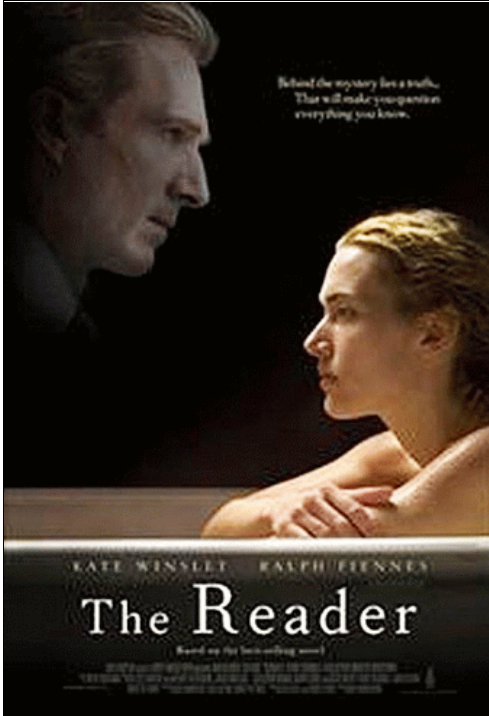
If you want some revealing insight into the current status of European society and the corrosive affects of political correctness and multiculturalism, see *The Class*. It’s reality, but it’s certainly neither inspiring nor encouraging.

## “The Reader”

*The Reader* is a brooding and engaging film centered around two themes: individual moral responsibility and the need for honest and transparent relationships. Set initially in Germany in the late 1950s, the film opens by focusing on the relationship between Michael Berg (played as a youth by David Kross and as an adult by Ralph Fiennes), a 15-year-old school boy, and Hanna Schmitz (Kate Winslet), a woman twice his age who first befriends and then seduces him. The movie proceeds to follow Michael through law school and into adulthood, showing the impact his relationship with Hanna has on his subsequent emotional development. Along the way, startling revelations emerge regarding Hanna and her past.

Ironically, the less one knows about the plot, the more the movie will impact you, so other than the comments above I’ll refrain from even a

cursory synopsis. (My suggestion is to avoid reading about the film until after you’ve seen it.) Chillingly believable, *The Reader* is one of those films that comes along every couple of years or so that can honestly stir your emotions and affect you on a visceral level. Personally, I haven’t seen such a thought-provoking film since *Juno*, although *The Reader* is considerably more troubling in terms of what it reveals about human nature.



A viewer warning: The first half of the film contains several sex scenes that are fairly graphic. This is not necessarily the kind of glamorized gratuitous sex that Hollywood typically dishes out, but nonetheless there’s a considerable amount of it and it’s well beyond the merely suggestive. The sex is integral to the story, and the second half of the movie is absolutely intriguing, but if this issue is particularly problematical for you then you might want to pass on the movie altogether.

Several points to consider and discuss about this movie include:

- (1)Hanna’s moral sensibilities and her understanding of personal responsibility.
- (2)Hanna’s question to the judge, “Well, what would you have done?”

- (3)The question posed by Michael’s law professor: “If people like you don’t learn from what happened to people like me, what’s the purpose of all this?”
- (4)Hanna’s response to Michael’s question in their last meeting, “Do you think about the past?”
- (5)The metaphorical significance of water in the film.
- (6)What are Hanna and Michael’s fundamental character flaws?
- (6)Do you find Hanna to be a sympathetic figure or not?

Despite having scenes that most Christians would (hopefully) find morally objectionable, *The Reader* is one of those relatively rare movies that is actually worth seeing and discussing. Most Christians, however, never develop any kind of thoughtful philosophy of the arts and are therefore ill-equipped to process a movie like this on anything but a superficial level. Many either lose interest in the arts due to the pervasive perversion of popular culture, or else they regard the arts as utterly irrelevant and never integrate them into their worldview in the first place. In either case, I suspect that most Christians are probably unaware that movies like *The Class* and *The Reader* even exist, or if they do know they are totally disinterested. This is unfortunate and just another example of how Christians continue to marginalize themselves in the public square and render the Gospel of Jesus Christ culturally irrelevant.



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