Watching Movies in the Name of the Lord: Thoughts on Analyzing Christian Film Criticism

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Watching Movies in the Name of the Lord: Thoughts on Analyzing Christian Film Criticism

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Christian film criticism reveals the role religion plays in how we use and interpret media. Relying on a textual analysis that compares the film reviews of two prominent yet diametrically opposed Christian film critics—the fundamentalist Christian *Movieguide* and post-evangelical Jeffrey Overstreet—this article analyzes the similarities in their approaches to Christian criticism in order to better understand how religious faith in general, and Christian faiths in particular, influence the use and interpretation of media. It identifies three main themes of Christian criticism—affirming the affective power of movies, exploring movie going as an exercise in understanding worldviews, and addressing the standards of production excellence—and argues that Christian criticism is distinguished in part based on its emphasis of movie-going as a transformative experience.

"Christian film criticism," writes an observer of the phenomenon, "is what happens when a Christian watches a film and then writes about it" (Leary, n.d.). This is a simple, succinct, and to a certain degree appropriate definition of Christian criticism. However, this tongue-in-cheek statement belies the complicated, political, and often schizophrenic field of Christian media criticism. Throughout the early to mid 20th century, many Christian responses to films were limited to the support of local ratings and censorship boards to fight purportedly salacious content or to proclamations by churches that framed movies as purveyors of sin and blasphemy. The early 1990s, though, witnessed a surge (a "Great Awakening" or "Revival," perhaps) of Christian media critics who were more likely to embrace movies than condemn them. These new Christian film reviewers were published widely in Christian magazines, and publishers released books, such as *The Gospel Reloaded: Exploring Spirituality and Faith in the Matrix* (Seay & Garrett, 2003) and *How Movies Helped Save My Soul* (Higgins, 2003), that located religious themes in Hollywood movies. Hollywood responded to this trend through targeting

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believers as a niche audience and marketing movies directly to churches (Trammell, 2010; Kusmer, 2004).

In light of these religious reviews and holy movie-going, it is surprising that the question of "What *does* happen when a Christian watches a film and then writes about it?" has not been evaluated more fully. That question strikes at the heart of much of religion and media inquiry specifically and at the essence of much critical-cultural scholarship generally. Analyses of Christian film criticism reveal much about the role religious faith plays in media use and interpretation.

This article explores the common topics and perspectives among Christian reviewers, despite the differences in their interpretative strategies, theologies, and worldviews. It summarizes the competing approaches to Christian film criticism, then analyzes the reviews of two prominent Christian film reviewers—the critics at *Movieguide*, and *Image Journal* and *Christianity Today* reviewer Jeffrey Overstreet—to identify their shared themes. The analysis relies on a literary-critical methodology proposed by Stuart Hall (1975) in order to better identify the embedded similarities in their reviews so as to help articulate the common themes of Christian film reviews. In so doing, the analysis attempts to understand the role that religious faith plays in how we use and interpret mainstream media, particularly in regard to the role movies play in religious life.

DEFINING "CHRISTIAN"

Even though it is common to call someone a "Christian," there is little universal acceptance of what Christian means. The more general uses of the term Christian suggest the person embraces the teachings of Jesus Christ as recorded in the Gospels and imply that Jesus is a significant influence in how one understands the world. Christians privilege the study of the Bible, the growth and development of their spiritual engagement, and intentional efforts to model Christ's teachings. These are broad generalizations, though; explorations of the nuances of Christianity, including what Christians specifically believe about Jesus and how they particularly apply their faith to understanding the world, must acknowledge the wide spectrum of Christian beliefs and subcultures. The U.S. Census puts the number of American adults who self-identify as Christian at more than 170 million, or just under 75% of the adult population, but these 170 million Americans have remarkably opposing ideas of what being Christian means and how that belief is applied to daily life (U.S. Census, 2010). To be sure, the Christian label is applied to fundamentalist, orthodox, evangelical, post-evangelical, moderate, and liberal believers, each of which professes to living lives influenced by the teachings of Jesus Christ but do so in significantly different ways.

These competing approaches to Christianity have been well-explored, particularly in regard to how Christians apply their beliefs in daily life. H. Richard Neibuhr's (2001) seminal typology of Christian ethics explores the "multiple principles and a large number of creative individual concretions of the Christian life" (p. xxxviii). These range from a "Christ Against Culture" type, in which believers aggressively set themselves apart from mainstream culture and view their lives as models of distinctive piety, to a "Christ of Culture" type, in which believers "interpret the revelation of values and imperatives through Christ from the standpoint of the common reason of their culture" (p. xlv). This typology is manifest in the spectrum of beliefs and values that, although competing, claim to be rooted in Christian ethics. For example, the Southern

Baptist Convention (n.d.) regards the Bible as "divinely inspired . . . without any mixture of error. . . . Therefore, all Scripture is totally true and trustworthy." This inerrant approach to the Bible contains no reference to the reader as interpreter of Scripture, which contrasts with the personal-interpretation approach of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship (n.d.), which "affirm[s] the freedom and right of every Christian to interpret and apply scripture under the leadership of the Holy Spirit."

In short, it is presumptuous to assume that labeling someone as Christian ascribes particular shared beliefs to that person; it is even fair to say there is more that divides American Christians than unites them. This manuscript is sensitive to the temptation to "box" Christianity into a tight, exclusive conceptualization that assumes a distinctive, cohesive belief system. In fact, this manuscript's exploration into how Christians use their faith *differently* to read movies implies an appreciation for the multivaried applications of belief to film.

Identifying some*thing* as Christian, such as "Christian film criticism," poses an even greater challenge. The use of the word Christian as an adjective is often taken for granted, but it is a dubious misnomer. The rhetoric of being a Christian person implies acceptance of a religious belief, but Christian things are unable to accept a belief. Christian film criticism is unable to accept Jesus as its personal savior (in the way that Southern Baptists privilege), and it cannot live a "Christ-like" lifestyle (as mainline Presbyterians are wont to do) since reviews can neither accept anything nor live in any manner.

Despite the misnomer of calling something Christian, it is common for believers to apply the label to set apart the seemingly sacred from the purportedly profane. The tipping point as to what makes a text particularly Christian, though, varies. Several observers of the Christian media industry acknowledge a quantitative approach at play in identifying a text's Christian-ness. For instance, songs that feature frequent, overt references to Jesus are more likely to be selected for air on Christian radio stations; this has been described by April Hefner as counting the number of JPMs (or "Jesus'-Per-Minute") in a song (as cited in Romanowski, 2001, p. 139; see also Beaujon, 2006; Howard & Streck, 1999). The Christian label is also frequently used to market a text rather than to specify a belief, as evidenced in retail stores that have a Christian book or CD section, suggesting that those products are either somehow Christian or at the very least are marketed to Christian consumers.[1]

Acknowledging the difficulties inherent in defining a Christian text, this manuscript identifies Christian film criticism based on its intentional, apparent application of the Christian faith—as conceptualized by the critic—to understand and interpret a movie, particularly through its commentary and interpretative strategy. This analysis of Christian media criticism centers around the critics' efforts to parse out religious themes from the film, to compare the movie to religious beliefs or myths, and to understand what the movie purportedly reveals about man's relationship with God.

DEFINING "CRITICISM"

Some scholarship into how religious faith influences media use relies on methodologically weak analyses. In a typical example, Hamilton and Rubin (1992) relied on a uses and gratifications

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[1]For more comprehensive coverage of the Christian media industry, see Hendershot (2004) and McDannell (1995).

framework to identify patterns of media use based on religiosity. They argued that conservatives and nonconservatives have generally similar viewing habits and noted no difference in voyeuristic viewing among the sample or any differences in their affinity for television. Others have explored the varied newspaper habits of Methodists, Jews, and Mormons through surveys of these religious faithful and have found little difference in their newspaper usage (German, 2007). These uses-and-gratifications-centered studies attempt to identify a correlation between religious faith and media use but are methodologically unable to reveal much about how religion *influences* media use. To merely identify the media that persons of faith use leaves little more than speculation about what that relationship means.

The belief systems used to make meaning of the world affect how we create meaning from media texts. Reception theorists, in particular, and media scholars, in general, argue that texts do not have single, totalizing meanings; rather, meanings are constructed through a myriad of factors, including the audiences' perspectives and ideologies. This results in as many potential interpretations as there are readers (Fiske, 2000; Mailloux, 2001). In one noteworthy example of the polysemic nature of texts, Celeste Condit (1989) explored the different interpretations made by pro-choice and pro-life viewers of a *Cagney & Lacey* episode that featured abortion. After viewing the program, the pro-life reader questioned the producer's political motive, focusing on the show's underlying worldview. The pro-choice reader, though, was less concerned about the worldview and more concerned about the story's believability and realism, raising doubts about whether persons facing abortion would experience a situation similar to what the show's characters faced. In both cases, the viewers drew primarily from their ideological beliefs to create different resistant meanings out of the same episode.

Some approach the role religion plays in interpreting texts by exploring the degree that the faithful embrace mainstream media. In a previous manuscript, Daniel Stout and I (in press) identified three general approaches to Christian criticism and explored how these interpretations are distinguished by the role Christianity plays in understanding and evaluating texts. Fundamentalist[2] Christian-inspired film reviews, for instance, are informed by the perception that mainstream culture threatens Christianity's purported ideological dominance (Armstrong, 2000; Martin & Appleby, 1991). They defend their beliefs through a strict dependence on religious texts and practices, often selectively isolating themselves from mainstream culture in order to maintain the integrity of their beliefs (Ammerman, 1987; Armstrong, 2000). This relationship with the secular media is colored in part by a motivation (calling, perhaps) to eliminate seemingly anti-Christian material from the marketplace of ideas by keeping it out of the marketplace of media. As Hollywood movies became popular in the 1910s, conservative Christians warned of their seemingly hypnotic appeal and prurient content. Their call for reform in the entertainment industry led to the creation of the Hays Office and the Production Code Administration, which required Hollywood movies to align with conservative Christian beliefs (Vaughn, 1990; Black, 1989, p. 169; Balio, 1976, pp. 253–284). Decades later, the 1988 film *The Last Temptation of Christ* was rebuked by many of the Christian faithful as a blasphemous

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[2]Although the popular press tends to use "fundamentalist" and "fundamentalism" as pejorative terms, I use them less as terms that evoke moral dissonance and more as terms that differentiate this belief system from other approaches to Christianity. To be sure, fundamentalist Christians apply their faith to mainstream culture in ways unique from other believers, and my use of "fundamentalist" attempts to reflect that difference rather than to make a judgment on their beliefs.

portrayal of Jesus. Fundamentalist Christians Jerry Falwell and Bill Bright aggressively tried to limit its distribution through protests, rallies, and op-eds (Lyons, 1997). As the 20th century came to a close, Southern Baptists concluded a boycott of the Disney company, which was motivated in part by what they considered to be the company's retreat from the traditional values of its mid-century movies (Kinsolving, 1996; Warren, 2001).

When they *do* consume mainstream media, conservative Christians have some peculiar and distinct viewing habits influenced in part by their faith. For example, Todd Rendleman (2002) explored how conservative Christians responded to *The Rapture*, a film featuring both religious themes and sexual content. He noted that conservative Christians are generally more likely to evaluate a text's merits based less on its embedded themes and more on its displays of sex and nudity. Daniel A. Stout, David W. Scott, and Dennis G. Martin (1996) found similar consumption habits among some "traditional" Mormons when analyzing the degree of influence the Mormon Church has on how believers make mainstream media choices.

The second model of Christian film criticism—the evangelical model—shares the fundamentalist concern that movies can model sinful behavior, and as such many films ought to be avoided. However, evangelical Christian critics are more likely to consume mainstream media as a part of their belief and worship (Trammell & Stout, in press). They believe that Christians should embrace media's possibilities as a means to help learn the Gospel and come to church through Bible studies on mainstream media, or as a means to give the Christian faith a sense of contemporary relevance through simulating secular sounds and aesthetics in its own religious media (Romanowski, 2001; Dark, 2002). To these believers, mainstream media are more of a supplement to and less of an enemy of Christianity.

This embrace of mainstream texts may be noted most frequently in texts that repurpose secular texts and aesthetics in religious media. The past couple of decades have seen an abundance of books, websites, and other media that attempt to locate the spiritual significance of popular movies, music, and television shows. HollywoodJesus.com, for instance, addresses "Pop Culture from a Spiritual Point of View" through identifying religious material and themes in movies that seem to have a dearth of spirituality. Audiences seeking religious solace in popular television programs can turn to books such as *The Gospel According to Tony Soprano* (Seay, 2002), *The Gospel According to The Simpsons* (Pinsky, 2001), and *The Gospel According to Lost* (Seay, 2009). This marriage of secular texts in religious worship and study has become so strong that marketers have begun to take notice: the past few years have seen significant campaigns marketing *The Passion of the Christ*, *The da Vinci Code*, and *The Chronicles of Narnia* directly to churches by, among other strategies, sending DVDs to pastors containing trailers of the films to be played during Sunday worship services and movie posters to hang in the vestibules (Trammell, 2010; Boyer, 2006).

Other Christian critics reject the fundamentalist critics' attempts to warn viewers of a film's perceived blasphemy, as well as the evangelical critics' attempts to locate object lessons in films. These post-evangelical Christian critics do not perceive mainstream media as a threat or as indicative of a sinful culture in need of redemption; rather, they embrace mainstream media as cultural artifacts that expose viewers to how others see and understand the world (Trammell & Stout, in press). They privilege movies that appeal less on a visceral or surface-level and more on engaged, enlightened, and critical reads.

Post-evangelical criticism is informed by a belief system that is "more comfortable with the mysteries, ambiguities, and paradoxes of faith" than evangelicalism or fundamentalism

(Tomlinson, 2003, p. 30). These believers are skeptical toward approaches to Christianity as a means to separate oneself from mainstream culture, or as a means to reform mainstream culture. Instead, post-evangelicals embrace mainstream culture, believing that engaging with different worldviews and ideologies strengthens and makes relevant their Christian faith. As such, they are comfortable encountering theologies and cultural norms that counter their beliefs; in fact, they seek out these opportunities to understand what others believe (Tomlinson, 2003).

This typology of Christian critics centers on how religious influences *differ* among fundamentalist, evangelical, and post-evangelical reviewers rather than how they are similar. An analysis of the similarities rather than the differences provides a framework against which stronger discussions of Christian criticism can be discussed. It helps us address what tends to fall into the mold of Christian criticism, what happens when Christian criticism falls outside of that mold, and what it means that *this* is the mold of Christian criticism. When Christians critique movies through the perspective of religious faith, what does that perspective reveal about role of religion in understanding media in particular and the broader world in general?

REVIEWING CHRISTIAN REVIEWS

The literary-critical analysis outlined by Stuart Hall provides a solid methodological foundation for exploring the common themes of Christian media criticism. His *Paper Voices* project analyzed "the core-values in a newspaper which provide its staff and its readers with a coherent, if not consistent, scheme of interpretation" (Hall, 1975, p. 15). He and his colleagues analyzed the *Mirror* and the *Express,* two London dailies that have "opposed positions" and "striking contrasts, distinctive personalities and styles" in order to identify "schemes of interpretation" that transcend the papers' editorial strategies and aesthetic tastes (p. 12). They relied on a literary-critical analysis, which Hall calls "useful in penetrating the latent meanings of a text," to uncover the dominant, recurring themes and expose the "structures of meaning" at play in the production and use of newspapers (pp. 15–16). This method has been used to "integrate the study of style, language, expression, and rhetoric directly into the study of social meaning" in media beyond newspapers, including *telenovelas* and American Girl brand dolls (Hall, 1975, p. 17; Acosta-Alzuru, 2003; Acosta-Alzuru & Roushanzamir, 2003).

Hall posited that effective textual analysis centers on a "long, preliminary soak, a submission by the analyst to the mass of his material" to become familiar with the material and help identify effective sites of inquiry. This allows the researcher to become not only familiar with the codes of a text by which the categories and codes of the analysis are developed but also to identify representative texts for deeper analysis (Hall, 1975, p. 15). To apply *Paper Voices*' method to this analysis, I began by exploring film criticism across the Christian spectrum. I conducted web searches for Christian film critics, explored film criticism in some of the more dominant Christian magazines, and examined books that model how Christians— broadly defined—analyze media. This "soak" helped to focus the study and led me to identify appropriate examples of two competing approaches to Christian film criticism: *Movieguide* (which models a fundamentalist Christian approach to film criticism) and Jeffery Overstreet (who models a post-evangelical approach to film criticism). It also led me to use their reviews of Wim Wenders' film *Don't Come Knocking* as a case that best reveals their shared strategies to evaluating and interpreting a movie.

This soak in the data also allows the researcher to develop a set of points of inquiry. In the case of *Paper Voices*, the researchers used their soak to shape their exploration of the *Mirror* and the *Express* in regards to how they framed social change. In particular, they considered how the papers emphasized certain issues over others, in part through the embedded "persona" of the papers (Hall, 1975, pp. 19–20). In conducting my analysis of Overstreet's and *Movieguide*'s reviews, I focused specifically on how the writers frame their interpretative strategies, with particular attention to how they emphasize and embed Christian beliefs into those strategies.

Movieguide's reviews are published by Christian Film & Television Commission (CFTVC) and posted online at www.movieguide.org. It prides itself on reviewing films based on a conservative Christian worldview informed significantly by the Bible. These biblically based standards reflect the fundamentalist Christian belief to actively and intentionally apply biblical ideals in daily life (Ammerman, 1987, p. 71–73). CFTVC Chairman and *Movieguide* publisher Ted Baehr argues that God calls believers "in His Word to apply godly weights and measures" through an intentionally biblical worldview to film criticism (Baehr, 2002, p. 7). In doing so, *Movieguide* argues its purportedly biblical approach not only reflects Christian discernment; it also empowers its reviewers to identify which films are more successful. "The movies we pick do better at the box office because we analyze movies from the biblical perspective shared by most moral Americans," Baehr (1993) writes. "Of course, unlike the dedicated Christian staff at *Movieguide*, those who have not been inspired by the Spirit of God through a new life in Jesus Christ are spiritually incapable of understanding a Christian worldview and the media preferences of those who hold such a worldview" (p. 5).

Movieguide's critiques are a function of the CFTVC's broader mission of media reform. The CFTVC calls for boycotts of *The Last Temptation of Christ*, advocates for a revival of the 1930s Hollywood Production Code, and encourages municipalities to outlaw screenings of prurient films ("Boycott," 1988; Billitteri, 1990; Baehr, 1990, 1992). Such campaigns have led some observers to call *Movieguide* an example of how Christians can "mistrust and misunderstand visual media" (Schaeffer, 1990, p. 55).

Jeffrey Overstreet, like many other Christian critics, questions that *Movieguide*'s reviews are thorough and critical, despite its claims of its "intelligent, thorough, critical method" to understanding films. Overstreet has reviewed movies for *Christianity Today* and for its film review site, ChristianityTodayMovies.com. He has also reviewed for *Image Journal*, a quarterly publication that attempts to "[speak] with equal force and relevance to the secular culture and to the church. By finding fresh ways for the imagination to embody religious truth and religious experience, *Image* challenges believers and nonbelievers alike" (*Image Journal*, 2010). His reviews apply the Christian faith to films in a remarkably different vein than *Movieguide*. Rather than center his reviews around elements of movies that Christians may find objectionable at best, and sinful at worst, Overstreet's reviews center more on what the embedded and subtle themes in a movie can reveal to spiritually minded viewers and encourage believers to embrace certain movies despite their seemingly prurient content.

This analysis centers on Overstreet and *Movieguide*'s reviews of Wim Wenders's 2005 film *Don't Come Knocking*. The movie features the tale of Howard Spence, a 60-ish former Hollywood star known for his cowboy roles on-screen and for his reckless playboy antics off-screen. When Spence disappears from the set of his current cowboy film, the studio's private detective traces Spence to Butte, Montana. There Spence is introduced to two of his illegitimate

children fathered during trysts 20 years earlier. Spence attempts to have a relationship with his children with varying degrees of success.

I chose to analyze *Movieguide*'s and Overstreet's reviews of *Don't Come Knocking* for a couple reasons. First, the movie, like many films, is not explicitly or overtly religious in nature; that is, it does not contain any references to "traditional" religious artifacts, sacraments, beliefs, or figures as, say, *The Passion of the Christ* would. Yet the film covers themes that overlap with religious ideals, specifically reconciliation. In this way, *Movieguide* and Overstreet are able to easily apply their religious perspectives to a secular, mainstream movie.

Second, Overstreet holds up *Movieguide*'s review of Wenders's film as an example of a poor interpretive strategy to reading movies. His book *Through a Screen Darkly: Looking Closer at Beauty, Truth and Evil in the Movies* contains a significant rebuttal to *Movieguide*'s review, and contrasts its approach to films with Overstreet's approach. This gives us a nice contrast in how Christians review films against which we can use to begin to identify their common, dominant themes despite the differences in their interpretative strategies and Christian perspectives.

UNDERSTANDING THE AFFECTIVE POWER OF MOVIES

The first shared theme among *Movieguide*'s and Overstreet's reviews is that they both *affirm the affective power of movies*. They both note that movies can motivate viewers to see the world in new ways. In fact, movies that fail to affect the viewer are often condemned as poorly made films.

Movieguide approaches the affective power of movies with trepidation, arguing this power ought to be feared rather than embraced. "There is a war raging around [Christians]," writes *Movieguide* publisher Ted Baehr. "It is a war being waged inside our minds, a spiritual war for our souls. The adversary [Satan] is using every possible tactic to control our minds: materialism, secularism, humanism, and all the other *-isms* that conflict with Christianity" (Baehr, 1998, p. 137). One of the more effective tactics to "control our minds," he argues, is the use of mainstream media: "With the corrupted movies and television programs of our age, the adversary is fueling our sinful propensity to lust and hooking us on our desires. Once hooked, he drags us down to hell" (Baehr, 1998, p. 137).

To help moviegoers avoid films that can "drag us down to hell," *Movieguide*'s reviewers cover the movie's potentially problematic content in detail. In the case of *Don't Come Knocking*, *Movieguide* warns its readers of the following:

> 24 obscenities (17 of which are "f" words) and three profanities; mild violence includes boyfriend pushing his girlfriend out of his way two or three times and father and son pushing and slapping at each other . . . ; one scene of implied fornication showing unmarried couple in bed together the morning after; naturalistic upper male nudity and unmarried couple is briefly shown in their underwear, as well as female cleavage and clothed backside shots; strong alcohol and drug use includes a movie star's trailer filled with empty bottles, drunkenness depicted, man is arrested for public drunkenness, several scenes of people drinking at various bars, etc. (Amsden, 2006, p. 46)

Jeffrey Overstreet acknowledges this content in *Don't Come Knocking*, but he is far less concerned that it will "drag viewers to hell." "There *are* scenes in *Don't Come Knocking*

that include foul language, gambling, drinking and drugs," he writes, "just as Christ's tale of the prodigal son involves a man who wishes his father was dead, sinks into debauchery, and ends up eating pig slop.... But none of this misbehavior is presented as rewarding activity.... These elements are clearly included to show [Howard Spence's] weaknesses and why he needs to be saved" (Overstreet, 2007, p. 60).

Overstreet writes that such seemingly offensive content ought not to keep serious Christian filmgoers away and frames movie going as a positive experience to be embraced by people of faith rather than feared. He would rather expose himself to a "feast of movies" rather than limit his celluloid diet (2007, p. 69). "I *want* to be moved [by movies], to glean more from movie going," he says. "I don't want to waste time with disposable box office sensations. I want to be challenged and nourished" (2007, pp. 29–30). Films "reflect life, and when we meditate on life, we might see something in a new way," he writes. "That might awaken us to possibilities, problems, hope, doubt, salvation or sin" (2007, pp. 33–34). This is true of *Don't Come Knocking*, in which Overstreet notes that "Howard's fractured family does not fall into each others' arms and live happily ever after. But we can still catch glimpses of grace and redemption along the way" (2007, p. 44).

EXPLORING THE WORLDVIEWS EMBEDDED IN MOVIES

In addition to addressing movies' affective power, Christian criticism tends to *explore movie going as an exercise in understanding worldviews*. *Movieguide* and Overstreet's reviews explore how worldviews affect the interpretation of a movie, but they approach these interpretations differently. *Movieguide* uses its criticism to uncover the worldview of the movie; Overstreet uses the movie to uncover the worldview of the critic.

The most dominant and perhaps most criticized feature of *Movieguide*'s reviews is the explicit identification of the film's worldview (e.g., Schaeffer, 1990; Romanowski, 2001). "The ultimate value of the [film]," write publisher Ted Baehr and editor Tom Snyder (2003), "is determined by its premise and worldview. It is these factors—which include its philosophy, theology, and morality—that make the work true, false, heretical, or evil" (p. 23). The degree to which a film is "true, false, heretical, or evil" is gauged against a biblical worldview, described by *Movieguide* in brief as a "moral worldview," or a "Christian worldview or elements, Gospel witness, redemptive elements, or positive reference to Jesus Christ" ("Using," 2004). *Movieguide* also identifies worldviews and themes in movies that tend to be rejected by fundamentalists, including antibiblical worldviews, anticapitalism, environmentalism, humanism, feminism, and paganism. *Movieguide* uses these worldviews to rate movies on an "acceptability" scale: movies that reflect fundamentalist Christian beliefs earn +4 ratings ("Exemplary"), while films that counter fundamentalist Christianity could be rated as low as −4 ("Abhorrent") ("A Family Guide," 2001).

Don't Come Knocking is an example of an "Abhorrent" −4 movie. *Movieguide* identifies a "very strong humanist, antibiblical worldview" in the film. "Discerning moral viewers should easily see that this movie is a perfect example of what happens when a man sows his wild oats and reaps the broken dreams of his sinful ways," the review continues. "Discerning moral viewers could easily see that the wages of this man's sin is death and that the sins of the father are visited on the children." Along with its "strong instances of foul language and miscellaneous

immorality such as gambling drinking and drugs," *Movieguide* ultimately declares, "this is a movie that is just not good" (Amsden, 2006, p. 46).

Jeffrey Overstreet takes umbrage to *Movieguide*'s worldview-centered reviews. Addressing how *Movieguide* interpreted *Don't Come Knocking*, Overstreet wrote that the reviewer had "[taken] a sledgehammer to an admirable work of art," labeling it as "Abhorrent," without acknowledging the sensitive and masterful telling of an old man making amends for his life's misdeeds. To Overstreet, *Movieguide*'s review "was like watching a guest at a generous feast stand up, spit on what is served to him and storm out" (2007, p. 43).

Such reviews are flawed, he writes, in part because they miss important subtleties that exist in a film's text and hastily center on the more apparent content such as nudity, swearing, drinking, and drugs. He chastises Baehr's approach to film criticism, which he considers to be too knee-jerk and morality-centered to be open to film's artistic potential. "Art conveys truth in mysterious ways," Overstreet writes, "and we interpret it differently because we come with different experiences. . . . It is often presumptuous and premature for a critic to proclaim that a movie is abhorrent or un-Christian" (Overstreet, 2007, p. 145). Overstreet advocates for a reading that centers less around passing judgment on a film and more around trying to listen to the film's embedded message without judgment. "When we approach art with humility rather than a readiness to judge," he writes, "we open ourselves to discovering that any particular detail might be a signpost that will point us in the direction of the truth," (2007, p. 55). "I have found that we can glimpse transforming truth through the beauty of art," he writes, "if we put aside fear and judgment and look with 'eyes to see'" (2007, p. 14).

When Overstreet uses his "eyes to see" *Don't Come Knocking*, he sees a sensitive tale about the effects of being an ineffective and absentee father. Comparing the movie to a "prodigal father" parable of sorts, Overstreet notes "the story of Howard Spence is a prevalent tale in movies today, as generations growing up fatherless seek to fill a void and as men who have run from family and responsibility begin to yearn for what they might have chosen" (2007, pp. 42, 45). Overstreet also sees subtle themes in *Don't Come Knocking* regarding the end of the macho, gun-slinging cowboy archetype, the emotional weaknesses that permeate the drug-addled, and the under-appreciated grace of mothers toward their wayward sons (2007, pp. 58–59).

Overstreet believes movies like *Don't Come Knocking* help the viewer learn more about him or herself, as well as understand the transcendent. Such films "[reflect] our mistakes, our flaws and our pain back to us so that we must acknowledge them and find hope to move beyond them" (2007, p. 36). Elsewhere, he writes that movies, "more than any other art, . . . [mirror] our experience in time and space. Reflecting our world back to us, it gives us the opportunity to explore and revisit moments. Offering imaginative visions of alternate worlds, it helps us glimpse aspects of our own that we might otherwise have missed" (2007, p. 77).

ADDRESSING EXCELLENCE IN FILMMAKING

Both Overstreet and *Movieguide*'s reviews also *address how to identify and evaluate excellence in filmmaking*. They agree that much in mainstream media is poor (i.e., low) art, and those discerning viewers, Christian or otherwise, would be better served by embracing art that satisfies the soul. This is not to suggest that they agree on what makes movies art, or that movies even

categorize as art. Nonetheless, the question of "what is excellence in filmmaking?" is one that *Movieguide* and Overstreet seriously approach.

Movieguide publisher Ted Baehr is adamant that "Movies are not art. . . . [Movies] are a commercial medium of entertainment. No major movie company executive would put up for long with writers and directors who wanted to create art" (1998, p. 399). Despite this sweeping proclamation, Baehr identifies movies that posses some artistic qualities and standards of excellence. *Movieguide* approaches a film's production quality as a separate component from the film's ideological perspective and worldview. Its quality ratings "refer to the production values in the movie, the entertainment quality of the production, and whether the movie fulfills what it tries to do" ("A Family Guide," 2001). Films that do this well earn four stars for "Excellent"; a film with one star is rated "Poor." Whereas a movie can earn a −4 "Abhorrent" acceptability rating, *Movieguide* could also give it a three or four-star quality rating if it is well-made, such as the three-star "Abhorrent" film *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* (Baehr & Snyder, 2001).

Don't Come Knocking, to *Movieguide*, is a one-star movie. The reviewer wrote that the production values are so poor that "the movie feels like an amateur piece from a first-year film student," despite the director having won a prize at the prestigious Cannes Film Festival years earlier. *Movieguide* also writes that it fails to be an entertaining production, stating it "feels as long as an epic . . . without the epic sense of story, grandeur, or enjoyment." Ultimately, the review encourages "discerning viewers" to "avoid this piece of trash from Broken-Home Mountain" (Amsden, 2006, p. 46).

Whereas Baehr distinguishes a film's production quality from a film's ideological attributes, Overstreet finds that these two components effectively merge. In fact, his book *Through a Screen Darkly* gushes over how the artistic qualities of movies are used to better communicate spiritual themes. Filmmaking at its best "carries us up out of our critical faculties and sweeps us to a galaxy far, far away. . . . We are presented with flickers of light preserved, one moment after another, motion and change reflected in a way that cannot happen in a painting, in writing, in music" (Overstreet, 2007, p. 28). "When we give others something excellent," he continues, "we reflect the standards of Heaven. We make others curious. When they get curious, they're open to discovering things they would not otherwise understand. Such discoveries provoke growth and a particular joy" (2007, p. 24).

When Overstreet explored *Don't Come Knocking*, he also addressed the film's pacing and acting as noteworthy. Unlike *Movieguide*'s belief that they take away from the film's power, though, Overstreet argues its setting, pacing, and photography strengthen the film's broader theme of isolation. "The film's power grows from the authentic performances of seasoned actors. It resonates in the wry humor of the soft-spoken script. Above all, vivid imagery (stunning scenery, time-weathered faces and the disintegrating architecture of Butte) communicates volumes about this desolate spiritual territory" (2007, pp. 44–45).

Overstreet is remarkably sensitive to how the filmmaking process of performances, lighting, editing, and sound can move the filmgoer. "We benefit when we bring into focus each movie's writing, editing, lighting, performance, direction, the intended audience and the film's political, spiritual and cultural perspectives and agendas. Questions about these aspects can lead us to discover strengths, weaknesses, and new insights" (2007, p. 77). The more masterful works "organize what we see and hear in such a way as to encourage the viewer to examine relationships between character, image, color, music, and camera angle. If they do their job well, the viewer comes away wanting to see the film again to take a closer look" (2007, p. 77).

"WHEN A CHRISTIAN WATCHES MOVIES AND THEN WRITES ABOUT IT"

These three dominant themes shared by *Movieguide* and Jeffrey Overstreet—understanding the affective power of movies, exploring the worldviews embedded in movies, and addressing excellence in filmmaking—reveal an approach to religious media criticism that centers around *movie-going as a transformative experience*. The film's ability to impact a viewer motivates these two opposing Christian reviewers to either warn against its content or praise it, but in either case they acknowledge that exposure to this content can change the viewer. The emphasis on the worldviews embedded in movies acknowledges the role that movies play to help viewers understand the world in new ways. The emphasis on production quality centers on how the craft of storytelling, when done well, helps communicate abstract themes in ways that the viewer may not notice otherwise.

Despite the differences in Christian beliefs and interpretative strategies of the fundamentalist reviews of *Movieguide* and the post-evangelical Overstreet, their common themes reveal the shared foci of their readings and interpretations. Both reviewers assume that movies do not merely *say* something, or even *mean* something—rather, they impact the viewer through a masterful combination of story, perspective, and craft of production. They both address not merely what a film says about the world but also how the movie will impact the audience. They are sensitive to the role that a movie may play in a person's understanding of religious belief and consider how the believing viewer may use the film to better understand the world.

This shared approach by these two polar Christian critics has some clear religious overtones. Religious faith in general is framed by many for playing a transformative role in people's lives. Christian faiths in particular privilege encounters with Jesus that change how a person sees the world and interacts with others. It is not surprising, then, to identify a dominant aspect of Christian film criticism as exploring movie-going as a transformative experience. In short, when reviewers use religious faith to read texts, regardless of whether they eagerly embrace mainstream media or reject it, they see not only how it will appeal to the viewer's senses or amusement; they see how the movie will impact the viewer's perspective and beliefs.

The virtue of analyzing religious film critics rests in what they reveal about the role ideology in general, and religious belief in particular, plays in how we understand media. Of course, there is much more to discover about the role of religion in media use and interpretation that is beyond the scope of this article. To be sure, this manuscript does not suggest that the sole or primary characteristic of religious media criticism centers on the transformative experience of movie-going; rather, it argues that this is just one dominant theme that seems to cross the spectrum of Christian media criticism. The better our analyses in religion and media become, the more we gain from understanding the intersection between those ideologies through which we understand the world, and the media through which we are exposed to the world.

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