

‘Christian Film Industry’ Can’t Thrive Like Music Industry Counterpart

Will there ever be a thriving “Christian film industry,” akin to the current “Christian music industry?”

That question has kicked up philosophical dust of late, with forums including ChristianityToday.com. Film critic Peter Chattaway sparked the latest round of discussion with [a recent column](#) at CanadianChristianity.com. Though he enjoys Christian music, Chattaway said he is glad that the Christian music industry as of yet has no film counterpart.

Furthermore, it won’t—for several reasons.

First, it must be noted that comparing Christian music and Christian film is, in a real sense, unfair.

Music and film are alike in that they are both artistic expressions and commercial products. But they are different in a key way. While music is sold on tapes and CDs, it also can be experienced live through concerts and performance by someone other than the original artist.

That means Christian music is literally brought into churches, where explicitly sacred lyrics are appreciated by an audience with built-in receptors for those messages. The messages are not necessarily predicated on storytelling. Often they are repetitive in nature and reinforce scriptural texts.

That experience can then be exported to “secular” arenas, where youth groups and others mobilize. Sacred space can be recreated there through performance.

No such opportunity exists for film. The film is the thing, and the theater is the

place to experience it. While more churches are using multimedia (including film and video), most churchgoers have far more exposure to popular music being used in worship than popular film.

That gives Christian music a built-in edge as a viable product that doesn't exist with Christian film. Further, it costs less to produce music than film. It's been said that film and architecture are the two most expensive art forms.

The result is the situation we have today. There's a booming Christian music industry, and a fledgling and maligned Christian movie industry. Consequently, the "Christian film critics" don't have a built-in target for their reviews. So they are left with pulling out "Christian" themes they find in almost any kind of movie—American, French, Indian, G, R, comedy, drama, you name it.

What would be the point of a Christian film industry? If Chattaway is correct, it might be to make bad films, as if there aren't enough bad films already.

Movies can be bad either in form or content.

Hollywood (where, yes, some Christians already work) does well in the form sphere, with its command of filmmaking language, production values and techniques for telling stories in the medium.

The industry, however, is less consistent with content, making stories that consistently engage audiences. Pick up any list of reviews, and the films scored excellent or very good are few and far between.

To be fair to all filmmakers, making *any* movie is difficult. Frankly, a good movie—a collaboration among writers, actors, designers, musicians, editors, distributors, projectionists and a gazillion others—is something of a miracle.

But when it comes to Christian films, Chattaway has concerns about both form *and* content, and he points to entries like "Left Behind II" to buttress his point.

There are inherent problems with putting salvation on film. Movies aren't

sermons. They don't work that way. It's not in their nature. Numerous people have made this observation, including filmmaker Paul Schrader and screenwriting guru Linda Seger.

Sermons can be straightforward and hit their audiences over the head. Movies that try to do that are at their best melodrama.

It's a content problem when the story is straightforward, scenes have no subtext and the predictable "moment of conversion" is the order of the day.

But it's also a form problem inasmuch as film has its own language—a cinematic structuring of visual relationships. An explicit Christian witness doesn't speak that language. When it tries, it muddles form.

This isn't picking on Christianity. Any message—be it salvation or sex—is poorly taken when shoved in one's face. Movies that do that are bad, because they don't allow the viewer to make judgments about the human condition.

"But that's not what the Christian film industry would produce," some would argue. "It wouldn't have to hit folks over the head with a holy two-by-four. It could discuss ideas and themes of salvation, redemption, forgiveness, mistakes and lessons learned."

But such products and expressions already exist, as is evidenced by the presence of Christian reviewers of mainstream films.

If meaning is in the mind of the beholder, we already have it. If it isn't, but instead rests with the sender of the message, then we don't really need a Christian film industry to shove the gospel message on the masses via the camera. That already exists in a previous incarnation.

Televangelism.

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