



Like everything else I hold sacred, movies are increasingly grist for our national Division and Discord mill. Movies, that is, and the people who create them.

Poor Natalie Portman thought she was making a noble gesture at the Oscars last week, when she showed up in a cape embroidered with the names of female directors who'd been snubbed by the Academy. The mainstream media praised her courage, conservative media mocked her for "virtue signaling," and actress/activist Rose McGowin slaughtered her on Twitter, saying, "I find Portman's type of activism deeply offensive to those of us who actually do the work. I'm not writing this out of bitterness, I am writing out of disgust."

Don't hold back, Rose. Tell us what you really think.

Somehow, I managed to miss Cape-gate for a few days after it happened. During those days of blissful ignorance, I went about my business blithely nursing the delusion that Natalie Portman – and her cape – had looked simply beautiful at the Oscars. Emphasis on *simply*.

But nothing is simple anymore, is it? We can no longer just enjoy the sight of a pretty woman in a dashing cape on a red carpet. That dashing cape must bear a subtle "message." And we must all parse that message six ways from Sunday. And no opinion can go unshared, unchallenged, or undistorted. Heaven forbid a day should pass without a giant food fight breaking out in Facebook Nation. (Sorry, I don't do Twitter. I'm not a young woman anymore and I have my health to consider.)

Don't you just love the new Roaring Twenties? There's so much... roaring.

Shortly before the turn of the decade – a few days before Christmas, to be exact – I posted a YouTube video of Adam Driver singing Stephen Sondheim's "Being Alive" in a bar. It's a phenomenal scene from the Netflix movie *Marriage Story*, which I'd stumbled on the night before while lying snug in the guestroom at my Mom's house. I think I called the film "this year's quirky, home-for-the-holidays movie find" or some such, because, much like with Natalie Portman's cape, I had managed to miss the buzz about

Marriage Story

till then

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I had no idea it had been nominated for several Golden Globes and was already in Oscar's sights. I was excited to share "my" discovery with my friends. Surely they'd all love this eccentric, under-the-radar little film as much as I did!

Oh, the naiveté. Bless my heart.

Two weeks later, the *Marriage Story* discussion thread was still alive on my Facebook page. I kept trying to kill it with neglect, but just as it seemed to be petering out, somebody would add a new comment, and up it would rise again, to the top of my newsfeed, like some hideous, wounded dragon, gasping and snarling for one last breath. I considered putting the beast out of its misery – deleting my original (innocent, hopeful!) post and the hundreds of comments that followed – but I've found that people don't like it when I do that. "All that hard work, down the drain," somebody once complained when I ousted a particularly noxious thread that had overstayed its welcome. You'd have thought I'd shredded his PhD dissertation or something.

(Gentle note to whom it may concern: If you're putting that much time and effort into your comments on somebody else's FB page, you might want to reconsider your priorities.)

If you're at all interested in how movies can divide people, you need only go to my FB page and search for that *Marriage Story* thread, where you will find everything from angry feminists to religious zealots to MGTOW apologists.

(MGTOW stands for Men Going Their Own Way. Yes, it's a thing. Google it. Better yet,

don't.)

On the bright side, you'll also find lots of people *united* in their love for this movie. People who didn't see the characters of Nicole (Scarlett Johansson) and Charlie (Adam Driver) as socio-political symbols – mere weapons to be brandished in our ever-expanding culture wars – but as flesh-and-blood human beings they could relate to... beautiful, terrible, complicated people with whom they could empathize and even sympathize. Though some folks were quick to line up for Team Nicole or Team Charlie – and boy, was it predictable who would go where – there were just as many who recognized the shallow silliness of responding that way to this exquisitely nuanced film.

Let's face it. When it comes to increasing understanding, bridging divides, and bringing people together, art has it all over political commentary. And filmmaking, I think, is perhaps the most powerful of all the arts – not only because movies are so widely accessible, but because filmmaking incorporates all the other art forms. Writing, acting, music, design, photography... it's all there. A great film engages our senses *and* our sensibilities – the visceral, the intellectual, the emotional, and the spiritual – addressing the fullness of our humanity in a way nothing else can.

And this past year brought so many great films to the screen. This was the year I learned that it's okay to laugh at Nazis (*JoJo Rabbit*) and that tough-guy racecar drivers can make you cry (*Ford vs Ferrari*). It was the year I learned that a war movie can be stunningly beautiful (*1917*), that a Joker can break your heart, and that Laura Dern can do anything.

Writing in *The Atlantic* a few months ago, about *Once Upon a Time in Hollywood*, Caitlin Flanagan railed against what she called the "justice critics," those movie reviewers who are more interested in their political agendas than the art they're evaluating. "They want movies that adhere to their vision of the way the world should be," she wrote, instead of movies that tell the truth about the way the world

is.

It's a complaint I've been nursing for a long time, but I didn't know it – not exactly – till Flanagan expressed it so perfectly. Good criticism can be a work of art, too, "justice critics" notwithstanding.

The Transcendent Gift of Film

Written by Margaret Evans, Editor

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But you know what I say? Let them write their small, cramped, agenda-driven reviews. Bring it, justice critics! Do your best damage. If the movie's worth its salt, it will survive long after your review is forgotten. Because the best movies can't be commandeered like that. With a nod to the popular parlance, the best films, by their very nature, *resist*. They are not political screeds; they're works of art. And art – always and forever – transcends politics.

Remember the big controversy over last year's Oscar winner *Green Book*? I do, but just barely. Far more vivid in my memory is

Green Book

, itself. See what I mean?

This week, over 100 filmmakers from all over the world are here in Beaufort to bring us the gift of their art. They will challenge us, provoke us, inspire us, devastate us, and heal us. They will tear down walls, build bridges, burst our media bubbles, and speak to us in the language of our common humanity.

But only if we let them. Only if we open our hearts and minds – and maybe, for a few short days, get off our damned smart phones – and graciously receive the gift.

See you at the movies.

The 14th Annual Beaufort International Film Festival is February 19 – 23 at USCB Center for the Arts. For tickets and information, visit www.beaufortfilmfestival.com