

critique

A Ransom Fellowship Publication 2020 Issue 1

**LOTS TO THINK ABOUT, INCLUDING
THE WHITE POWER MOVEMENT, AND
HOW TO BE A BETTER LOVER:
ATTENTION IN A DISTRACTED WORLD**



CRITIQUE



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Except where noted, all articles are by Denis Haack.

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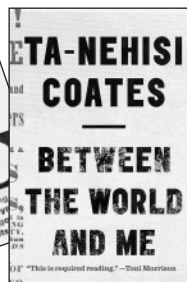
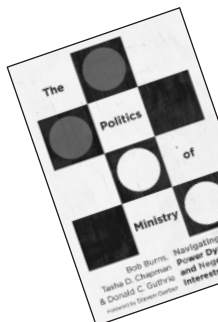
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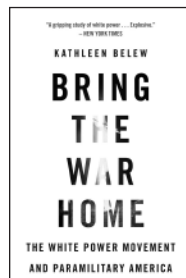


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Gratefulness



Gratitude is hard to learn, as any parent will tell you. Sometimes I hesitate before giving some treat to a child because I know what will happen next. A parent will instruct them to “Say thank you,” and they’ll look pained and mutter the appropriate words with what appears to be minimal conviction. Sometimes the parent will apologize, but I always insist they shouldn’t. Gratitude is hard to learn and too often as an adult I’ve said the correct words but that’s as far as it went. Once I learned the proper formula, I discovered I could ignore my ungrateful heart.

I’ve been noticing how outrage kills gratefulness. I have no double-blind research data to back that up, but my experience confirms it. If I make a simple graph, one line being amount of news and social media consumed and the other the amount of spontaneous gratitude felt for small blessings, I’m left with a simple giant X. As the first (outrage) increases the second (gratitude) is threatened with not just diminishment but extinction.

It’s complicated by the fact that much of what I am grateful for is relatively rare in our world where goods are unfairly distributed because systemic injustice and individual greed has so badly skewed the vaunted invisible hand of capitalism. Like hot showers,

indoor plumbing, fresh salad greens out of season, more books than I can actually read, affordable wine, woods with wild turkeys, deer, fox, and a host of songbirds outside my office windows. When anxiety is fanned by some outrage in the news, it’s easy to forget them. My focus has been shifted.

There is a deeper level as well. I want to be grateful for small things, the little blessings that are easy to miss because they are so ordinary, so unexpected, or so often received I forget that I don’t actually deserve them. They are precious when noticed but must be noticed, and that takes a mindfulness that everything around me tries to disrupt. “Bless the Lord, O my soul, and all that is within me, bless his holy name!” David tells himself (Psalm 103:1–2) “Bless the Lord, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits.” It’s like he’s taking himself by the scruff of the neck and shouting, “Do it!” I need a similar reminder.

There are more enemies of mindfulness than outrage and distraction; the values of the idol of consumerism, efficiency, and productivity are equally effective. The urgent supplants the important, and busyness can make the pace of life too quick to notice the tiny graces that appear momentarily at the edges of our consciousness. Sometimes they initially appear as interruptions and only on reflection reveal their true nature.

Thanksgiving 2

On Thanksgiving, the phone suddenly stops working. For this, too, Lord, we give thanks.

I don’t understand my secular friends who tell me they express gratitude to the universe. They say it isn’t so different from praising a God that exists

only in my imagination. I understand that argument but find it unconvincing. I also realize it isn’t for them primarily a cognitive issue and so remember the final apologetic is love.

My love for them, yes, but also my love for the personal infinite God that is really there. Corporate worship is, among other things, an expression of gratitude to God before a watching world. And that watching suggests that we need to step back and ask, “What would a visiting unbeliever see in our worship? Will they be moved by the authenticity and depth of our gratitude for God’s grace in a broken world even if they disagree with some of what they hear?”

Outrage feels powerful and transformative while gratitude requires humility and a gentle thoughtfulness. Superhero movies get exciting when the protagonist goes on a rampage, but they slow down when a character pauses to express thanks.

“I would maintain,” G. K. Chesterton said, “that thanks are the highest form of thought, and that gratitude is happiness doubled by wonder.” That may be true, but gratitude is still hard to learn, even over a lifetime. I’m coming to see I haven’t mastered it yet. I hope I do, someday. ■

Source: The excerpt from “Thanksgiving 2” is by Jim Moore (2011). It arrived, to my delight, in my inbox on November 28, 2019 via Pome by Matthew Ogle (pome@mattogle.com). “Pome: Short modern poems for your inbox, because it’s dangerous to go alone.” G. K. Chesterton online (brainyquote.com/quotes/gilbert_k_chesterton_140975?src=t_gratitude)

DIALOGUE



To the editor:
Dear Denis:

Thank you for the wonderful sermon you preached at your mother's funeral [*Critique* 2019:5]. You spoke with such thoughtful, loving honesty and clarity that you should be commended by all of us who heard it or read it. Thank you also for the way you and Margie honored her during her life, especially in the last years when you could talk to her with freedom of expression; and then when it became more difficult for her to talk. Your love and faithfulness were a most valuable tribute to her and a testimony to me, and I am sure many others. The things you spoke about came from a lifetime of discipline and faithfulness to your calling. You honored her, and the Lord, and His Word with your sermon. May God bless you and keep you with warmth in your heart.

Love and respect,
Pete Swearingen
Cadillac, Michigan

To the editor:

Enjoyed reading Denis' tribute to his mom [*Critique* 2019:5]. An important point that he made—we *all* are made in God's image. Hope that *Critique* goes on for many years.

In journey,
Danny Bullington
Knoxville, Tennessee

To the editor:
Dear Denis:

Jodie and I are so sorry to learn about the loss of your mother, but

we are comforted to learn that you had time to reconnect as family. Your funeral sermon was a beautiful, reassuring tribute; particularly your reminder of the circle of women she's joined [*Critique* 2019:5].

I've been considering my own "tracery" much of late, and I am often discouraged how little the soil has shifted, how short a distance I've moved the stone. Whether words uttered have helped anyone, I cannot see. Your reminder that all we need is an audience of One was greatly encouraging.

Wish we could visit in person again, dear brother.

Please accept our heart-felt condolences for the grief of separation you must now bear.

You both remain in our prayers,
Steve and Jodie Oster
Grand Junction, Colorado

To the editor:
Denis—

I have been a supporter, and reader of the excellent products from your wife and you for many years. I am not writing this email so that it should be published. But I am giving a big thumbs up to *Gentleman in Moscow*. I read this book a couple of months ago, and immediately turned back to the first page and started reading it again. I am still paging through and re-reading sections—a third time. I know people say that all the time, but this is the only book I've ever done that with. There are a few that I will go back and re-read from time to time: *Slaughterhouse Five*, *Soldier of the Great War*, *The Moviegoer*, the Jack Aubry novels, Tolkien, and oddly, *Soon I Will be Invincible*. *Gentleman* is lighter than most of those books,

essentially escapist (he's really a superhero), and very quotable. The author is so literate. It's also a cheat to feel even a little like you're reading Tolstoy or Dostoyevsky, without the tragedy or density. It would be great for a men's group. Very spiritual and uplifting. In any event, thrilled that you loved it too. Hope you follow up and tell the readers what you thought of it after actually finishing [*Critique* 2019:4]. Was there a letdown for you at all?

Thanks.
Kevin Keller
Virginia Beach, Virginia

Denis Haack replies:

To Pete, Danny, Steve, and Jodie: Thank you for your words of comfort on the death of my mother. And I am pleased that the sermon I preached at her funeral was an encouragement. For all the progress, dreams, promises, and advances of our modern world, we still face the reality of death, and what we make of it makes a great deal of difference about everything else.

To Kevin: As I hope you can tell from the review I wrote [*Critique* 2019:6], I loved Amor Towles' novel, *A Gentleman in Moscow*. One of the abiding difficulties of writing fiction is that despicable villains are always easier to write about than virtuous characters. There is a natural tension in villains and their pursuit of evil, while good characters often come across as weak, uninteresting, or sentimental. That is not the case in *A Gentleman in Moscow*, where Count Alexander Rostov, a civil, kind and civilized man acts virtuously in a way that is properly seen as heroic. This in itself makes the novel a standout, in my mind, along with the spectacular prose that makes reading it a treat for mind and imagination. I was not let down at the end, except for the regret I felt that there were not more pages to enjoy. ■

A Constellation



Faithfully shining this fam'ly of stars
Patiently pointing in radiant song
Wheeling in motion to music they sing
The love in the law of the heavenly spheres.
The center surrendered a likeness defines,
Outlines an image, a pattern divine,
That daily declining rises to cheer,
Bright comfort and courage where it appears,
A sight that would guide a willing watcher,
If ancient light can the impossible
Distance cross to find a wanderer's way.
So then shine, burn, bless, and be blessed—so bright—
That when the star of the morning appears,
Then we may meet in the light of the day. ■

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Samuel Hamer is a practicing attorney in Minnesota. He earned degrees in physics from Wheaton College and in law from Harvard Law School. His occasional poetry considers themes of faith, doubt, and family. He lives with his wife, Naomi, and three boys near Minneapolis.

READING THE WORLD

HOW TO BE A BETTER LOVER: ATT



ENTION IN A DISTRACTED WORLD

by Phillip Johnston



When it comes to information, humanity has been playing a vast game of Tetris for thousands of years.¹

As any child of the 1980s knows, the goal of Tetris is to take the differently shaped blocks that rain down from the top of the screen and rotate and stack them into an orderly configuration. In our game of information Tetris, new blocks of information are constantly being formed as we encounter and acquire knowledge. Our task is to take the “blocks” of information we come into contact with and place them into our experience in a helpful and enriching way.

This was easier for our ancestors. Most of them lived in environments of information scarcity, which meant that they were near the beginning of the game. The blocks were falling slowly from the sky. There was time to attend to each one, make a decision, and move on.

But those were the early rounds of the game. All Tetris players know that the game rapidly escalates. The blocks fall faster with each round until it is harder and harder to keep up.

Here in 2020, information is coming toward us at lightning speed and from every direction. We have more access to information—more opportunities to learn, search, communicate, network, and share—than at any other point in human history. There is a whole world of digital information and entertainment available at our fingertips 24/7. The internet makes constant claims on our attention and it does so with increasing effectiveness through our smartphones and digital devices.

There is so much information coming at us, so many blocks falling from the sky, that many of us are losing control of the game. When we are

conscious of this, we feel overwhelmed—inadequate, dumb, like poor players of the game. When we are not conscious of this, however, we are simply distracted. We lack focus and intention, we forget what we initially set out to do, and we wonder why time is going by so fast.

Case in point: Have you recently sat down on the couch to read a book or write a message to a friend, only to emerge from your phone or iPad an hour or more later having checked social media, read a few articles, played a few rounds of a game, posted something on Instagram, and perhaps even purchased something from an ad you saw online? This has become a way of life for many of us and it happens more times than we’d like to admit.

You’ll find articles about these issues in major news publications just about every week. Sometimes these pieces are about how distraction inhibits productivity in the workplace, safety on the road, our ability to process information, or how we remember things. But I’m convinced that we’ve paid very little attention to something even more primal. Our information-saturated moment has a formative affect on our *loving*.

As our distractibility goes up, our capacity for other-centered love goes down. The more distracted we are, the more our love is turned away from the people and places around us and toward the things that distract us. Our distractions don’t simply prevent us from loving God and other people—they actually shape the things we love instead.

Let’s unfold this idea under three headings.

First: What is love? We’ll sketch a basic definition of love to help us understand why it is so endangered in

our information-swamped world.

Second: Love's innovative enemies. We'll look at four cultural and technological developments that currently contribute to how our love is shaped.

Finally: Paying attention to what we're paying attention to. We'll draw some conclusion about the quantity and the quality of our love.

1. WHAT IS LOVE

a. Describing love

Love is the guiding force of every person's life. Our love is the fuel of our action, drawing us like a magnet toward what we most desire.

I didn't always believe this. In fact, I read many books when I was a teenager, and even went to a Christian apologetics camp, where I was told the exact opposite. "Right living flows from right thinking," I was taught. "If you think the right things, the right actions will fall into place."

But I eventually encountered a startling problem: I had a brain full of "right thinking" but no desire to live according to it.

Thankfully, I soon came across some books by the American Christian philosopher James K. A. Smith that significantly helped me with this problem.² The burden of much of Smith's writing is a conviction that many Christians have latched onto an understanding of action and behavior that prioritizes thinking, but neglects desire and love. We often confuse discipleship with information gathering, assuming that the Christian life is primarily about acquiring knowledge of the truth. But many of us know in our guts that it is more complicated than that.

Smith puts it like this:

*...the vast majority of our action and behavior is "driven" by all sorts of unconscious, pre-cognitive "drivers," so to speak. Those pre-conscious desires are formed in all sorts of ways that are not "intellectual." And so while I might be fueling my mind with a steady diet of Scripture, what I don't realize is that all sorts of other cultural practices are actually forming my desire in affective, unconscious ways. Because of the sorts of creatures we are, those pre-conscious desires often win out.*³

A simple example: I am fully aware of what healthy eating looks like. I know in my mind that it does not involve late night visits to the refrigerator. If my knowledge and beliefs were the decisive factor, I would never find myself spoon in hand, eating ice cream straight from the container at 11:22 p.m. But my ritual of late-night snacking has formed me into a lover of ice cream. I love the pleasure of ice cream more than I love the goal of health.

There are things I love more than the truth that I know—and the same is true for you. We bear in our hearts a vision of what we want and are propelled toward that vision, often in spite of firmly held convictions. You are what you love, Smith says, but you might not love what you think.⁴

An illustration from the social psychologist Jonathan Haidt has helped me understand this more clearly.⁵ Haidt suggests that the mind is divided into two parts like a small rider on the back of a very large and powerful elephant. The rider represents our *conscious reasoning*, our thinking. The elephant represents our *intuition*, or what we're calling our love.

An elephant is very large and profoundly smart—and the same is true

of our love. Our love knows how carry us toward the things we desire most. This is why we can fill our rider's head with reams of information and rational argument, while our elephant keeps on carrying us in a different direction.

Your love is your elephant, taking you toward what you most desire.

b. Defining love

We've described how love works, but what exactly *is* love? This is a difficult question, for that word in the English language has so many common and diverse uses.

A husband looks into his wife's eyes and says, "I love you" an hour after exclaiming "I love this steak" at the dinner table. I say that I love my family, but I also say I love our local pizza shop and the breakfast sandwich at the Jewish bakery down the street. We use the phrase "making love" as shorthand for sex. There are so many uses for this one, four-letter word.

But let's get more basic. When we use the word love, what is the subject doing or showing in relation to the object? Can we name that thing we are exerting when we give "love" and that thing we are receiving when we receive "love"? Here is my attempt.

Love is committed attending.

"Commit your way to the Lord," implores the psalmist (37:5). Join with Him and walk His paths. When we commit to something, we pledge or bind our self to it. There is dedication involved—an intention to stick with something or someone even when it is difficult, draining, or disappointing. We commit to something—be it good or evil, easy or difficult—because we are somehow persuaded that it is good to do so.

Attending is more than just showing up; it's less "He wasn't in attendance today" and more "Look how that mother attends to her daughter." Attending means offering more than a momentary glance or a short period of concentration. Attending is active presence, the consistent application of energy toward something rather than away from it.

Do you want to identify the objects of your love? If so, ask yourself, "Who or what receives the most of my committed attending—my active presence?" The answers to this question can be unsettling.

I may say I love reading and back up this claim by lining my home with books. What does it mean, then, if I spend the majority of my free hours scrolling through Instagram, playing games on my iPad, and surveying the Netflix terrain? Clearly, I don't love reading as much as I think I do. I may have had a love for books once, but my committed attending has since found new objects.

Or, think of a spouse who cheats on their beloved three times in a short span and each time comes back saying, "You've always been the one I loved the most!" The spouse might truly think they love their partner most, but their committed attending has been directed elsewhere, turned toward someone else whom they feel is more fulfilling than their spouse.

The objects of our committed attending are the objects of our love. Attention is the engine of love. Where your attention is, there your love will be also.

2. LOVE'S INNOVATIVE ENEMIES

If love and attention are this intimately connected, we must consider

love's innovative enemies—four cultural and technological forces bent on harvesting as much of our committed attending as possible.

a. The Attention Merchants

The attention merchants are a class of businessperson whose presence dominate our world. In 2020, they are literally everywhere, present with us during all of our waking and sleeping. Each one of us has interacted with multiple, perhaps even hundreds of attention merchants today, most of us within the last hour, even if we haven't realized it. The attention merchants are with you right now, their presence suffusing the place where you sit even though they are not physically present.

Our attention is a resource for us, but for the attention merchant, our attention is a commodity. The business of the attention merchant is to harvest your attention and convert it into revenue for someone else.

The first attention merchant was a man named Benjamin Day, a newspaperman who stumbled upon a remarkable new business model back in 1833. Day wasn't really interested in publishing the news; he just wanted to make money. His solution was to sell his paper *The Sun* for less than it cost to produce and make his money selling page space to advertisers. Day's cheap newspaper reeled readers in with juicy (and often entirely false) stories about

grisly suicides, murders, and sexual escapades—and it was chock full of ads. Readers would see these ads, their desire for the products would be piqued, and they'd open their wallets.

It looked like Benjamin Day was selling newspapers, but he was actually selling his readers to advertisers. The newspaper was not Benjamin Day's main product, the readers were. Like all attention merchants, Benjamin Day offered his readers an affordable product in order to harvest their attention and sell it to the highest bidder.

"Attention merchant" is the Columbia University law professor Tim Wu's word for advertiser⁶—and Benjamin Day's brilliant decision was the dawn of an industry.

The M.O. of the attention merchant is to

lurk, Wu explains, "seeking out time and spaces previously walled off from commercial exploitation, gathering up chunks and then slivers of our unharvested awareness."⁷ And this lurking has become quite advanced since the 1850s.

Advertising came to maturity in the twentieth century. Consumers were buying the items and services they needed when they saw advertisements, but a significant problem eventually arose—once they got what they needed, they stopped buying. The attention merchants began to see that America needed to shift from a needs economy to a wants economy.

This was accomplished by shifting

"WHEN A PERSON CAN'T FIND A DEEP SENSE OF MEANING, THEY DISTRACT THEMSELVES WITH PLEASURE."

Viktor Frankl

the content of advertising away from factual information about products. There needed to be a desire component, a way of awakening or implanting desire in people—and once you could key into that desire, behaviors and attitudes could be powerfully shaped. Talk to the elephant, not to the rider.

In other words, advertising is not about products. In the fancier parlance of Don Draper:

*Advertising is based on one thing: happiness. And do you know what happiness is? Happiness is the smell of a new car. It's freedom from fear. It's a billboard on the side of a road that screams with reassurance that whatever you're doing is OK. You are OK.*⁸

Advertising is about persuasion, not information. Even toward the end of the twentieth century, it was still difficult to measure just how effective this persuasion was. But with the dawn of the internet, the attention merchants struck gold with new forms analytics and ad customization—an unforeseen tool belt of new ways to get consumer eyes on persuasive content.

And suddenly, without many people seeing just what was happening, the sophisticated persuasion of the attention merchants allied itself with the equally sophisticated technology of Silicon Valley at the beginning of the twenty-first century. As the new millennium dawned, the attention merchants came into possession of unprecedented new methods for turning the cash crop of human attention into an industrial commodity.⁹

b. The Attention Economy

We are now living in what economists call “the attention economy.” This

is love’s second innovative enemy.

To understand what this means, consider the words of the economist Herbert Simon back in 1971:

*In an information-rich world, the wealth of information means a death of something else: a scarcity of whatever it is that information consumes. What information consumes is rather obvious: it consumes the attention of its recipients. Hence a wealth of information creates a poverty of attention and a need to allocate that attention efficiently among the overabundance of information sources that might consume it.*¹⁰

A wealth of information means a shortage of attention. There is more information available to us than ever before in human history, so the stakes are higher than ever for the attention merchants. There is a constant race to get our attention, especially on the internet where most of us spend a large part of our lives.

The attention economy came into being with the introduction of the smartphone, a device designed to consume human attention wherever it could be found. The smartphone is optimally suited not only for making consumers see advertisements, but for ceaselessly monitoring, tracking, and measuring consumer activity in order to ensure that what consumers see on their screens produces maximum persuasion.

c. Algorithmic Behavior Modification

The Silicon Valley pioneer Jaron Lanier calls this process *algorithmic behavior modification*—and it is the primary way the attention merchants persuade in our current attention economy.

Algorithms are simply sets of rules

for a computer to follow in order to achieve a set goal. They read data and respond accordingly. Lanier vividly explains how algorithms work in the attention economy:

Algorithms gorge on data about you, every second. What kinds of links do you click on? What videos do you watch all the way through? How quickly are you moving from one thing to the next? Where are you when you do these things? Who are you connecting with in person and online? What facial expressions do you make? How does your skin tone change in different situations? What were you doing just before you decided to buy something or not? ...

*All these measurements and many others have been matched up with similar readings about the lives of multitudes of other people ... [in order to] correlate what you do with what almost everyone else has done.*¹¹

Though the algorithms don’t know you on a relational level as a spouse or a friend might, they are remarkably good at what they do. Through what you write, watch, click, buy, say, and do, the attention merchants’ algorithms make a guess about your emotional state—Are you happy? Sad? Lonely? Fearful?—and then populate your screen with the kind of content that will consume more of your attention, with the end goal of getting you to buy things, either online or in person. Through this technology, the attention merchant “can seize the moment when you are perfectly primed and then influence you with messages that have worked on other people who share traits and situations with you.”¹²

The fact that our phones and social media constantly distract us is not an accident. The process is called persuasive design, and it’s the result of

thousands of hours of careful psychological research. You cannot be on your phone, and especially not on social media, without your attention being vied for by the attention merchants—and they have done their research to ensure that they will grab as much of your attention as they can with the right colors, sounds, images, and other persuasive tools.

d. Surveillance Capitalism

In our contemporary attention economy, algorithmic behavior modification is the most successful avenue for the attention merchants to seduce consumers to desire and purchase things and experiences. Powerful and ubiquitous, it has become the foundation of a new economic order that the Harvard Business School professor Shoshana Zuboff calls surveillance capitalism, our final innovative enemy within which the others find their home.

In her comprehensive book *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power*, Zuboff develops an illuminating vocabulary for understanding the invisible workings of this new economic logic. She does this by comparing surveillance capitalism to its industrial predecessor.

In industrial capitalism, nature was claimed as raw material for the production of commodities that could be sold and purchased. Trees from verdant forests were cut down en masse, processed in factories, and fashioned into consumer products. Vast swaths of creation were reborn as real estate to be bought and sold in the market.

In surveillance capitalism, the raw material—the forests and the trees, as it were—is our *private human experience*.

Through our smartphones and other devices with the prefix smart-, this experience is claimed for the market and reborn as *behavioral data*. This data is run through *production processes* called artificial intelligence and machine learning. Out of these invisible “factories” come *prediction products*—packages of educated guesses of what we will do now, soon, or later. Almost every business in our current economy is interested in these products which amount to *behavioral futures*. These futures can be leveraged to direct the activity of consumers toward *guaranteed commercial outcomes*.

Thus, Zuboff declares, we arrive at surveillance capitalism, “a new economic order that claims human experience as free raw material for hidden commercial practices of extraction, prediction, and sales.”¹³

Though there are hundreds of thousands of advertisers in the world who would like to engineer your behavior toward guaranteed commercial outcomes, there are two private companies who currently control the best algorithms.

Google and Facebook are attention merchants and surveillance capitalists extraordinaire with a relentless dedication to keeping us engaged with their products. These two companies alone comprise 85 percent of internet advertising’s growth in America from year-to-year—and the numbers keep rising.¹⁴ They have the scientifically proven ability to shape what billions of people desire and love, and increasingly how we behave.

Remember that an attention merchant is someone who offers you something for a very low cost (or for free) in order to harvest your attention and sell it to someone else. What does

Google offer us? What is the free raw material harvested when Google products and services are used? Nicholas Carr summarizes:

*Through Gmail, it secured access to the contents of people’s emails and address books. Through Google Maps, it gained a bead on people’s whereabouts and movements. Through Google Calendar, it learned what people were doing at different moments during the day and whom they were doing it with. Through Google News, it got a readout of people’s interests and political leanings. Through Google Shopping, it opened a window onto people’s wish lists, brand preferences, and other material desires.*¹⁵

The result? “Without permission, without compensation, and with little in the way of resistance,” Carr writes, “the company seized and declared ownership over everyone’s information [offered to the company through people’s attention]. It turned the details of the lives of millions and then billions of people into its own property”¹⁶—property that is sent through the company’s algorithms in order to mold and shape user behavior.

James Williams is a former Google employee who has used his insider knowledge of these practices to write critically about them. In his book, *Stand Out of Our Light: Freedom and Resistance in the Attention Economy*, he offers this axiom to help us understand the way technology functions in our cultural moment: “There’s a deep misalignment between the goals we have for ourselves and the goals our technologies have for us.”¹⁷

Google has goals for you that are far different from the goals you have for your use of their products. But Facebook has gone even further—and by

Facebook we must include their other properties Instagram and WhatsApp.

When we use these services, we tend to see them solely as resources we use to express ourselves and to communicate with others. Each one of us has a human need for connection with other people and for a way to share our lives with other people. Facebook approaches us and says, "Here: I will give you both for free." And we think we are in control since we decide what *we* post and what *we* share. This is just what the attention merchant has always wanted us to think.

But remember what James Williams says: "There's a deep misalignment between the goals we have for ourselves and the goals our technologies have for us."¹⁸

Your goal for Facebook? Connect with other people and share yourself.

Facebook's goal for you? Keep you on Facebook for as long possible so that you provide them with free raw material that they can use to shape your behavior toward guaranteed commercial outcomes. The more of your waking moments Facebook consumes, the more accurately they are able to do this.

According to Zuboff, there is really only one organizing problem Facebook is trying to solve: "how and when to intervene in the state of play that is your daily life in order to modify your behavior and thus sharply increase the predictability of your actions now, soon, and later."¹⁹

The company conducts all manner of research to ensure these desired outcomes. Consider this report from *The Guardian* in 2017:

An internal Facebook report leaked [in 2017] revealed that the company can identify when teens feel "insecure",

"worthless" and "need a confidence boost." Such granular information, Harris adds, is "a perfect model of what buttons you can push in a particular person."

Tech companies can exploit such vulnerabilities to keep people hooked; manipulating, for example, when people receive "likes"

for their posts, ensuring they arrive when an individual is likely to feel vulnerable, or in need of approval, or maybe just bored. And the very same techniques can be sold to the highest bidder.²⁰

This process is completely invisible to users. It's also why the advertisements we see across the internet are constantly changing, shifting, and adapting to us: the algorithms know much of, if not all of our internet activity, and increasingly our non-internet activity, via any device with the prefix smart- in front of it.

Google and Facebook were the pioneers of using human experience as free raw material for behavior modification. This economic logic has moved beyond these two companies and is now deeply rooted in the entire tech sector. As Carr puts it, "Much of the recent innovation in the tech industry has entailed the creation of products and services designed to vacuum up data from every corner of our lives" for

the purpose of "figuring out ways to use the data to shape how people think and act."²¹

This is no conspiracy theory; it's simply the way industrial persuasion works in 2020. Consider the slogan of a popular data mining company

that helps advertisers pull the right levers on Facebook and Google algorithms in order to get ads in front of the right consumers at the right time: "Software to help turn customers into fanatics, products into obsessions, employees into ambassadors, and brands into religions."

The goal is to fashion a personalized climate of

desire, mediated through your devices, that feels entirely pleasing and comfortable. As you dwell in this climate and breathe its air, you will begin to crave certain experiences and want certain things. These companies have mastered the art of channeling your committed attending toward those things and experiences, resulting in great monetary gain for every stakeholder.

3. PAYING ATTENTION TO WHAT WE'RE PAYING ATTENTION TO

Let's draw all this together. As our distractibility goes up, the quality of our love for one another goes down.

"THE MOMENT OF DRIFTING INTO THOUGHT HAS BEEN CLIPPED BY MODERN TECHNOLOGY. OUR LIVES ARE FILLED WITH DISTRACTION WITH SMARTPHONES AND ALL THE REST. PEOPLE ARE SO LOCKED INTO NOT BEING PRESENT."

Glen Hansard

The more distracted we are, the more our love—our committed attending—is turned away from God and from the people and places around us toward the thing that distracts us.

Here in the attention economy, love's innovative enemies are keenly aware of our psychology and deep emotional needs. They know what to offer us to keep us engaged. We accept the offer—and they harvest our attention via our digital and smart devices. If love is committed attending, then by doing this, they are drawing out love from us and forming us to love them more than the people and places around us. After all, any claim made on our attention is a claim made on our capacity to love. Where your attention is, there your love will be also.

There are many conclusions to draw from this. The most primal one, however, comes from the Christian psychologist Curt Thompson: We must pay attention to what we're paying attention to.²² In particular, we should note how what we are attending to is shaping both the *quantity* and the *quality* of our love for God and neighbor.

a. The Quantity of our Love

In his book *Digital Minimalism*, Cal Newport highlights the misalignment James Williams encourages us to notice. In order to find some digital sanity, Newport asked his blog readers to join him on a challenge called the digital declutter. The process had three steps:

1. Put aside a thirty-day period during which you will take a break from optional technologies in your life.
2. During this thirty-day break, explore and rediscover activities and behaviors that you find satisfying and meaningful.

3. At the end of the break reintroduce optional technologies into your life, starting from a blank slate. For each technology you reintroduce, determine what value it serves in your life and how specifically you will use it so as to maximize this value.²³

Newport projected only a few takers, but he ended up getting over 1,200 participants. A theme he noticed in the reports participants gave him afterward was the discovery that time online had crowded out their capacity to participate in activities with other human beings. Many of his readers failed to realize the extent to which the internet had pushed “analog social media” out of their life. The declutter helped them regain time to prepare meals together and actually see their close friends in person.

Newport's research reveals just how much many of us fail to see the extent to which the “digital clutter” in our lives—social media, podcasts, Netflix, etc.—has reshaped what we now love. It's certainly one of the reasons why we say we are always “too busy.” Our capacity for love has been zapped through our lack of paying attention to what we're paying attention to.

We live in a time when many people who have been Christians for a long time are burning out on their faith, filled with a feeling that they just can't live a life of faith anymore. There are a variety of unique reasons for this, but this is certainly one: Information overload and distraction is taking away the limited supply of committed attending many people use to live a life of faith toward God.

b. The Quality of Our Love

In July of 2018, *The Atlantic* published an article by Erika Christakis entitled

“The Dangers of Distracted Parenting.”²⁴ Christakis is a mother of three and, like many parents today, she's heard a lot about the dangers of too much screen time for kids. She points out, however, that we should be just as concerned—or even *more* concerned—about “tuned-out parents.”

Statistics show that mothers spend a higher quantity of time caring for their children than mothers in the 1960s, but that parent-child engagement today is increasingly low-quality. “Parents are constantly present in their children's lives physically, but they are less *emotionally attuned*,” she writes, because of the ubiquitous presence of digital devices. Christakis notes that *occasional parental inattention* has been part of parenting forever, but that parenting in our time is characterized more by *continuous partial attention*. Her conclusion is profound:

Smartphone use has been associated with a familiar sign of addiction: Distracted adults grow irritable when their phone use is interrupted; they not only miss emotional cues but actually misread them. A tuned-out parent may be quicker to anger than an engaged one, assuming that a child is trying to be manipulative when, in reality, she just wants attention. Short, deliberate separations can of course be harmless, even healthy, for parent and child alike (especially as children get older and require more independence). But that sort of separation is different from the inattention that occurs when a parent is with a child but communicating through his or her nonengagement that the child is less valuable than an email. A mother telling kids to go out and play, a father saying he needs to concentrate on a chore for the next half hour—these are entirely

reasonable responses to the competing demands of adult life. What's going on today, however, is the rise of unpredictable care, governed by the beeps and enticements of smartphones. We seem to have stumbled into the worst model of parenting imaginable—always present physically, thereby blocking children's autonomy, yet only fitfully present emotionally.

What is this other than a deep deficiency in the quality of love? It is the precise opposite of committed attending.

CONCLUSION

"There's a deep misalignment between the goals we have for ourselves and the goals our technologies have for us."²⁵

Think about this as you scroll through Instagram and see an ad for that thing you didn't know you wanted, and that you'll now be thinking about for days on end. Consider it at midnight when Netflix starts autoplaying the next episode of your new favorite show. Remember it when you receive a bundle of notifications on your phone in those bleary moments before you crawl into bed to rest your body and mind.

These moments of self-reflection will shelter you, if only for a moment, from the lightning rounds of information Tetris that thunder all around. It will provide you with even the smallest bit of energy necessary to take that salvaged portion of your love and to call your grandmother, take your spouse on a date, pray for your children, be emotionally available for your community, or unearth that forgotten hobby that once gave you such joy.

In the attention economy, these deceptively simple acts of paying attention to the things that matter most are acts of resistance. They are the essential

first steps to becoming a better lover.

Attention is something we pay—a limited currency we are always rendering to someone or something. But what exactly are we paying when we pay attention? James Williams writes,

*You pay with all the things you could have attended to, but didn't: all the goals you didn't pursue, all the actions you didn't take, and all the possible yous you could have been, had you attended to those other things. Attention is paid in possible futures forgone. ... We pay attention with the lives we might have lived.*²⁶

Your attention is precious. Protect it with care. Offer it with intention in a lifetime of love. ■

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Theological Seminary, he is also the curator of Three Things, a newsletter digest of three resources to help readers better engage with God, neighbor, and culture.

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BOOK BRIEFS



The Politics of Ministry

In school there was always a sigh of disappointment when our professor assigned us to work in groups. Having to deal with others always complicated the task we needed to accomplish and increased the risk of a lower grade. Except for those who simply take over, even those who enjoy working in groups need to steer a path through often difficult issues of leadership, power, trust, communication, and responsibility if the group is to accomplish its mission.

In *The Politics of Ministry*, four seminary teachers and church leaders address this issue for those in vocational ministry. By “politics” they

mean, “the art of getting things done with others,” an art expected of the church by her Lord to be the normal way we seek to be faithful day by day. Our Lord also made it clear he expects the Christian’s approach to such leadership to be distinct from that of the world (Matthew 20:25-28). In *The Politics of Ministry*, Burns, Chapman, and Guthrie help us learn what that looks like. ■

Book recommended: *The Politics of Ministry: Navigating Power Dynamics and Negotiating Interests* by Bob Burns, Tasha D. Chapman and Donald C. Guthrie (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Books; 2019) 192 pages + appendices + notes.



Between the World and Me

This short book, Nobel and Pulitzer prize winner Toni Morrison rightly says, “is required reading.” Composed as a letter to his son, Coates writes with authenticity and prophetic clarity, and if America refuses to hear then perhaps the time for America is over. I have read numerous books arguing for the proposition that all human beings are made in the image of God and against the violence of racism, but none so compelling.

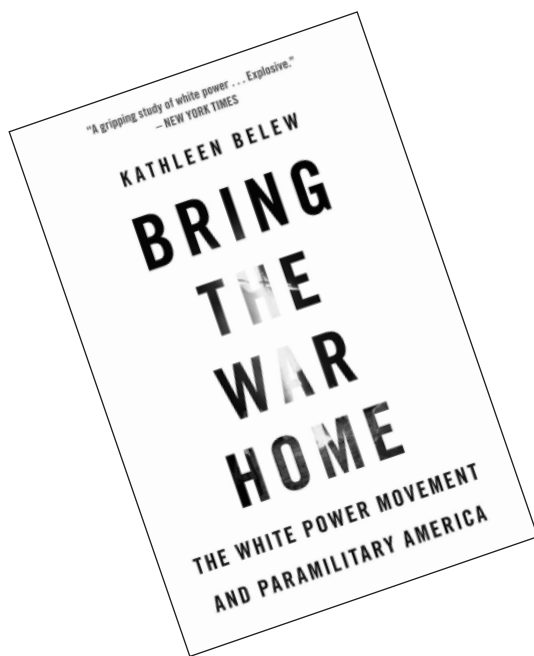
Beginning in 1626, at 74 Wall Street, in the heart of America’s financial district, was a slave auction. Not far away, on September 11, 2001, the

twin towers of the World Trade Center collapsed into clouds of debris, dust and shattered bodies. What does it mean that the second act of horror registers in my imagination but not the first? “Bin Laden,” Coates writes, “was not the first man to bring terror to that section of the city.” In *Between the World and Me*, Coates invites us into his experience, thinking and heart and in the process, we are changed. Please read it. Allow it to shape your prayers and your life. ■

Book recommended: *Between the World and Me* by Ta-Nehisi Coates (New York, NY: Spiegel & Grau; 2015) 152 pages.

The Legacy of the White Power

by Ruth DeFoster



It is the difficult work of historians to bring order to the past. The very best historical work draws upon multitudes of sources and accounts, sifting through the minutiae of historical record to streamline the story of seemingly isolated individual events into a broader, unified constellation that can be traced from its beginnings to the looming cultural landscape of the present.

Kathleen Belew's *Bring the War Home: The White Power Movement and Paramilitary America* provides just this sort of clear, compelling, historical trajectory for the white power movement in the United States. Belew correctly identifies what she describes as the "white power" movement—a movement that combines the ideologies of the historical Ku Klux Klan, radical tax resisters, separatists, white nationalists, neo-Nazis, and proponents of many other ostensibly religious white supremacist theologies—as a historically

under-studied phenomenon with roots that go back over a century, and whose reach extends insidiously into the present day.

In the book, Belew brings two historical moments in particular to the fore as key turning points in the American white power movement. These two historical episodes crystallized a surging movement of many disparate parts into explosive radicalism that combined into a dangerous and unified theology of white supremacy, separatism, and violence.

Both of these moments are important and oft-studied episodes in American history, but few historians have linked them together so compellingly to a single, growing ideology of white supremacist violence.

The Vietnam War, and its disastrous aftermath, is the first historical moment that Belew connects to the growing white power movement of the 1960s and '70s. Between the dehumanization of the Vietnamese enemy abroad, the continued segregation of the American military, and the "white power" rhetoric that pervaded the contentious cultural landscape of the Civil Rights movement at home, the stage was set for a subset of disillusioned veterans of this unpopular war to embrace an ideology of racism and white nationalism that festered and splintered into radical fringe groups, like the mercenary group Civilian Military Assistance, and the white power terrorist group known as the Order. When Vietnamese refugees fled to the United States in the war's aftermath, they were met with much of the same hostile and racist rhetoric that now pervades public discourse around Mexican immigrants during the Trump Administration. The Klan and neo-Nazis pushed explicitly racist and

dehumanizing tropes about Vietnamese immigrants, accusing them of carrying disease, of preying on white women, and of being rapists and sexual deviants.

Belew also draws readers' attention to the organized intentionality behind the resurgence of Klan ideology and the white power movement in the mid-twentieth century. She reminds readers that these organized strains of white supremacist ideology were a backlash against the gains of the Civil Rights Movement. This is a particularly good reminder for twenty-first century readers in the United States, as we grapple with the legacy of Confederate imagery that often persists in government and public life. Many of the visible trappings of the American South's heritage, such as the choice to fly Confederate flags above Southern state houses, were mid-twentieth-century decisions, made intentionally to defiantly offer visible opposition to desegregation and racial equality. It was this racial resentment, combined with the casual dehumanizing rhetoric of the Vietnam War, which laid the groundwork for the growing white power movement as the twentieth century drew to a close.

The second historical event that Belew brings to the forefront of this history is the Oklahoma City bombing of 1995—the culmination of the white power movement's "leaderless resistance," and the fulfillment of the promise of revolutionary violence waged by white power proponents.

Strangely, history has not regarded this bombing, the deadliest act of domestic terror in American history, as being intimately connected to the white power movement. Rather, news media and public discourse often identify this bombing as an isolated attack carried

Movement

out by a madman, a kind of “lone wolf” terrorism disconnected from the powerful strains of white power ideology that actually inspired it.

Describing this historical omission as “remarkable,” Belew dismantles this misconception piece by piece. Indeed, Timothy McVeigh, the Gulf War veteran influenced by the Christian Identity movement who carried out the Oklahoma City bombing with other radical extremists, was a perfect exemplar of the culmination of the white power movement in the 1990s:

[He] read and distributed the novel that has structured the violence of the Order; [he] chose a building that white power activists had targeted since 1983, the year they declared war on the state; [he] talked about stealing weapons from a military post and saw civilians as “collateral damage” in a war upon the federal government. His action was the work of a post-Vietnam War paramilitary white power movement that was still structuring militia violence and supposedly “lone” acts of terrorism in 1995. (p. 236)

This description of McVeigh—as a radicalized young man who fell prey to explicitly religious “holy war” ideology—provides an interesting parallel to religious terrorism of another stripe. In terms of both the promises made in recruitment materials (of military prowess, power, and heroism) and of fringe religious identity, much of the white power rhetoric of the twentieth century that Belew describes is very similar to Islamic radicalism in the vein of groups like al-Qaeda and ISIL, who operate with uncanny similarity to some of the fringe radical terror movements that twist and pervert—but claim to represent—Christianity.

Belew tracks this long history of ostensibly religious messaging as a tool for white power radicals throughout history, from the Klan to the Christian Identity movement of the 1980s and ‘90s. Writing in 1981, for example, Louis Beam, a white nationalist and Vietnam War veteran who trained children as young as eight years old in armed guerilla tactics, wrote, “A sword in the year of our Lord 1981 can be an M-16, three sticks of dynamite taped together, a twelve-gauge, a can of gas, or whatever is suitable to carry out any commission of the Lord that has been entrusted to you.”

Thirty-four years later, in 2015, Dylann Roof, a young white man who self-radicalized on the internet by reading the works of Beam and other white power movement radicals, created an online manifesto, posting photos of himself wearing Confederate and Rhodesian flags, and quoting extensively from earlier white power movement materials that urged proponents to foment a race war in the United States. On June 17, 2015, Roof walked into a church in Charleston, South Carolina, and murdered nine black parishioners during a Bible study. It was a tragic reminder that the legacy of the white power movement has never left us.

This is the greatest strength of *Bring the War Home*—that the book carefully lays out a case for understanding white power not as a

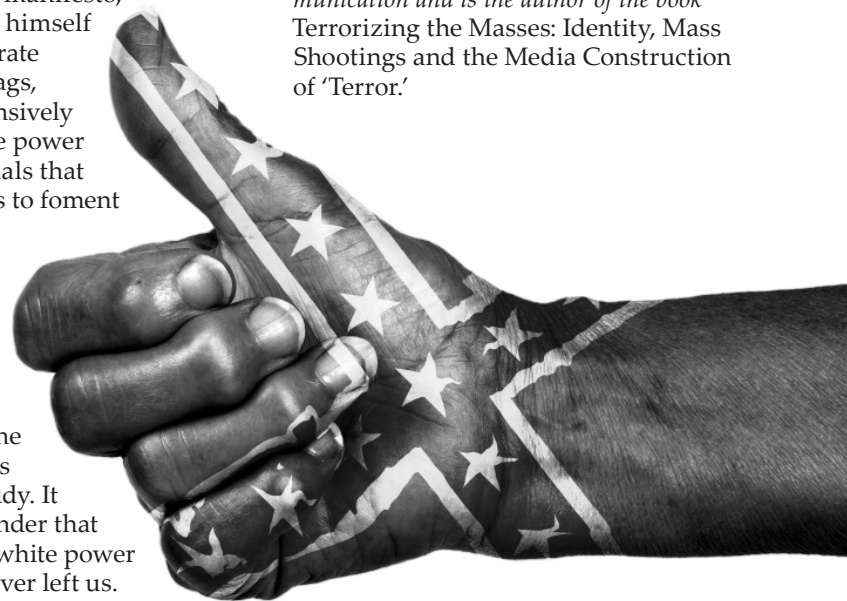
series of acts perpetrated by individual racists or extremists, but as an organized social movement with deep historical roots. Understanding this history is integral to preventing future violence, and it provides crucial context for debates over racial ideology that still rage on today. ■

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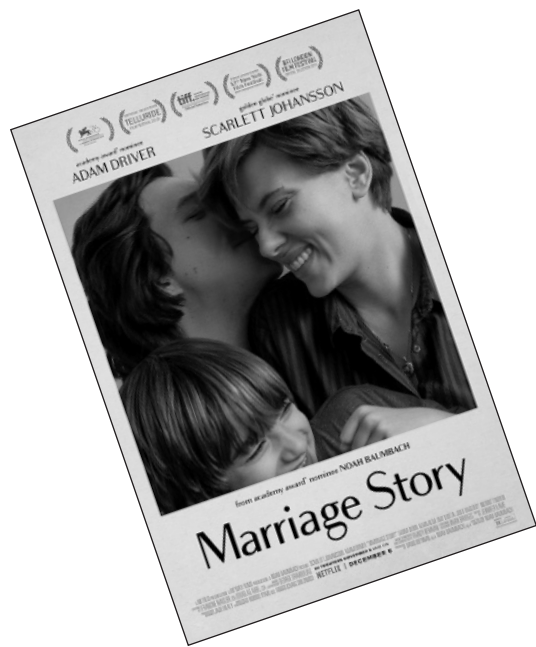
Book recommended: *Bring the War Home: The White Power Movement and Paramilitary America* by Kathleen Belew (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press; 2018) 239 pages + appendices + notes.



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A Death Without a Body



From the beginning, my goal in *Critique* has been to call attention to films that are worth discussion and reflection. The cinema and the best television tell stories that help shape the social imaginary of our generation. Some films are so significant that they shape values and perceptions even of people who never saw them as the culture shifts under their influence. Some partake of ancient myths, some grant us a glimpse of lives and places far from where we are, spanning time and space to broaden our comprehension of reality. It isn't necessarily the most popular films that have the greatest impact or address issues most effectively. In any case, I've tried to identify films that offer a window of insight into our glorious yet broken world, providing a point of contact where people can authentically engage with the issues and questions that matter most. By this standard, *Marriage Story* (2019) is an obvious choice, a decision I made even before I had finished watching it.

In fairness I should add that, though I am here encouraging you to lead discussions on it, I probably won't. The reason is simple: leading a discussion would mean needing to watch it again with the group discussing it. I'm not certain I want to do that. *Marriage Story* is not an easy film to watch.

Marriage Story is about the end of a marriage, and it is relentless in its realism. In fact, the details depicted in the film were shaped by the divorces the writer, director, and actors endured in their private lives. The depth of authenticity is stunning and, as a result, the brokenness, regret, hurt, arguments, court scenes, attorney interviews, uncertainty, family interactions, and yes, brief glimmers of hope that make up the story, made me feel like I had stumbled into someone's home to hear not just a report of their divorce but to see and hear it fleshed out in living color. *Marriage Story* does not make the viewer feel like an intrusive voyeur but like a best friend invited in to share the pain of a process that breaks apart something so intimate and permanent that no one can bear the cleavage. "Getting divorced with a kid is one of the hardest things to do," attorney Bert Spitz (played by Alan Alda) says. "It's like a death without a body."

You may not want to watch it more than once, but please do see *Marriage Story*. Divorce is too prevalent, too common to refuse to see its destructive process unfold as marriages unravel as good people try desperately to preserve something good afterwards, not just for their own sanity but especially for their children. Seen in this light, *Marriage Story* is a real gift, a severe mercy in a badly broken world.

Hearing the stories of sinners is often a painful experience. Being invited into your life is precious but it

will necessarily involve facing your sin, failure, and brokenness. Christ endured the pain in order to bring redemption and we must do the same. Actually knowing each other will involve difficulty and sadness.

The plot of *Marriage Story* is deceptively simple. Charlie (Adam Driver) and Nicole (Scarlett Johansson) are married and living in New York. They are involved in the theatre, as director and actor, and have an 8-year-old son, Henry, whom they love. Nicole has long yearned to return to L.A. where her family lives and, though they've discussed her dream, nothing has come of it. Their work is in New York, the theater there is flourishing and, like for so many, life simply keeps unfolding so as to keep them there. Nicole takes Henry to visit her family in L.A.—who really is a delight—and decides that her marriage isn't fulfilling her deepest desires. Too much of what has happened is really Henry's preferences rather than her own.

"Nicole," writes John Anderson in *America*, "has decided that being a wife to Charlie has finally meant sacrificing too much of herself. Charlie, though temperamentally inclined to a degree of self-doubt, thought he was doing O.K. Both are equally wrong. They resist falling into the pit of recriminations and legalistic dirty pool as long as they can. But they have attorneys, so they are lost." The scenes with the divorce lawyers are despicable, and the meltdown they share together in one last effort to resolve things is deeply human.

They divorce and the parting is not a good thing, but Charlie and Nicole also try to make possible a continuing friendship after their marriage is terminated. They do it for their son, Henry, the innocent caught in the breakup, but also

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

for themselves. There seems to be a clear realization by both of them that what they had was good, not perfect, but good, nevertheless. So, some of what they had is worth saving. "Driver, Johansson, and Baumbach bring you to your knees," Peter Travers says in *Rolling Stone*, "through the hard truths and aching empathy they express to deliver the true meaning of being alive. It's the kind of movie that will take a piece out of you."

Some stories are tragedies but they are still worth telling. *Marriage Story* is one such story, and I recommend it to you. ■

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Brian Tallerico online (rogerebert.com/reviews/marriage-story-2019)

1. What was your initial or immediate reaction to the film? Why do you think you reacted that way?
2. What emotions did you experience as you watched *Marriage Story*? What scenes were most poignant? Why?
3. Noah Baumbach is careful to intersperse bits of humor and comedy throughout the film. Does this help or hurt the story?
4. In what ways were the techniques of filmmaking (casting, direction, lighting, script, music, sets, action, cinematography, editing, etc.) used to get the film's message(s) across, or to make the message plausible or compelling? In what ways were they ineffective or misused?
5. With whom did you identify in the film? Why? With whom were we meant to identify? Discuss each main character in the film and their significance to the story.
6. Does the film, although telling a fictional story, seem authentic? How does it achieve this? Why is authenticity so attractive?
7. Some people, Christians included, speak against divorce by insisting that because it is a choice that is hard on the children of the family splitting up, the married couple simply should decide against it. Say No to divorce. Does that argument seem plausible in light of *Marriage Story*? Why or why not?
8. Does *Marriage Story* change how you see those who have been divorced? Why or why not?
9. *Marriage Story* depicts divorce not sentimentally or as a good thing but as a very painful and difficult choice that good people who do not want it might find themselves choosing. How realistic or authentic is this perception? How do you know?
10. Film critic Brian Tallerico writes online: "It would have been so easy to make a version of this story in which there's an obvious villain—put us on one side and allow us to root for an outcome. What Baumbach is exploring is the truth that there is no 'good' outcome in divorce. There's rarely a way to make everyone happy. Sure, Charlie cheated and ignored Nicole's needs, but she's also basically trying to steal his son to the other side of the country. Some will pick a side, but I firmly believe that the movie works better if you don't." Discuss.
11. In a seemingly insignificant scene, Charlie inadvertently slashes himself with a pocketknife. What is the significance of this scene? Why?
12. For Christians there is an uncomfortable scene in which the divorce attorney, Nora Fanshaw, played by Laura Dern says this: "People don't accept mothers who drink too much wine and yell at their child and call him an asshole. I get it. I do it too. We can accept an imperfect dad. Let's face it, the idea of a good father was only invented like 30 years ago. Before that, fathers were expected to be silent and absent and unreliable and selfish, and we can all say we want them to be different. But on some basic level, we accept them. We love them for their fallibilities, but people absolutely don't accept those same failings in mothers. We don't accept it structurally and we don't accept it spiritually. Because the basis of our Judeo-Christian whatever is Mary, Mother of Jesus, and she's perfect. She's a virgin who gives birth, unwaveringly supports her child and holds his dead body when he's gone. And the dad isn't there. He didn't even do the fucking. God is in heaven. God is the father and God didn't show up. So, you have to be perfect, and Charlie can be a fuck up and it doesn't matter. You will always be held to a different, higher standard. And it's fucked up, but that's the way it is." Discuss.



Movie credits: *Marriage Story*

Director: Noah Baumbach

Writer: Noah Baumbach

Produced by Noah Baumbach, Leslie Converse,
David Heyman, and others

Music by Randy Newman

Cinematographer: Robbie Ryan

Starring:

Adam Driver (Charlie Barber)

Scarlett Johansson (Nicole Barber)

Azhy Robertson (Henry Barber)

Wallace Shawn (Frank)

Laura Dern (Attorney Nora Fanshaw)

Ray Liotta (Attorney Jay Marotta)

Alan Alda (Attorney Bert Spitz)

Martha Kelly (Nancy Katz, Evaluator)

Julie Hagerty (Sandra, Nicole's mother)

Merritt Wever (Cassie, Nicole's sister)

U.S.A., Heyday Films and Netflix; 2019;
136 minutes

Rated R (language and sexual references)