

# UNIV Conference 2011

## Living Freedom Decisively

### Academic Research Paper

*Freedom to be Indifferent or Excellent?  
Why our free societies produce the kind of art they do.*

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## Abstract

Freedom is said to be a key ingredient in artistic creation – yet as is frequently shown in today's world, a large amount of freedom does not necessarily produce a large amount of excellent art. This paper seeks to investigate the curious paradox as to why the products of the enormous artistic freedom experienced in a country like New Zealand are so often dark, brooding, and quirky, as opposed to portraying the beauty, truth, and goodness that art alone of all human activities is capable of producing in such a striking and powerful way. The research was carried out using a combination of bibliographic, journal, and internet sources. The results lead back to the fundamental difference between William of Ockham's Freedom of Indifference and St Thomas Aquinas' Freedom for Excellence, as being the key point of departure in the understanding of freedom in the Western world today. As a result, an artist's definition and understanding of freedom is suggested to have a fundamental impact on the way that artistic practice is directed, and therefore what sort of art it is likely to produce, with the conclusion that the understanding of what one's freedom entails has a fundamental impact on whether one produces indifferent or excellent art. Finally, this analysis is applied back to the case of New Zealand's cinema. It is hard to say what social or other conditions may bring around a fresh perspective on artistic freedom in New Zealand, but with a view to practical answers, a few suggestions for the wider promulgation of the findings of this research are proposed at the end of this paper.

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# Introduction

There is something sinister that stems from the fact that freedom and tolerance are so often separated from truth. This is fuelled by the notion, widely held today, that there are no absolute truths to guide our lives. Relativism, by indiscriminately giving value to practically everything, has made 'experience' all-important.

- Pope Benedict XVI, Papal Welcome,  
World Youth Day, 17/07/2008.

Today, "...it (morality) is thought to be concerned purely with what it is right to do rather than with what it is good to be."

- Charles Taylor, Sources of the Self.

Although these quotes mention nothing about art, they apply with unerring relevance to the very heart of the issue of interest in this paper. In art, as in so many fields today, freedom has become separated from truth, relativism gives value to practically everything, individual experience has become all-important in art production and criticism, and art itself has become less concerned with leading the artist and audience to discover 'what it is good to be', rather concerning itself primarily with 'what it is right to do' as dictated by the art world, contemporary trends, and above all the individual's own whims and tastes. When asked why he chose to make a film about the brutal murder of a Christchurch (NZ) woman by her daughter and daughter's friend in the 1950's (*Heavenly Creatures*, 1994), Peter Jackson (*The Lord of the Rings*, *The Lovely Bones*) said: "I choose to stay in New Zealand earning a fraction of what I could make in Los Angeles because I want to do whatever I feel like doing . . . The freedom that I have in New Zealand is worth millions of dollars to me." I believe we live in the midst of an intriguing paradox; whereby modern art, theatre and cinema in many western nations such as New Zealand (my home) enjoys an astounding degree of freedom in almost every area they could desire it; financial freedom (through government aid), liberal attitudes in society, freedom of choice as to subject matter and materials, freedom of expression and religion, an incredible freedom of opportunity, and the 'freedoms' of modern art in general... and yet with all this freedom, a sizeable proportion of New Zealand artwork seems obsessed with the dark,

the perverted, the horrific, dramatic, ugly, and ‘quirky’, so much so that New Zealand’s cinema, as a striking example, has been characterised as a “Cinema of Unease”.<sup>1</sup> The same can be said for art more generally on an international scale; consider prominent artists such as Damien Hirst with his *Freeze* exhibition, Ron Mueck and his sculptures of decapitated heads, Jane Alexander’s *The Butcher Boys*, and others. In this climate of great social and intellectual freedom, artists produce sculptures of rubbish spilling over the floors of art galleries, fluorescent tubes stuck randomly into sand, giant silver ‘boulders’ in the middle of a square... Artists are indeed free to pursue and produce whatever they want to in the name of art – but why has the freedom they enjoy given rise to the products it has?

Firstly, it is necessary to determine the nature of the link between freedom and artistic creation. Why exactly is freedom so important to art, as so many artists claim it is? There are many definitions of freedom, and in seeking a clear and well-reasoned definition of freedom, it is clear that a key departure in the understanding of freedom in the Western world today occurred in the 14<sup>th</sup> Century. In this departure, one definition leads to an understanding of freedom as the ability to choose indifferently between options, while the other definition leads to an understanding of freedom as a process of growth, developed through one’s whole life and directed toward attaining ‘perfection’. This departure, I argue, through the prominence of the former definition in the West since its inception, has resulted in the strange and unbeautiful art that is self-directed, experience-driven, and subject to the influences of public and self-interest, as opposed to art that has a purpose, a direction, and real long-lived worth. Having been presented with these two definitions, the artist is presented not with obligation but with choice and decision as to which understanding and mindset he/she will let influence his/her art. I will end by relating the findings to the case of New Zealand’s film industry.

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<sup>1</sup> “Cinema of Unease: A Personal Journey”, *A Century of New Zealand Film*, directed by Sam Neill, New Zealand, 1995.

# Methodology

I began with brainstorm sessions with small groups of friends and family, to highlight the issues associated with freedom that are unique to New Zealand, and the arenas in which the issues of freedom were most visibly manifest. This became centred particularly on film (being my own area of study – although I originally intended to research outside my own area of expertise).

Following this, I began my research by seeking to formulate a good definition of ‘freedom’. I carried out general Internet searches for references, opinions, and articles that discussed freedom, creativity, art and the strange trend of New Zealand film towards the dark and disturbing. I tried to pull from as many New Zealand authors and sources as I could. I also searched a variety of academic journals using online journal databases. Following discussions with my learned father (Andre van Heerden; author of the recently-released book ‘Leaders and Misleaders’), I embarked on what turned out to be the most successful and rewarding research effort; bibliographic research, cross-referencing and referring between authors where possible.

Lastly, as the focus of the project became more clearly focused and refined, I consulted various blogs and comment threads in an attempt to gather some ‘popular opinion’ from the sort of people who feel strongly enough about issues to engage in debate on the internet. Sadly, this did not retrieve the hoped-for results. As a result, this project has been compiled and constructed largely through bibliographic research and discussion.

# Results and Analysis

“God created man in his own image and likeness, i.e. made him a creator too, calling him to free spontaneous activity and not to formal obedience of his power. Free creativeness is the creature’s answer to the great call of its Creator. Man’s creative work is the fulfilment of the Creator’s secret will.”<sup>2</sup>

Art is inextricably linked to freedom. For at its very heart producing art means having the freedom to create. In his book *The Destiny of Man*, the Orthodox theologian and philosopher Nicholas Berdyaev devotes a chapter to “The Ethics of Creativeness”. In it, he provides an excellent discussion of two very important points; firstly that *freedom is integral to the creative act*, for creativity depends on a primary ‘freedom’ from which new ideas are formed. The very act of creating something, Berdyaev writes, is the “breaking through from non-being to being”, from the ‘formless matter’ of “primeval, pre-cosmic, pre-existent” freedom to being, to that which did not exist before.<sup>3</sup> He identifies three elements of the creative process, the first and most important being “man’s primary, meonic, uncreated freedom”; second are the gifts bestowed on Man by God, and thirdly the world as the field for his activity.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, Dorothy Sayers explains the first spark of an utterly new concept as the Creative Idea, which is passionless, timeless, beholding the whole work complete at once, the end in the beginning”.<sup>5</sup> From my own creative experience in film production, I find this to be quite true. In short, under Berdyaev’s definition true creativity requires the freedom of infinite openness, space and nothingness from which utterly new ideas can spring. Secondly, *the creative activities of Man are integral to his vocation*, his calling and purpose here on earth. In Christian theology, God created man in his image and likeness, and made humankind creators as well, in order to continue His creative work here on Earth. It therefore follows that the fruits of a person’s creative works have a *purpose* that is intimately linked to that person’s vocation or reason for being on Earth, his ‘journey to perfection’ as such. Art is in its

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<sup>2</sup> Nicholas Berdyaev, *The Destiny of Man*, Harper & Row Publishers, New York, 1960, p.33

<sup>3</sup> St Augustine, *Confessions*, Translated by R.S. Pine-Coffin, Penguin Classics, London, 2003.

<sup>4</sup> *ibid*, p.128

<sup>5</sup> Dorothy L. Sayers, *The Mind of the Maker*, HarperSanFrancisco, New York, 1987.

essence creativity and the bringing of ideas from ‘freedom’ to fruition. Thus freedom is integral to art, and the creative activity of art is infused with purpose.

We have here defined freedom as a sort of utter absence of constraints, borders or *things*, however, this definition is of a freedom that is outside the realm of the physical, practical world. To define freedom in the sense that it is understood and applied in the ‘real world’, something more comprehensive is required. Freedom is one of the more difficult terms to define because it comes with enormous political, social, religious and philosophical baggage. Freedom is considered by many, ‘being able to do whatever I want’<sup>6</sup>, or as something along the lines of “the condition to which an individual has the right to behave according to one’s own personal responsibility and free will”.<sup>7</sup> The Oxford American Dictionary defines it as “the power or right to act, speak, or think as one wants without hindrance or restraint”. A fourth definition is that “Freedom is the power, rooted in reason and will, to act or not to act, to do this or that, and so to perform deliberate actions on one’s own responsibility”.<sup>8</sup> It is worth noting that the first definition could of course lead to a person infringing on the ‘freedom’ of another person ‘to do whatever they want’, and is thus problematic. The second definition sees freedom as being subject to exterior (presumably political or societal) forces. The third definition sets freedom over and above one’s ability to think, act and speak – thus presumably a person’s powers of will and reason are subject to their ‘freedom’. In contrast, the fourth definition sees freedom as proceeding from reason and will, and is a more active definition than the third definition, giving the person more agency in defining and living out their freedom.

The difference between the third and fourth definitions stems back to a difference in the interpretation of Freedom by two friars in the Middle Ages, with far-

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<sup>6</sup> George Weigel, *Letters to a Young Catholic*, Basic Books, New York, 2004, p.215

<sup>7</sup> Wikipedia, *Liberty*, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Liberty>, page last modified on 15 February 2011, last viewed February 2011.

<sup>8</sup> The Catechism of the Catholic Church, Part Three, Section one, Chapter One, Article three: Man’s Freedom. Accessed from Vatican website, February 2011.

reaching consequences for today's world.<sup>9</sup> St Thomas Aquinas defined freedom as proceeding from both reason and will, thus being a 'power to choose, derived from our two spiritual faculties and quickened by the inclinations of truth, goodness and happiness that animate these faculties'.<sup>10</sup> Under this definition, freedom is thus a "Freedom for Excellence", because it is the power to engage in actions that aim at truth and goodness, thus excellence, even though a person may fail and do evil.<sup>11</sup> William of Ockham, on the other hand, reversed the relationship, and explained freedom or 'free choice' as being the "first faculty of the human person, whose act does not originally depend on anything but his or her own choice".<sup>12</sup> Under this definition, freedom is a "Freedom of Indifference", because it means that freedom is simply the power to choose between good and evil, truth and falsehood and so on as indifferent options.<sup>13</sup> If we derive the ability to be rational from a pre-existing freedom, then the moral values we derive from our rational thought also proceed from freedom, meaning freedom is above and before morality. Without the bigger overarching idea of God or a Creator as the source of our freedom, it is clear to see how this definition may lead onto the idea that freedom ranks above morality, and as the primary reality, has precedence over any morality or law system constructed on Earth. In this view of things, a moral code or a code of law is thus merely imposed upon humankind to limit our freedoms. Artists who want ever-greater freedom in their artistic creativity would under Ockham's definition logically see morals or laws as restrictions and impositions on their artistic creativity; thus art becomes a continual effort to push boundaries and tap into ever-wider realms of experience – there is no logic in this that aims to the good, the truthful, or the beautiful.

One of the fundamental differences between these two interpretations is that St Thomas Aquinas' Freedom for Excellence takes happiness and joy into account, whereas joy and happiness do not factor into William of Ockham's interpretation at all. For Ockham, father of Nominalism and consequently Relativism, "Freedom, for (him) as for so many European and American intellectuals today, has no spiritual

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<sup>9</sup> Refer primarily to (among many others) George Weigel, *The Cube and the Cathedral*, Basic Books, New York, 2005.

<sup>10</sup> Servais Pinckaers, O.P., *Morality: The Catholic View*, St Augustine's Press, Indiana, 2003, p.68

<sup>11</sup> *ibid*, p.68

<sup>12</sup> *ibid* p.68

<sup>13</sup> *ibid*, p.68

character. The reality is autonomous man, not virtuous man, for freedom has nothing to do with goodness, happiness, or truth. Freedom is simply wilfulness. Freedom can attach itself to anything, so long as it doesn't run into a superior will, human or divine."<sup>14</sup> I believe one can see in this the seed of the idea that if the purpose of my freedom is not necessarily to attain 'goodness, happiness or truth', then it must mean that I am 'free' to pursue whatever goal I wish. It follows that the 'purpose' of what I produce, in this case a piece of artwork or a film, is not necessarily beauty, truth or goodness either. In other words, I am free to produce art directed toward whatever goal I wish – whether it is to shock, to disgust, to make a political or social 'point', or to express my own opinion. Thus, my own self-'interest' becomes a primary factor in my choice of subject matter – a reason that defies any appeal of objectivity by pleading its utterly subjective nature. With the prevalence of Relativism in the world today, it is little wonder that artists and filmmakers view their artistic freedom as the freedom or ability (or license) to choose almost indifferently, if you will, between the grand array of stories and topics and subjects and experiences of humankind, and to choose that which appeals to them, regardless of its moral merits. As a striking example, Frida Kahlo (1907-1954), the Mexican painter, said of her work "I paint my own reality. The only thing I know is that I paint because I need to, and I paint whatever passes through my head without any other consideration."<sup>15</sup> In other words, self-expression becomes justification enough for an artwork, and anything goes. This almost certainly explains the proliferation of films with open, unresolved and unhappy or unsatisfying endings; satisfaction, happiness and redemption are not necessary. It also explains and justifies the proliferation of art that is neither beautiful, true nor meaningful; art is reduced to being 'art for art's sake' (or for the sake of celebrity, money, notoriety, and so on). In other words, there is no difference in the artistic merit between a series of steamrollered silverware hanging in the Tate Gallery, and Michaelangelo's *David* sitting in the Galleria dell' Accademia in Florence.

However, the sort of 'freedom' that allows one to 'do anything' can be, perhaps counter-intuitively, restricting. As Federico Fellini said,

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<sup>14</sup> George Weigel, *The Cube and the Cathedral*, Basic Books, New York, 2005, p.85

<sup>15</sup> <http://www.quotationspage.com/subjects/art/> Michael Moncur, 2010, accessed February 2011.

“I don't believe in total freedom for the artist. Left on his own, free to do anything he likes, the artist ends up doing nothing at all. If there's one thing that's dangerous for an artist, it's precisely this question of total freedom, waiting for inspiration and all the rest of it.”<sup>16</sup>

Aquinas' theory of human freedom being a 'Freedom for Excellence' explains life as a progressive journey of improvement toward perfection, the ultimate goal being “happiness, gained through union with the absolute good” (see *Appendix I*). Servais Pinckaers uses the metaphor of learning to play the piano; at the start you are absolutely free to push whatever keys on the piano that you want to – but it is unlikely to sound very pleasing to the ear. However, if, from this unbridled and uneducated sort of freedom, the novice pianist goes through the hard slog of learning scales, arpeggios, and exercises, and acquires the ability to read music (just as a person goes through the difficulty of learning discipline, what is good and what is not good, what the virtues are and how to pursue them), they will gradually become able to play with greater and greater harmony and precision, and to create beauty and delight in the ears of their admirers. Thus, they have the potential to use their freedom to reach perfection in the art of piano playing, just as we have the potential to use our freedom to reach perfection in the art of living. Or, conversely, in the living of art. For, this metaphor illustrates beautifully what the path of an artist *can be* if they decide to use their creative freedom in this way. A writer who has not taken pains to learn grammar and to read extensively will struggle to experience the joy and the freedom that comes from being able to express oneself accurately and cleverly – to say exactly what they want to say. A painter who has not gone through the slow and difficult years of learning how to mix colour, observe light and life, and learn technique will never be able to paint like Da Vinci or Michelangelo. A filmmaker with no knowledge of the history of film and the technical side of filmmaking will be quite disadvantaged when it comes to making a film, because this sort of knowledge increases the pool of understanding from which they can draw knowledge to express their creative vision and relate the story of the film in the most effective way. With time and practice in their art, the artist inevitably experiences ever-greater freedom as they acquire a broader base of knowledge, understanding, experience from which to draw their ideas and creative capacity from. In this way, artistic freedom can be seen as naturally aligned with the Freedom for Excellence, because it engenders an understanding of

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<sup>16</sup> <http://www.quotationspage.com/subjects/art/> Michael Moncur, 2010, accessed February 2011.

freedom that can grow and evolve and increase – if one (freely) decides to do what is necessary to achieve this.

Furthermore, Freedom for Excellence encourages an understanding of one's freedom as a growth towards a purpose; a journey through life. The artistic products of such freedom will naturally be directed towards happiness, truth, beauty and good. On the other hand, the prevalence of Relativism and Ockham's philosophy of freedom in the world today, particularly in New Zealand, can be seen in the dark, obscure, random, and meaningless products of its art and cinema; avenues artists traverse in pursuit of ever-greater freedom; but it is a freedom that leads to morally and value impoverished art. To truly increase one's artistic freedom requires decision and commitment, and a path of growth that requires an *active* rather than passive approach to one's art and to life. This brand of freedom requires the artist to live it decisively. Whether taken in a religious light or not, the philosophy of Freedom for Excellence has at its heart a purpose: excellence. Purpose is fuel to artistic creativity, and stamina for the long creative road. "Creativeness is always a growth, an addition, the making of something new that had not existed in the world before".<sup>17</sup> The interpretation of freedom as a Freedom for Excellence requires a lifetime of decision-making and working towards perfection, something that is perhaps a counterintuitive response to the array of opportunities our free societies give us. Freedom for Excellence demands the individual to be proactive and decisive, not acting out of obligation and passive to their own destiny, waiting for ideas to come to them – and I believe it is really only with this philosophy of freedom that an artist can truly be discerning with regard to the creative ideas they choose to follow and pursue in their art.

Finally, to relate the discussion to a specific example relevant to my own area of study and an intriguing issue in my home country, New Zealand, I wish to apply the findings to the case of New Zealand's national cinema (specifically films of original New Zealand content – therefore excluding *The Lord of the Rings*). There is a tendency for New Zealand's cinema in particular to focus on unsavoury, dark, unsettling themes such as murders, mental illness, deaths, and family violence. This

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<sup>17</sup> *ibid*

observation was made before research on this topic began, but then proved a more widespread opinion (and indeed, reality) as more research was undertaken. Barry King notes "...the dark and brooding nature of many of New Zealand's most notable films" and their tendency to retreat into "nihilism, irony, satire, and despair" or alternatively to "express the defining Kiwi quality of "quirkiness"—a certain eccentricity of expression, both humorous and ironic" and, I might add, more than slightly strange.<sup>18</sup> King proves his point referring to films such as "Roger Donaldson's *Smash Palace* (1981), Geoff Murphy's *Goodbye Pork Pie* (1980), *Utu* (1983), *The Quiet Earth* (1985), Vincent Ward's *Vigil* (1984), Peter Jackson's *Braindead* (1992), *Heavenly Creatures* (1994), and Lee Tamahori's *Once Were Warriors* (1994)". One could also add to this Jane Campion's *An Angel at my Table* (1990), and *The Piano* (1993), and more recently Brad McGann's *In My Father's Den* (2005) and Peter Jackson's *The Lovely Bones* (2010). This list forms a large chunk of NZ's most well-known films, and there are many more that could be listed. This 'Cinema of Unease' as actor Sam Neill (*Jurassic Park*, *Dean Spanley*) called it in his 1995 documentary is often explained as merely being New Zealand's attempt to define its own identity.<sup>19</sup> Being such a young and intensely multicultural country, New Zealand lacks the long traditions of culture and history that older countries in Europe, for example, have, and it is indeed difficult to define precisely what New Zealand's culture and identity is. New Zealand's 'painful isolation' is another factor that some believe leads to the strains of madness, melancholy and obsession with the strange and non-mainstream in our art. Bearing this in mind, perhaps the root of the problem is the great concern that New Zealand in its film and arts has with trying to express a national identity, somehow trying to represent itself and express its culture through the films it was making – perhaps the resulting 'dark, brooding' cinema is a result of this rather self-oriented, inward-looking creative goal. This harks back to the values freedom of indifference engenders; desire for self-expression and the value of experience, rather than seeking the 'good' or 'what it is good to be'.

However, along with several others I have spoken to, it seems that a more reasonable explanation is simply that in New Zealand, with our small population,

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<sup>18</sup> Barry King, 'The New Zealand Film Commission as a Government-Sponsored Film Producer', in *The Journal of Arts Management, Law and Society*, 40:157-163, 2010, p.160.

<sup>19</sup> *ibid*

great freedoms and peace, things that are out of the ordinary – a horrific murder, for example that shatters the seeming peace of our small society are remarkable events, and as Theodore Dalrymple says, evil fascinates those who seldom come into contact with it.<sup>20</sup> Thus, in a Westernised culture that promotes a do-whatever-you-like brand of freedom, it is logical that artists would latch onto the most frightening, bizarre, strange and seemingly inexplicable events in our history, or simply attempt to express the strange, shocking, or unspoken-of things that the regular New Zealander seldom comes into contact with – this in an attempt to provoke, entertain, shock, or elicit a response, for such is the logical purpose of art created under Ockham’s definition of freedom. While much of our cinema is world class in execution and technical terms, it is searching around laterally to break boundaries rather than aiming its sights skyward toward truth, beauty, goodness, and happiness.

The dark, mysterious, unspoken-of events will always fascinate people who seldom come into contact with them, but one hopes that as Albert Camus wrote, “even within nihilism, it is possible to find the means to proceed beyond nihilism”. In his application for funding for the film *Heavenly Creatures*, Peter Jackson wrote “WHY ON EARTH AM I ATTRACTED TO THE PARKER-HULME STORY?... it has one compelling attraction that is guaranteed to intoxicate film-makers: it is a very well-known but totally misunderstood chapter in New Zealand criminal history. ... I have taken no sides, no political stance... I have tried to tell a complex psychological story in a way that I think represents the truth in a very accurate manner...’<sup>21</sup> Interestingly enough, the thing that excited Jackson the most about this idea was that it was a true story with real people, and that through his film he had the chance to portray *truth*.<sup>22</sup> Truth is still a calling card to artists; perhaps the desire for truth will be what leads our artists and filmmakers to create art and cinema that champions beauty and goodness once again. New Zealand punches well above its weight in the international film industry; there is no lack of talent here. I believe the long-held trend in NZ’s cinema may be changing, as recent films like ‘No. 2’, ‘The Whale Rider’, ‘The World’s Fastest Indian’ and others seem to be indicating that the desire

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<sup>20</sup> Theodore Dalrymple, *Life at the Bottom*, Ivan R. Dee, Chicago, 2001

<sup>21</sup> Sibley, Brian, *Peter Jackson: A Filmmaker’s Journey*, Harper-Collins Publishers, Sydney, 2006, pp.228-9

<sup>22</sup> *ibid*, pp.228-9

for more wholesome, ‘good’ stories is slowly but surely reappearing in our national cinema.

## Conclusion

“Man carries within himself the divine principle, the word of God. And as a free being he carries it creatively and actively and not passively and receptively.”<sup>23</sup>

Our creativity is intimately bound up in our freedom. As such, the fruits of our creative work will most likely be influenced by what we understand our freedom to entail; whether it entails obligation or excellence; whether it *obliges* us to produce works, or whether it allows us to create works *in the pursuit of excellence*. Both interpretations of freedom give us the ability to choose, only for Ockham the choice is indifferent, our freedom, under his definition, being primary – and for Aquinas the choice is between good and evil, joy and sorrow, a pathway toward the Divine, or away from it.

The potential for an artist to create good art does not necessarily rest on the degree of physical freedom they have, or on the importance and freedom given to the arts in his/her society. Rather, understanding one’s freedom as a freedom for excellence gives the artist a purpose and direction in his art, because the meaning of art and artistic creation thus becomes to attain perfection, and in perfection is happiness, and happiness arises out of the satisfaction of the ultimate human longing, which is for beauty and for truth.

Unlimited, indifferent, borderless freedom to do anything, in which anything and everything is valid, lacks this sense of purpose and is therefore not complete as an understanding of what true creative freedom can be and what it can produce. As G.K. Chesterton said, “art, like morality, consists of drawing the line somewhere”.<sup>23</sup> The self is not enough to fuel true creativity – man needs ‘matter’ to work with, Berdyaev’s third ‘part’ of creativity. The most important thing is not seeing ‘purpose’ as an obligation and a restriction, but as a path that has to be chosen as a way of

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<sup>23</sup> <http://www.quotationspage.com/subjects/art/> Michael Moncur, 2010, accessed February 2011.

reaching perfection, fulfilment, and ultimate happiness, joy, meaning and truth in our work. From all accounts, it appears that this is what is lacking in New Zealand's cinema and art.

An artist, as with every human being, needs a sense of purpose, an over-arching guiding principle or plan in their work to feel truly excited about it, and to give them stamina to see it through not just to any indifferent end, but to an end that is beautiful, true and good. Understanding creative freedom as a freedom for excellence can, I believe, lead the artist to grow toward the fulfilment of perfection by prompting them to excel and outdo the most challenging opponent of all; themselves.

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## Proposal

As T.S. Eliot once wrote, what “the most fruitful social conditions for the production of works of the first order, philosophical, literary, or in other arts, is perhaps one of those topics of controversy more suitable for conversation than for writing about.”<sup>24</sup>

In light of the results of this research and discussion, it is clear that what is most needed is a change of perspective in the arts community, and society at large, with regard to the understanding of freedom. Obviously, several practical constraints immediately spring to mind regarding bringing this about – however, big changes must usually begin with small deeds. Here, then, are a few proposed small deeds that could lead to a positive impact on society as a result of what has been learnt through the course of this study:

1. Turning the results of this paper into a talk, or the subject of a series of screenings through various film clubs and societies in Auckland and New Zealand; this could involve monthly or bi-monthly screenings of selected films, with a discussion afterwards – perhaps a series devoted to the representation and discussion of ‘freedom’.

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<sup>24</sup> T.S. Eliot, ‘Society and the Arts’, in *T.S. Eliot: Selected Prose*, Ed. John Hayward, Penguin Books, Middlesex, 1953.

2. Holding the discussion groups and Facebook surveys we originally intended to hold – even just as a way of leading people in non-academic circles to think more closely and critically about the way they understand freedom, and the way freedom is defined by our society. A blog with multiple contributors could also be developed alongside this.
3. Lastly, the greatest impact of all so far of this paper has been the huge benefit it has had on my own thinking, learning, and understanding of freedom and the demands of a creative calling. As someone once said, change begins with “me”. Hopefully through what I have learnt as a result of writing this paper, I will be able to bring about positive change in the circles in which I live and work, and will be able to inspire others to think more critically about the concept of ‘freedom’ – hopefully to inspire others to live their artistic and creative freedom decisively.

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# Appendices

**Appendix 1:** Table of comparing and contrasting St Thomas Aquinas’ Freedom for excellence vs. William of Ockham’s Freedom of Indifference.

<b>Two Forms of Freedom Two Types of Morality</b>	
<b>Freedom for Excellence</b>	<b>Freedom of Indifference</b>
<p>Ability to act with excellence and perfection whenever one wishes.</p> <p>Proceeds from Reason and Will and from the natural longing for truth, goodness, and happiness.</p> <p>Given in germ, it develops gradually through education until it reaches maturity.</p> <p>Unites one’s actions in an ordered whole through a finality that ties them together interiorly. The principal end is “happiness” attained through union with the “absolute good”.</p> <p>Virtue is an aspect of freedom. It is the personal ability whether acquired or infused, to act with perfection. It causes joy.</p> <p>Law has an educational role in the growth of freedom. It is a work of wisdom and corresponds to one’s most intimate longings.</p> <p>Engenders a morality of happiness and virtue, which springs from one’s interior inclinations.</p>	<p>Ability to choose between contraries.</p> <p>Precedes and dominates every natural inclinations. Proceeds from the will alone in its ‘indifference’ to contraries.</p> <p>It is entirely present from the beginning and in each act of the moral life.</p> <p>Each free act is independent of all others. The moral life is a succession of “cases of conscience”. Moral theology is a “casuistry” governed by obedience to law.</p> <p>Virtue is a habit of submission to law.</p> <p>Law is external to freedom, which it limits through obligation. It is the work of the pure will of the legislator.</p> <p>Engenders a morality of law and obligation. The question of happiness is extrinsic to morality.</p>

*Figure 1: Servais Pinckaers, p.74*

**Appendix 2:** *Testimony and Discussion of the way art is taught in art schools today and how this encourages artists to view the very practice of art as a purely subjective and personal experience-based creative outlet. A testimony by a student from one of the most prominent art schools in New Zealand is included.*

If “freedom is a matter of asserting myself and my will”<sup>25</sup> then as Charles Taylor says, “In this conception there is no place for the notion of the good in either of two common traditional senses: either the good life, or the good as the object of our love or allegiance.”<sup>26</sup> Under this definition and way of thinking, one could be excused for feeling a little defensive and precious about their individual freedom, because morality and any suggestion that they should use their liberty in a particular way becomes an impingement and a limitation on their freedom. It engenders an attitude that regards morality, moral laws, the suggestion of using one’s talents in a particular way, or the necessity of going through a stage of ‘learning’ as antagonistic to one’s ‘creative freedom’; things that merely limit one’s freedom and shackle an artist’s ‘instinctive’ or ‘native’ ‘organic’ ‘natural’ creativity. Thus it is only logical that, this being such a prevalent understanding of liberty in today’s world, art schools no longer teach technique, technical theory, or the history of art, but focus purely on ‘concepts’ and the ‘ideas’ behind art. Below is a short testimony by a student from one of the most prominent art schools in New Zealand that reinforces the point quite well:

“It’s really frustrating trying to explain something that you hardly seem to know about despite having spent two years at art school. First year, we were directed along the paths we ought to take in producing work – we were being introduced into contemporary art practice. Second year: a lot more freedom, the briefs always being so open that you could apply it to anything you wanted to do – but a lot of people struggled to do what they wanted (painting a nice picture for example) because it was felt that it wasn’t ‘right’ in the context of modern art.

What they teach is more focussed on the execution of an idea rather than traditional fine arts skill, and in year 3 the students are given every freedom to do what they want, and are asked to focus mainly on the idea of ‘place’ or the ‘context’ in which they now live. In art, production context and the ideas produced are of the utmost importance to the modern art world.

Perhaps this is where the problem lies, in that today’s context is hardly a beautiful one – there is beauty but what we are shown mostly is the ugly, pornographic, destructive, etc... which is ironic considering NZ is one of the most safe countries in the world. We seem to be searching for drama. Maybe then artists get confused because, really, anything goes and everything can be contradicted but nothing can really be considered ‘wrong’. Being given so much freedom to do ANYTHING the possibilities are endless.”

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<sup>25</sup> George Weigel, *Letters to a Young Catholic*, Basic Books, New York, 2004.

<sup>26</sup> Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1989.