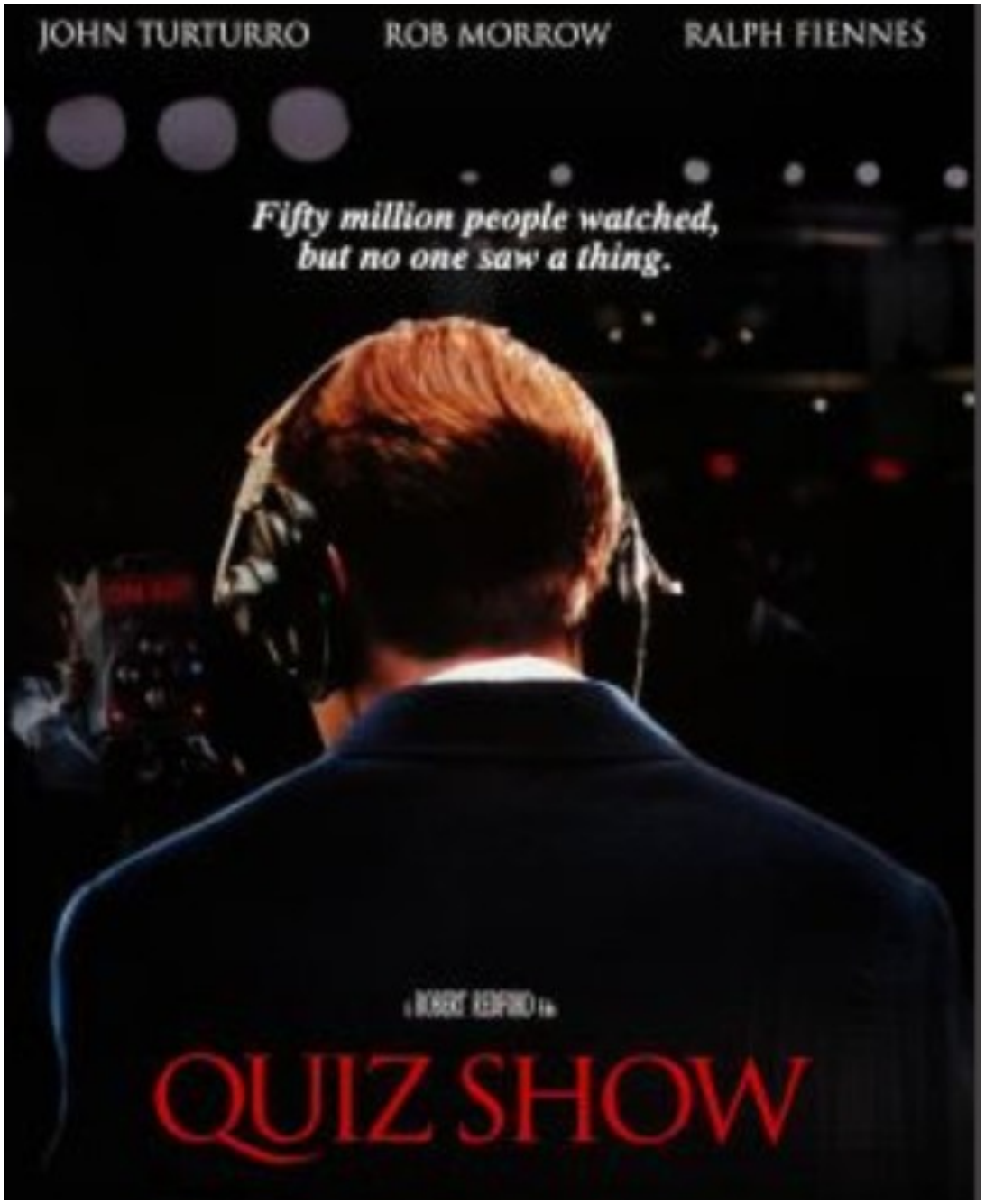
‘Quiz Show,’ 30 Year Later: Seeking the Truth in a Culture of Deception

COMMENTARY: The Robert Redford movie provides a compelling glimpse into the drama of the human conscience.



Poster for the 1994 film starring Robert Redford. (photo: Fair Use / IMDB.com)

Father Joseph Thomas Commentaries January 3, 2025

From the opening of the 1994 Robert Redford film *Quiz Show* — a movie very much worth

taking a look back at, 30 years later — the viewer is immersed in a late-1950s atmosphere of commercialization, which doesn't seem so different from our own.

The young idealistic lawyer Dick Goodwin (played by Rob Morrow), is captivated by the sight of a brand new Chrysler convertible on display in an automobile showroom in Washington, D.C. In his fascination, Goodwin already hints at a key theme of the movie: the way in which a materialistic culture makes it difficult to be truthful. As he looks over the car with a salesman, he admits, "If my wife knew I was here she'd kill me."

Soon the viewer is whisked away into another setting pervaded with the same worldly spirit: the television studio in New York City where the quiz show *Twenty-One* is about to be broadcast. The host Jack Barry (Christopher McDonald) painstakingly rehearses before a mirror. As he arrives on the set, while millions of viewers gather around their televisions, Barry continues his punctilious attention to appearances: "Is my light okay? My nose doesn't look big?"

And so we are introduced to the television program at the center of the movie. Despite the grandeur of the spectacle, all is not well behind the scenes. The NBC executives and their corporate sponsor feel that the reigning champion on the show, the brainy Queens resident Herbie Stempel (John Turturro), has exhausted his appeal to viewers.

While having an elegant steak-and-wine dinner, producer Dan Enright (David Paymer) presents the situation to Stempel: "You've plateaued." Viewers want something new. As he suggests that Stempel intentionally lose, he adds an altruistic motive: "Think about the cause of education." Herbie eventually gives into the pressure, as well as the financial incentive offered to him, and intentionally misses a relatively easy question to the astonishment of the television audience.

The televised spectacle thus enters a new stage, as the handsome young Columbia instructor Charles Van Doren (Ralph Fiennes) takes over as the reigning champion. Nonetheless, in this transition, we also receive glimpses of the much more powerful drama at work in the movie — the drama of the moral conscience as it seeks truth in a world that values appearances and money. Herb's wife Toby, who serves as a voice of this moral sensibility, storms out of the studio audience as Van Doren is acclaimed for his victory.

Charles' ascent to stardom has come at the price of another transgression of conscience.

Enright and his fellow producer Albert Freedman (Hank Azaria), convinced that Charles is the right fit for the show, ask him if he would be willing to answer questions he already knows in advance. Before Van Doren's moral qualms — "I'm just trying to imagine, what would Kant think of this?" — the producers reassure him, "I don't think he'd have a problem with it. ... Think about what this could mean for the cause of education." While Charles initially refuses, he too eventually falls prey to the seduction of celebrity and begins receiving answers in advance.

The movie vividly portrays the glamor that accompanies the young Van Doren's ascent to fame: the adulation of college students, an expensive Greenwich Village townhouse, and his awe at the tens of thousands of dollars he has won.

Yet, for all of these trappings of glory, Charles is deeply unhappy. The pangs of his conscience become ever more apparent at the questioning of Goodwin, an investigator from a congressional subcommittee who is trying to uncover the contents of a grand jury inquiry into the show.

While putting on a show of nonchalance and friendliness, Van Doren can't help but feel compunction for his patent insincerity. In a session in which Freedman reads the questions for the show in advance, Charles blurts out, "Al, I've been thinking — maybe you shouldn't give me the answers anymore." The producer responds with a blank look and tries to calm the young intellectual's intranquility: "Professor, you're doing the right thing. Everybody's making money."

In this way, the movie brings up the quandary: What is more important, money and grand appearance, on one hand, or the truth? Van Doren, enthralled with his fame, finds it hard to choose the latter. In the face of Goodwin's questioning, Charles reminds us of the 'educational good' brought about by the show: "Kids are excited about books and learning. Dan Enright had a lot to do with that."

The path to finding the truth is not easy for Goodwin himself, a Harvard-trained lawyer, who at first balks at the idea that an intellectual with the "pedigree" of Van Doren could be guilty of deceit. Once again, a wife serves as the voice of conscience, as Richard's wife Sandra (Mira Sorvino) opens his mind to the possibility that the esteemed Ivy League academic might also be part of the alleged deception.

Goodwin eventually does gain the strength to confront Van Doren. In the middle of a card game, surrounded by friends, the investigator looks the celebrity contestant in the eye and proclaims: “I know you’re lying.” The guilt is too much for Charles to bear, and the reigning champion escapes his fabricated stardom with another lie, faking ignorance on a question to end his run on the show.

Nonetheless, as the investigation advances, the question of Van Doren’s guilt or innocence becomes an ever more public question. With the support of his wife, Goodwin proceeds to uncover to the public the show’s lies. Eventually, against his own inclinations of camaraderie, he subpoenas Van Doren, for whom the moment of truth finally arrives.

To be sincere, Charles feels the need for a companion to support him. In an empty lecture hall, Charlie confesses his duplicity to his father, the esteemed professor Mark Van Doren (Paul Scofield), and asks the elder Van Doren to accompany him to testify before the committee.

The scene shifts to a Congressional hearing room where, before the legislative committee, the press, and a crowd of onlookers, Van Doren finally admits the truth before the world: “I lied to the American people. I lied about what I knew, and then I lied about what I did not know.”

Despite the angry reaction of the crowd, and the reporters who surround him as he exits the courtroom, Charles has finally found peace. A reporter asks: “How do you feel, Charlie?” to which he responds “Relieved.”

However, the triumph of truth is only partial, as Enright proceeds to absolve the network and corporate sponsor of any complicity in the show’s dishonesty. Goodwin shakes off a colleague’s attempt to congratulate him, and comments: “I thought I was gonna get television. The truth is television’s gonna get us.”

With this ambivalent conclusion, the movie presents a stark portrayal of the superficiality of a media-saturated society. But even more so, this powerful film gives witness to the voice of conscience which ever resounds in the heart of man, summoning him to the truth even amid the many obstacles to it.

As the Second Vatican Council recalls in *Gaudium et Spes*: “In the depths of his conscience, man detects a law which he does not impose upon himself, but which holds him to obedience.” *Quiz Show*
can remind us that only by following this voice, with the help of others, can one break through the deceptions present in our culture and discover the liberating power of truth.

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