

Entertainment and Youth

By Minni K. Ang

What is “entertainment”? There are various definitions and descriptions. The Merriam-Webster dictionary states that the word itself dates from the 15th century and that it refers to “something engaging or diverting”, while the thesaurus defines it as something diverting, amusing or entertaining, synonymous with amusement, dissipation, distraction, diversion, divertissement, and recreation. Related words listed include play, sport, enjoyment, gaiety, pleasure, relaxation, and relief.

The Scriptures talk of “entertaining” angels and strangers (Hebrews 13:2) and when searching for references to entertainment, its context is invariably given in terms of hospitality, referring to feasts, dinners, and banquets, and related to food and drink, sometimes with the introduction of music and dancing (Amos 6:5; Mark 6:22; Luke 15:25).

Various Internet directories such as Yahoo and AltaVista list categories of entertainment. Categories of entertainment given by the Global Resource and Information Directory include the following: art, collectibles, games, film, gaming, hobbies, music, print, radio, and television.

Clearly, when faced with the question “what is entertainment?” it is not a simple matter to immediately come up with a direct, clear-cut answer. Entertainment may mean different things to different people. Perhaps it may be more instructive to consider why people seek out entertainment.

Visitors to India are startled to realize the extent of poverty present in that country. Most people are theoretically aware of the fact that many in India live at or below the poverty line, but it takes a personal visit to bring home the reality of children playing literally in the centre of the local garbage dump, surrounded by mounds of rubbish, while their parents, if they still have any, scavenge through the scraps looking for whatever they can find. Yet visitors are amazed to observe that Indian cinemas are regularly packed, and not only by the wealthy – I know I was. People are even willing to sacrifice a meal to pay to be entertained by Shah Rukh Khan fighting evil villains, and singing while dancing around trees with his lady love.

Sociologists studying this phenomenon generally conclude that the fantasy world of the movies provides temporary relief from the harshness of real life. For a brief three hours or so, instead of focusing on hunger pangs and worries about tomorrow, viewers are instead transported to an imaginary world where they live out their dreams. One of the reasons for the phenomenal success of the controversial series of Harry Potter books is the fact that author J.K. Rowling appeals to this basic desire for escape from the real world by readers bored or perhaps even dissatisfied with their own mundane existences. “The Mirror of Erised” (“desire” spelt in reverse) portrays this graphically. Headmaster Albus Dumbledore warns Harry that many have wasted away their lives standing in front of this mirror, which shows each their heart’s deepest desires, but provides no indication whether these dreams are attainable or even possible. He goes on to advise Harry not to dwell on dreams and forget to live (in the real world).

In his article on writing tips for would-be fiction writers, author David Farland observes that

Each of us has background stress in our lives, and each of us wants to cope with that stress. The stress may come from dangers in our marriage, or fear that we'll lose our jobs. It may have to do with concerns for our own health, or the health of a friend. It may have to do with deadlines or other time pressures. Right now, without thinking much, you can probably come up with a dozen stress-inducing problems that you have in your life. To cope with life's little problems, we have but two options: we may either retreat from stress—by taking a vacation perhaps, or a night on the town—or we can perform exercises to help cope with the stress. (Quotation from "Why People Read Fiction" by David Farland).

He goes on to suggest that we crave immersive imaginary experiences to which our subconscious minds may respond to in some degree as though they were real because our subconscious is unable to distinguish between reality and imagination. A captivating and entertaining story is one that resolves a meaningful conflict. The more immersed we become, the more completely our physical bodies will respond. As the conflict in the imaginary world builds up, some threshold point is reached where the human biofeedback mechanism is triggered and the body in its effort to handle this imaginary stress creates some endorphin-like substance to counteract it. As the story draws to its conclusion and the imaginary conflict is resolved, our stress is released and we feel relieved. This emotional exercise helps us to handle our day-to-day stresses, as minor problems seem to diminish in intensity and even major ones appear less daunting. Farland summarizes all this neatly

In short, all forms of entertainment boil down to this: Entertainment is an emotional exercise that we perform by putting ourselves at risk in some controlled way.

This principle applies not only to reading (and its relations: film, TV, theatre, or any other form of storytelling) for entertainment, but also to other forms of entertainment such as spectator sports (the meaningful conflict of watching our team in a nail-biting struggle to overcome their opponents), participative sport (the meaningful conflict of overcoming that hill you've been trying to climb or that mile you've been striving to run), board games (that meaningful conflict of checkmating your opponent in a more or less even game of chess) and even gambling (that meaningful conflict of betting your money and not knowing if you're going to win or lose).

Our discussion thus far has attempted to define what is entertainment and why human beings seek it out. To provide a Christian understanding of and response to entertainment and the role it has to play among our youth, this context is important. It is probably safe to say that everyone expects their entertainment to be fun and enjoyable, and that different things are enjoyable to different people, hence the many forms that entertainment can take. It is also safe to say that we seek entertainment as a diversion from the routine and the mundane, and also to be better able to handle stress in our lives.

Whether the entertainment we seek provides an escape from the hard realities of life or whether it actually is a reflection of our own individual realities, I would like to suggest that entertainment not only provides personal relaxation and leisure, but also has a significant role to play in human and also community development.

The development of human civilization through the ages has been dependent on creativity – the ability to think out of the box, to come up with fresh, new, extraordinary, yet workable ideas and inventions that are the hallmark of quantum leap advances. The fact that creativity has been at the heart of every single significant step forward in human development should not come as a surprise – after all, the very first sentence in the Bible talks about God as Creator of the Universe. Creativity is clearly a pre-requisite to creating something truly new.

At the heart of creativity lies the imagination. It is not possible to dream up something new without literally dreaming it up. It follows that the development of the imagination should also develop our sense of creativity. We so often hear comments such as “he’s so creative” or “she’s such a creative person”, usually by those who unconsciously label themselves as not falling in the same category, thinking (I would suggest somewhat spuriously) that creativity is a gift given by God only to some and not to others. The Scriptures state, and I am certain none reading this article would disagree, that man is made in the image of God. Since God is certainly Creative, by definition therefore so are we.

I would like to clarify here that when I talk of “creativity” the term is by definition void of meaning apart from our Father, God, the Creator. Secular use of the term “creative” has apparently given license to many seemingly bizarre and even destructive behaviours and actions, justifiable to those who accept such a definition of “creativity”. Our present discussion excludes this sort of definition on the grounds that the mere hijacking of a perfectly valid gift of God for purely selfish motives does not invalidate the concept itself, whatever else the world may say.

So why is it then that many fail to develop this aspect of their potential? Why is it that the majority seem to lack that extra “spark” of creativity, satisfied merely “to go where others have gone before”, instead of “to go where no one has gone before”?

I believe the answer to this question lies in the general trends in contemporary entertainment. Though not the sole factor, I would like to suggest that this is one of the main factors for the present day general lack of true creativity. I would like to qualify myself here. I am not suggesting that there are no truly creative individuals in present day society. What I am suggesting is that the majority lack the ability to imagine new ideas, concepts, inventions, et cetera on their own.

To draw an analogy from the world of sport, there is a “spectator mentality” present in most entertainment today, as opposed to the “participant mentality” prominent in entertainment of yesteryear. Take children’s play for example – parents used to be able to tell their children to “go outside and play” – with nothing more to play with than other children and their imaginations. Trees became hideouts, broom handles became horses, old badminton rackets became guitars... in plainer words, children were able to improvise, to make do with whatever they had and to invent whatever else they required. Today’s parents by contrast worry that their children need more toys, more computer games... children today in general wouldn’t think of using old matchboxes to build their own toy cars – instead they want their parents to buy them Matchbox brand miniature replicas.

Another favourite type of entertainment has always been and continues to remain storytelling. What has changed is the form that it takes. The very oldest form

of storytelling was just that – the oral tradition of actually telling stories. Someone would imagine up a story to tell, and listeners would have to imagine the scenes described to them. Listeners’ interjections (“ooh!”, “what happened next?”, et cetera) only served to fuel the storytellers’ imagination, causing the story to evolve into a sort of “living organism”. With the invention of writing and the printing press came books, and a new form of storytelling entertainment – fiction novels and short stories. While these more explicitly described characters, places and events in the author’s imagination, they nevertheless still engaged the reader’s own imagination, with each reader experiencing their own unique mental imagery and emotional responses. The invention of the moving picture added yet another external shell to the world of storytelling – with television and movies, viewers were now presented with an exact replica of the producer’s imagination, resulting in everyone receiving an identical mental image of the story. My vision of the Mines of Moria may have been different from yours, but now everyone’s vision is exactly the same as Peter Jackson’s. The proposed next step in the world of film technology is to introduce smells as well – what left is there for us to imagine then?

Music is one of the oldest forms of entertainment, and along with dance, is one of those mentioned in Scriptures in the context of entertaining guests and strangers at feasts and banquets. It is interesting to note the difference between more “primitive” musical forms in contrast with newer more “advanced” forms of music. Folk music is by its very nature meant to be for the people, by the people. It does not require high levels of musical skill, but instead corporate participation. People play, sing and dance, rather than watch and listen. This active participation not only builds community spirit and bonds of fellowship, but also develops individual character as participants learn to express themselves on their instruments, and with their voices and bodies. The trend of concert going, which first came into style in the 18th century, bred a generation of passive music listeners who merely sat back and enjoyed the effort of others. The musicians and singers themselves became more and more skilled, until the average person felt content to no longer participate in the music making, but to leave it to the professionals. The invention of recording technology and mass distribution avenues such as radio and music CDs meant that even the limited “community experience” of physically going to a concert hall was now replaced by an even more passive form of individual listening, at its most extreme form in total isolation through a pair of headphones. Creativity was no longer in the picture at all, neither was imagination. That was left to the composers, sometimes long dead and gone!

These three general examples serve to effectively illustrate the trend in modern entertainment towards mass forms that require minimal creative input from its participants, in contrast to much older forms of entertainment where those being entertained actively participated while at the same time developing their imagination and sense of creativity. The fact that entertainment today is geared towards the masses, and its effects somewhat numb the mind’s ability to think for itself, has resulted in a general “mindlessness” in modern society. In fact, we live in a society that has been “prepared” to receive mass direction – a potentially dangerous situation open for exploitation by those sharp enough and manipulative enough.

Young people have young minds. They are impressionable, and are at that stage in life where they are searching – to understand themselves, where they stand in society, what they want to do with their lives... youth are also one of the main

consumers of modern mass entertainment forms. Modern youth, unless guided otherwise by their parents during early childhood, have also grown up on a diet of passive forms of entertainment not requiring much imagination or creativity: television, pop music, computer games, and the movies. Not many Malaysian young people (or even older people for that matter!) would confess to being avid readers of fiction, or know how to occupy themselves if left alone with nothing other than their own imaginations. The common complaint among youth, “I’m bored”, stems from a singular lack of creative imagination. The truly creative are never bored – they can always find something with which to occupy themselves.

This lack of individualism is sometimes considered, especially by Asians, to be a virtue because it reflects the inherently Asian cultural value that the community always comes before the individual. It can however pose a hazard to trusting young minds when faced with a constant stream of information and instruction from various sources – unquestioning acceptance makes it easier for the scrupulous and unscrupulous alike to promote their own hidden agendas through the medium of entertainment – these hidden agendas may range from philosophies of life to religious beliefs, from political aims to promotion of different consumer products. I am not advocating the self-centred individualism that places the individual above the community. What I am advocating is the freedom of the individual to be different, as God intended them to be – we are not clones, all meant to think and feel alike, but individuals brought into being by God, subject to His Word, yet free to think differently, to come up with new ideas and inventions.

It thus becomes increasingly important for the church to be aware of these trends and to address these issues. This modern passive entertainment mentality has not only invaded our personal and family lives, but has also crept into the church as a corporate entity. It is present when we see

“An increasing fixation on worship experiences (in the form of praise concerts) instead of a fixation on fruitful godliness”. (Quotation by Joe E. Furr, “The Singing School”, Abilene University.)

I am not saying here that church has to be “boring” and that Christians should utterly shun all forms of modern entertainment. We have to be aware of the bigger picture and to understand trends in modern entertainment, especially the trend towards decreasing imagination, creativity and an ability to think for oneself. We should not allow such trends to enter our churches – Christians were never meant to be “pew warmers” but are always called to be participants. If Sunday service for the “average Christian” means going to church Sunday after Sunday only to listen to great sermons and to enjoy the great music, then we have to examine ourselves and why we go to church in the first place. Joe E. Furr sums it all up very nicely

People should enjoy going to church. Praise, joy, and thanksgiving should be a delight. Sermons should be motivational and life-changing. We should enjoy God’s Word. We should be uplifted. We should be inspired to grow, develop, and become more productive in God’s kingdom. We should be moved to put away our carnal nature. If all of this is “entertainment”, then church should be entertaining.

The assembly should not substitute audio visual-stimulation and sensational excitement for genuine worship. Bright lights and hyper-emotions should not replace the delight we have in the Word of the Lord. If we need fast, loud music, stimulating videos and liturgical dancing to get people to church, then we are abusing the assembly. If this is “entertainment”, then the church should not be entertaining.

The church leadership also needs to recognize the fact that we live in this world, although we are not of this world. It is unreasonable to forbid our young people to go to the movies with their friends, or to prevent them from reading books that everyone in school is talking about. In fact, most young people, if forbidden by parents or figures of authority, will still do whatever it is they meant to do in the first place, only in secret.

Our corporate response therefore must be to understand the present day situation and to respond appropriately. And how do we do this, as a church? Firstly, we need to come back to the realization that we are all born creative beings, with active imaginations. Instead of allowing modern lifestyle to dull our minds, the church should take the leadership in nurturing and developing this God given ability to imagine and create something new, all the time subjecting this to consistency with the Word of God. The Church has the responsibility also to redeem all forms of entertainment for the glory of God and for use in the proclamation of His Good News. Within the moral framework of the Word of God, creative entertainment should be encouraged, and developed further. Young people should be taught how to evaluate the entertainment they seek, and how to weed out the good from the bad. Development of the imagination needs to be encouraged, again all the time subject to the moral framework of the Word of God. There is still so much to do, but it does need to be done.