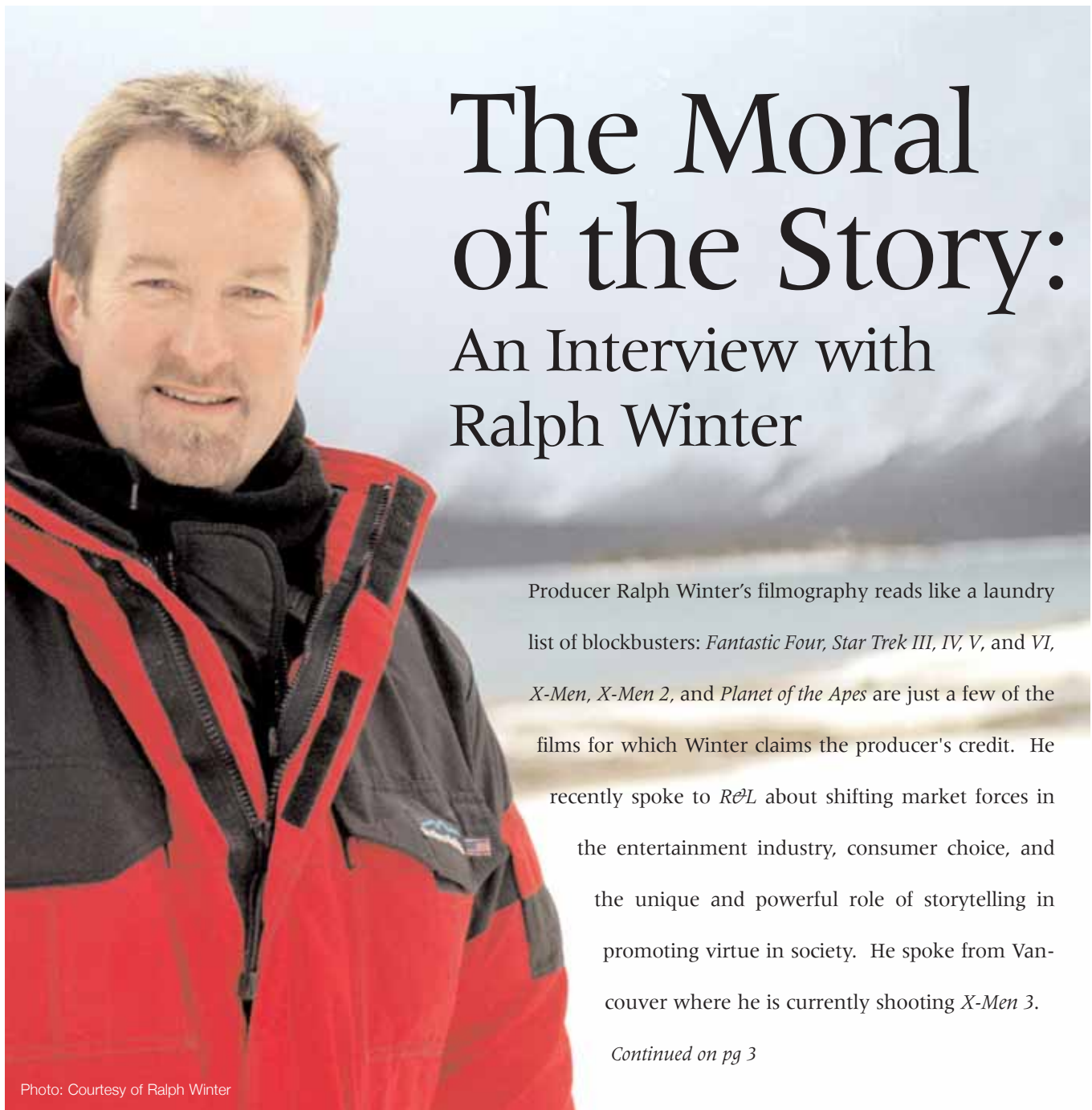


Religion & Liberty

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The Moral of the Story: An Interview with Ralph Winter

Producer Ralph Winter's filmography reads like a laundry list of blockbusters: *Fantastic Four*, *Star Trek III, IV, V, and VI*, *X-Men*, *X-Men 2*, and *Planet of the Apes* are just a few of the films for which Winter claims the producer's credit. He recently spoke to *R&L* about shifting market forces in the entertainment industry, consumer choice, and the unique and powerful role of storytelling in promoting virtue in society. He spoke from Vancouver where he is currently shooting *X-Men 3*.

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Photo: Courtesy of Ralph Winter

Editor's Note



The Acton Institute is, at heart, a cultural enterprise. We are not concerned so much with politics or economics or sociology or philosophy as we are with the whole package—the effect they have on our culture. Our concern is with the health of society as a whole—the free and virtuous society.

In this autumn issue of *Religion & Liberty*, that concern is made very clear as we examine a tremendous influence on our culture—the entertainment industry. In Hollywood, they speak about movie-making as “the Industry,” but movie stu-

dios have an enormous influence on our culture, independent of their balance sheets.

Ralph Winter, a successful producer of several blockbuster films, speaks about that influence in our feature interview. His experience, reflected through his religious faith, offers a perspective on Hollywood that we rarely hear.

Cort Langeland explains that the cultural influence of films lies in their storytelling power. Whoever tells the stories shapes the culture. But storytelling is not a matter of only a fireplace and a cup of cocoa; it is demanding business that requires as much entrepreneurial excellence as any other business venture.

Other articles in this issue look at our entertainment culture from different perspectives. Father Sirico comments on protecting our children, and the liberal tradition focuses on the most famous Hollywood actor of all: Ronald Reagan.

I would draw your attention to a new

feature in *Religion & Liberty*. Called “the Double-Edged Sword,” it looks at a particular Scripture passage and how it might apply to a particular question of interest to our readers. The challenge is to allow the Word of God—described in Hebrews as sharper than a two-edged sword—to cut to the heart of the matter rather than being blunted by our purposes. It’s a worthy challenge, and I think this issue gets it just right.

And I might say an immodest word about our lead article. I thought perhaps you might appreciate something from *ReL's* new editor—something of an introduction to what interests me. My essay addresses the past summer's best-selling economics book—*Freakonomics*. It doesn't address much of what we do specifically at Acton, but I found it animated by a sympathetic spirit, fascinated by human liberty and the consequences of the choices we make.

Father Raymond

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Photo: Courtesy of Ralph Winter

The Moral of the Story

An Interview with Ralph Winter

How do you maintain your faith in a high-demand job environment of money, power, and stress?

I've got a support system in place that helps make that all work. Primarily, a wife who understands as well as challenges me. I've been married for thirty-one years. Our lives are centered around our faith in terms of what we're about, where we're going, and why we do things. That remains at the center. And this is a fun job. I like it. I think I'm making a contribution by what I do. But it's a little more difficult when I'm out of town because I don't have the normal support system around: our small group bible study or the two guys that I'd be with on a regular basis when I'm in [Los Angeles]. So I talk to them on the Internet [and on the] phone remotely up here in Vancouver. But generally I think it's about having a support system, and trying to be somewhat regular in worship on Sundays when I'm on location, which is a little difficult. But you've got to keep reminding and remembering and re-orienting to true North. You know, "Where am I headed?"

Is Hollywood hostile to people of faith?

I think you need to distinguish some things. I think Hollywood is made up of a lot of people who are good people and family oriented, [who] want to do good things that aren't anti-faith. I think there are certainly people who want to wear their faith on their sleeve. What did Pat Robertson say about trying to assassinate

somebody? Well, when some guys like that say things like that, we all get lumped into one category. But I think that happens in manufacturing, in business, in retail, and in banking. It's easy to get lumped in with the whackos that are out there. And I think I haven't really encountered a hostile environment because I'm a Christian. It's known at the studio what I stand for and who I am. But being a Christian certainly isn't something to lead with. [Successful filmmakers must] be the hip, avant-garde thing that's going to get movies made and be at the cutting edge of culture. [Christianity] is not what Hollywood sees as all that. Although, lately with the success of *The Passion*, people are very interested in a faith market because there's money in it. There's an untapped market, an underserved market, as they say.

Much has been written about this, about the profitability and growing market share of values-driven films. How is Hollywood responding to these market pressures?

Oh, I think they're responding. I think the congressional stuff about studios marketing R-rated movies to kids under thirteen has definitely produced more PG-13 movies and PG movies. And I think the success of movies like *National Treasure* made studios realize there is a big market out there for kids. Jerry Bruckheimer made that movie and it was PG—but still provided action, adventure, and fun, and was very successful. You've got to pay attention to that. *Fantastic Four*, which we just finished, I think

plays a lot younger. The movie was embraced by the comic book geek world as well as young families and kids. Yes, I think the studios are well aware that market—that six, eight, nine hundred million dollar

"I think the studios are well aware that market—that six, eight, nine hundred million dollar business that went to *The Passion*—didn't go to them."

business that went to *The Passion*—didn't go to them. And they'd love to tap into that. They'd love to find a sequel to *The Passion*.

Oftentimes in religious circles, the entertainment industry is characterized as a sort of "cultural polluter." How accurate is this characterization?

I think it's interesting. I think the guys at the studios—the major studios—do think about the stuff they're making and the impact it has on culture. But it necessarily falls to a small group of people who can sit at thirty thousand feet and look at the landscape and say, "Do we really want to tell stories that have that message?" Now

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Freaked Out: Liberty, Choice, and Rogue Economics

by Rev. Raymond J. de Souza

It is a rare thing for an economist to write a bestselling book, but Steven Levitt is a rather rare economist. Winner of the Clark Medal for the best American economist under forty, Levitt does not practice economics as most of his colleagues at the University of Chicago do. Indeed, he is something of maverick, as is made clear by the subtitle of his bestseller, *Freakonomics: A Rogue Economist Explores the Hidden Side of Everything*.

Levitt does not seek to explain price theory, monetary policy, or trade relations. He turns his attention to rather more quirky questions: Why do crack dealers live at home? Do real estates agents really seek the best deal for their clients? Do abortions lower the crime rate? Do schoolteachers cheat?

Freakonomics has become the most noticed economics book of the year because of the explosive answers Levitt provides to those questions. But for those interested in the nature of economics as a discipline, *Freakonomics* is a marvelous reminder that economics is not about money, it's about man. And for those who are concerned about restoring the human person to the center of economic inquiry, Levitt is an ally, albeit a rogue one.

As any undergraduate economics student will tell you, the further one progresses in economics, the more the human person seems to disappear from view, obscured behind an increasingly complex mass of mathematical models and equations. No

one doubts the value of the math, but what separates economics from, say, engineering, is that the subject of study is the human person. Lose the human element and you have lost the best in the tradition of economic thinking.

At the heart of economics is how people seek to satisfy their needs, wants, and desires by balancing costs and responding to incentives. The premise of economics is that human beings are rational and make perfectly understandable choices by taking into account competing incentives. Economics does not argue that everyone's crazy Uncle Fred is rational; but it does argue that, in the main, we make rational choices in the face of incentives. It is, despite being known as the "dismal science," a rather lofty view of the human person and his dignity.

That being said, Levitt turns his powerful analytical tools upon the more dismal realities. He concludes that crack dealers live with their mothers because, apart from a few drug kingpins, the profit margins in dealing crack are actually quite low—too low to allow a street-corner hood to have his own place. He demonstrates how the marginal increase in real estate commissions is not sufficient to motivate agents to secure the best price for their clients. He traces the process by which upper-class parents choose novelty names for their children, only to be imitated by lower-class parents seeking some sort of upper-class cachet, at which time the upper-class par-

"For those interested in the nature of economics as a discipline, *Freakonomics* is a marvelous reminder that economics is not about money, it's about man."

ents abandon the names. It's all fascinating stuff, demonstrating that otherwise perplexing outcomes can be explained by looking carefully enough at the information people use to make choices.

The most notorious chapter of his book stands out from the others. In exploring the relationship between abortion and crime rates, Levitt does not look so much at how choices are made, but rather at the (unintended) consequences of such choices. He argues that the drop in crime rates in the 1990s was due to the increase in abortion rates eighteen years earlier—in 1973, the year of *Roe v. Wade*. After sifting through the data, Levitt concludes that while other factors contributed to the drop in crime rates—more police, the fall in the price of crack cocaine—the most powerful cause was a demographic one.

Levitt writes:

The most dramatic effect of legalized abortion, however, and one that would take years to reveal itself, was its impact on crime. In the early 1990s, just as the

Freaked Out: Liberty, Choice, and Rogue Economics



first cohort of children born after *Roe v. Wade* was hitting its late teen years—the years during which young men enter their criminal prime—the rate of crime began to fall. What this cohort was missing, of course, were the children who stood the greatest chance of becoming criminals.

The argument is carefully made and somewhat complex. It remains always a descriptive argument, not a prescriptive one. He does not advocate eugenics, but simply argues that, in fact, rising abortion rates have

contributed to declining crime rates. Of course, at this point the reader is already considering the moral implications arising from the swirl of data. Levitt deliberately absents himself from consideration of these moral implications.

“Morality, it could be argued, represents the way that people would like the world to work—whereas economics represents how it actually does work,” he writes. That’s a little rough around the edges, but there some wisdom in that. Especially for those concerned with the foundations of a free society, this twofold focus—economics and morality—on human choices is fruitful.

Morality teaches us that some things should not be chosen—aborting babies to lower the crime rate, for example. But economics teaches us that given certain incentives, almost anything will be chosen by those not restrained by moral discipline.

The consequence for public policy then is clear: it is important to structure incentives so that economic behavior reinforces moral behavior. There was much discussion of this during the welfare reform debates of the 1990s. Broad economic policy

also teaches us the same thing. If incentives point toward less saving and more consumption (e.g., inflation), then there will be fewer thrifty savers to fuel investment. Day-to-day experience confirms this, too. The wise business owner provides incentives for the employees to contribute to the well-being of the company—profit-sharing, stock savings plans, rewards for finding efficiencies. Likewise, incentives are put in place to discourage immoral behaviour—penalties for absenteeism, policies to discourage petty theft.

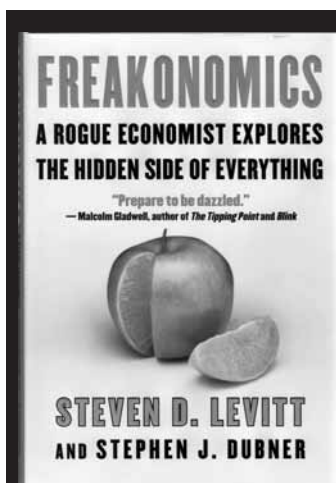
The goal of good public policy is to bring incentives into line with moral behavior so that a society can be both free and virtuous.

“Incentives are the cornerstone of modern life,” writes Levitt. “And understanding them—or, often, ferreting them out—is the key to solving just about any riddle, from violent crime to sports cheating to online dating.”

Incentives are not just the cornerstone of modern life—they are the data upon which human freedom does its work. Levitt has done a service by bringing that truth to light, albeit in a somewhat freaky way.

The mission of the Acton Institute is to explore that same freedom. Our interest in economics is not because we are interested in economics or prosperity per se, but because like Levitt and a long tradition of economists before him, economics attempts to look hard at the human person exercising his freedom in making choices. Economic analysis and ethical reflection begin with the same starting point—the rational, choosing, and acting person.

Father Raymond J. de Souza, editor of Religion & Liberty, studied economics at Queen’s University in Kingston, Ontario, and the University of Cambridge before his theological studies for the priesthood.



Freakonomics: A Rogue Economist Explores the Hidden Side of Everything

by Steven D. Levitt, Stephen J. Dubner
Harper Collins

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Tinseltown's Tin Ear

by Michael Medved

A recent slide in movie attendance suggests a film industry crisis of major proportions, but pop culture potentates seem reluctant to confront it. In May of this year, a *USA Today*/CNN/Gallup poll showed that fully 48 percent of American adults say they go to the movies less often than they did in 2000. For nineteen consecutive weeks, including the heart of the summer 2005 blockbuster season, the motion picture industry earned less (despite higher ticket prices) than it brought in during the corresponding period the year before. Projections of ticket sales for all of 2005 indicate that the public will occupy at least 8 percent fewer seats in movie theaters this year than in 2004—an alarming performance at a time of population growth and a generally robust economy.

To explain the bad news, *USA Today* ran a lengthy analysis under the mournful headline, “Where have all the moviegoers gone?” Reporters Anthony Breznican and Gary Strauss quoted numerous insiders speaking optimistically about new attempts to rekindle the old romance: “The lures include providing high-tech eye candy through 3-D, digital projection and IMAX versions of movies.... Stadium seating, which improves views, is just now becoming standard. Other theaters are opting for screenings that serve alcohol to patrons 21 and older.” Revealingly, none of the studio honchos talked about reconnecting with the mass audience by adjusting the values conveyed by feature films, replacing the industry’s liberal posturing

with a more diverse, balanced, or (perish the thought) patriotic perspective. Innumerable callers to my radio show have expressed resentment at the partisanship of top directors and stars. No one has ever complained about the lack of 3-D, digital projection, or alcoholic beverages at concession stands.

“Ironically, a new attempt to address the most deeply held commitments of ordinary Americans might help the entertainment elite to create the sort of timeless artistic expressions they say they so desperately wish to contribute.”

It’s not enough, either, to explain audience alienation with cavalier references to “mediocre movies.” Anyone who reviews films for a living can tell you that most movies have been mediocre for a long time—several decades, at least. Something changed between 2004 and 2005 to cause a sharp, sudden drop-off at the box office, and an obvious factor that entertainment insiders refuse to consider is their own activism during the 2004 election.

The show business establishment embraced Senator John Kerry’s campaign with near unanimity and bashed President Bush with unprecedented ferocity. Despite the best efforts of entertainer activist and their political associates, a majority of American voters cast their ballots for George W. Bush this past November. If only a small minority of those 62 million GOP voters—say, 20 percent—reacted to Hollywood’s electioneering by staying away from the local multiplex, that alone would account for the decline in ticket sales in the months immediately following the president’s re-election.

An additional element that may help explain 2005’s missing moviegoers involves another bitter controversy from 2004, this one over *The Passion of the Christ*. That movie earned a startling \$370 million at the domestic box office and drew in religious-minded patrons who had for years shunned movies altogether. Amazingly enough, however, no major feature film in the months since the release of *The Passion* has attempted to speak to that energetic faith-based audience. The Walt Disney Company hopes that churchgoers will flock to the theaters this Christmas season to see *The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, the lavish new adaptation of the beloved Christian allegory by C. S. Lewis. That promised deliverance remains speculative, but if the theory proves true, it will say a great deal about Hollywood’s real problems.

The refusal to recognize ideological consid-



erations and a “values gap” as major elements in Hollywood’s box office collapse reflects the trendy leftism that remains the reigning faith in Tinseltown. The tendency to emphasize material solutions characterizes liberal thinking on a wide range of policy issues—from out-of-wedlock births (provide birth control devices and abortion on demand), to crime (more gun control), to poverty (more welfare), to terrorism (more anti-poverty aid). Above all else, it is this blindness to the philosophic dimensions of major challenges that renders the Hollywood Left unable to reconnect with a skeptical mass audience.

After all, the American people aren’t stupid, and they’re not all apolitical; many (at least a third) are even self-consciously conservative in both politics and values. Ironically, a new attempt to address the most deeply held commitments of ordinary Americans might help the entertainment elite to create the sort of timeless artistic expressions they say they so desperately wish to contribute.

...

Michael Medved is a film critic, host of the nationally syndicated Michael Medved Show, and author of Hollywood versus America and Right Turns: Unconventional Lessons from a Controversial Life.

A longer version of this article can be read in the autumn 2005 issue of The American Interest (www.The-American-Interest.com).

Does the Acton Institute advocate specific political positions or candidates?

Because the Acton Institute deals with issues often at the heart of political debates, some people assume that Acton is a political organization and somehow aligned with a particular agenda or political party. This is simply not the case. Acton is not and does not desire to be affiliated with any political party or candidate or any partisan movement.

There are two reasons why the Acton Institute does not lobby for or against specific candidates or legislation. The first is that we simply are not allowed by law to do so. Because of our 501(c)(3) nonprofit status, we are legally obligated to refrain from engaging in specific partisan activity.

But even if we could do so, we wouldn’t. There is another more basic reason why the Acton Institute refrains from endorsing specific political candidates or legislation: the Acton Institute is primarily an educational institution that seeks to provide the moral and intellectual instruction necessary for free persons to take well-informed, just, charitable, and effective actions. Because of its strong emphasis on the dignity of the human person—a foundation for all we do here—Acton respects and endorses the freedom and initiative of the individual. To advocate specific political candidates or legislation would undercut our message of responsibility. It is much better to lay out prudent principles and to let persons act in freedom and with a well-informed conscience.

This does not mean, however, that Acton refrains from delving into public policy issues. While we do not advocate for or against specific legislation, we do think it important to explain how the basic ideas of freedom and responsibility play themselves out in areas such as educational choice, environmental stewardship, effective compassion, and technology regulation. In each of these areas, policies can be introduced that deny the inherent dignity of the human person; therefore, Acton considers it an essential part of its mission to remind policy makers of their responsibility to safeguard this dignity. We do so by providing sound economic and moral education to the policymakers’ boss: you.

Kris Mauren
Executive Director





The Twin Vocations of Art and Work

by David Michael Phelps

The human worker is at his core an artist. Oftentimes, the term artist connotes a vocation of leisure, an esoteric profession of starving bohemians, set apart from the commercial world of utility. But this is a rather narrow view that discounts the essence of both art and business. In reality, art and business are subsets of the larger category entrepreneurship.

To gain a clearer view of art, business, and the similarities between the two, we can turn to the writings of Pope John Paul the Great. One of the late pontiff's favorite artists, Polish poet Cyprian Norwicz, wrote that "beauty is to enthuse us for work, and work is to raise us up." John Paul quoted this line not in *Centesimus Annus* or *Laborem Exercens*, his more economic encyclicals, but in his 1999 *Letter to Artists*. Art (the service of beauty) and business (the service of work) are two strains of a common movement, two forms of a common vocation. This vocation is the vocation to see and to serve, "to enthuse us" and "to raise us up." Workers do this by providing goods and services; artists do this by providing beauty.

Art and work are simply two manifestations of an essential human trait: creativity. "Through his artistic creativity," writes John Paul in *A Letter to Artists*, "man appears more than ever 'in the image of God', and he accomplishes this task above all in shaping the wondrous 'material' of his own humanity and then exercising creative dominion over the universe which surrounds him." This account of art

sounds remarkably like the account of work found in *Centesimus Annus*:

The earth does not yield its fruits without a particular human response to God's gift, that is to say, without work. It is through work that man, using his intelligence and exercising his freedom, succeeds in dominating the earth and making it a fitting home.

The difference here is that the worker harvests the earth whereas the artist harvests "the wondrous 'material' of his own humanity." The method is the same: by exercising their freedom in intelligence and creativity, both artists and workers approach "the visible world as a vast field in which human inventiveness might assert itself."

This idea is akin to something Michelangelo once said about his masterpiece, David: when asked how he created this sculpture, the master reportedly replied that David was always there in the stone, and that he

just chipped away everything that wasn't him. Both Michelangelo's marble slab and John Paul's "vast field" are potential somethings. In *Centesimus Annus*, John Paul explains the entrepreneur as someone with the vision to see potential, as someone with "the ability to foresee both the needs of others and the combinations of productive factors most adapted to satisfying those needs." A keen eye, a creative mind, and a corporeal initiative make potential somethings into actual somethings.

But to what end? Work and art may be expressions of creativity, but to whom and for whom do they express? "Here we touch on an essential point," writes John Paul to the artist.

Those who perceive in themselves this kind of divine spark which is the artistic vocation—as poet, writer, sculptor, architect, musician, actor and so on—feel at the same time the obligation not





to waste this talent but to develop it, in order to put it at the service of their neighbour and of humanity as a whole.

Discovery, insight, the creative mind—these exist not only as aspects of the entrepreneurial mind, but as imperatives to serve. Because “it is through the free gift of self that man truly finds himself,” the products of that aspect of self called creativity ought to be oriented toward other persons. Creativity finds its fulfillment when it is *creativity for*. When one person invents—that is, discovers—a new good or combination of goods, the implicit question is “good for what?” Good for me is one possible answer; good for others is another. And willing good for others is the foundation for love.

If art and work are twin vocations, this means that artists and businesspeople are also twins. Perhaps they are more than twins. Perhaps both are simply entrepreneurs working with different materials. Artists often have little problem knowing they have a creative vocation (thus the starving artist stereotype); they do not as often, however, see themselves as servants. Contrarily, businesspeople do not often see their creative vocation; they do know, however, that they must serve their customer in order to survive in the market. The artist is a worker; the worker is an artist. Each can learn from the other, and perhaps find encouragement that the vocation to create and the vocation to serve are in many ways the same vocation. *David Michael Phelps is the associate editor of publications at the Acton Institute.*

Double-Edged Sword: *The Power of the Word*

Mark 9:42–48

Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe [in me] to sin, it would be better for him if a great millstone were put around his neck and he were thrown into the sea. If your hand causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter into life maimed than with two hands to go into Gehenna, the unquenchable fire. And if your foot causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter into life crippled than with two feet to be thrown into Gehenna. And if your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out. Better for you to enter into the kingdom of God with one eye than with two eyes to be thrown into Gehenna, where ‘their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched.

Jesus’ parables are frequently cited as examples of the effective teaching power of storytelling; less often mentioned is Jesus’ use of imagery. But Jesus knew the power of the image, as is illustrated in the substance and form of this passage.

“To the hard of hearing, you shout, and for the almost-blind you draw large and startling figures.”

The passage itself could hardly be more graphic: chopping off hands and feet and plucking out eyes—it reads more like a mob story than a Sunday sermon. But these images convey the gravity of his message in a way that “Thou shalt not ...” cannot. When asked why she used such striking imagery in her fiction, Flannery O’Connor responded “To the hard of hearing, you shout, and for the almost-blind you draw large and startling figures.” Images have the power to present forceful ideas forcibly.

Jesus knew and used the power of striking and graphic imagery, not only in his teachings, but on the cross. (C. S. Lewis observed that the crucifixion scene entered the history of art only after everyone who had actually seen one had died.) But just as images, even striking ones, can be used for good, they can be used for evil. This is precisely what Jesus warns us of in this passage: our eyes can lead our hearts astray, and if they do so, it is better to be half-blind than slaves to temptation.

This is a common struggle in an image-soaked society like ours. One glance at television, billboards, or magazine covers and one is likely to see something that previous generations would have found scandalous. Images are everywhere, and few are designed to do anything more than appeal to our desires.

Even though we have become increasingly numb to these images, they are no less powerful in directing our passions. Occasionally, we need someone to emphasize their power severely so we can be jolted back into a right sense of righteousness. Jesus knew this. Jesus did this.



Investing in the Industry of Influence

by Cort Langeland

Whether economic, political, or religious in nature, our world is structured by ideas. And these ideas move so quickly through our media today that they are often accepted before they have been examined for truth. Modern media has the emotional power to make ideas feel true even when they are not. A single moment caught on film can render an entire story somehow “truthful” to an undiscerning audience.

In the entertainment industry, the battle of ideas is fought very differently than in politics or philosophy. Ideas in politics and philosophy depend largely on rhetoric or reason; ideas in film depend almost exclusively on stories. Ideas are woven into themes, into the choices of characters, and into the point of view from which the story is told. The job of writers and directors is to create characters with whom the audience identifies and for whom the audience has sympathy. Filmmakers want us to be on a character’s side because once we are and our disbelief is suspended, once we are engaged in the story, we become open to the ideas that the filmmaker shares.

This is perhaps best summed up in a scene from Steven Spielberg’s *Amistad*. In this scene, John Quincy Adams (played by Anthony Hopkins) gives a younger lawyer (played by Morgan Freeman) a piece of sage advice for an upcoming case before the Supreme Court: “In a court of law,” he says, “whoever tells the best story wins.” The fact is a very simple one: we live in a

story-driven world.

It should be no surprise, then, that after an exhaustive study, Barna Research has concluded that the single most influential profession in society today is the film business. So if people of faith want to influence culture, why don’t they invest their time, talent, and capital into this most influential business? There was a day when men and women of faith were the pre-eminent storytellers in our culture. As near as fifty years ago, two Christian Oxford dons had an impact every bit as big as Harry Potter does today. And the stories of J. R. R. Tolkien and C. S. Lewis remain highly influential, in no small part because of the filmic adaptation of *The Lord of the Rings* and the upcoming filmic adaptation of *The Chronicles of Narnia*.

But even considering these films, there is a conspicuous absence of faith-influenced films in theaters. Often, this phenomenon is written off as a by-product of Hollywood’s attitude toward the faithful. But Hollywood isn’t keeping the faithful out of the media; in their ignorance, the faithful are keeping themselves out of the media. For example, although the numbers are growing, there simply are not very many Christians working in the film industry, and sadly, this is mostly because Christians often lack the talent and know-how necessary to compete in the film market. But they often lack the resources as well: with the church almost completely uninvolved in supporting the concept of filmmaking

(and sometimes actually discouraging filmmaking), Christians haven’t received the training they need to compete in the film market.

Christians who do get involved in filmmaking often face an enormous hurdle in raising the money it takes to make films. Somehow Christians can cough up tens of millions of dollars for enormous church buildings yet money for films of faith is as scarce as water in the desert. Consider this: Mel Gibson’s *The Passion* was made for less money than it costs to build many of our

“Good intentions do not make up for poor business practices, no matter what the industry.”

large churches. *The Passion* brought the story of Christ to tens of millions of people around the world; a large church brings the story to perhaps 5,000 people. If the goal is “to influence the world,” which of these two cases is a better example of stewardship? Which has the better return on investment?

To be fair, not every aspiring filmmaker is Mel Gibson, and many wealthy Christians have tried to invest in Christian movies only to see that investment go up in smoke. But many of these failures have

Investing in the Industry of Influence



been due to a lack of prudence, where the investors oddly make deals with far less business sense than they employed in the ventures that created their wealth to begin with. In other words, many investors enter the business without understanding a few basic principles about how the film industry works.

First of all, it is important to remember that the single most important aspect of the film business is story development. No amount of money or marketing savvy can overcome a poor story. Investors need to make sure that the industry professionals they invest in have experience in the creative and storytelling side of filmmaking. If their experience is in a technical or business area, these producers may not have the grasp of storytelling crucial to the success of the film. I've seen some seemingly impressive industry experts make some pretty poor films because, although they "know the industry," they don't understand the art of storytelling.

But care is needed here: businesspeople looking to influence the world through film often mistake propaganda for storytelling. I've seen many investors make the mistake of investing in agendas instead of stories. There is only one reason to make a

film and that is to tell a story, not to push a moral, political, or religious agenda. Yes, stories are a powerful vehicle for promoting faith and virtue; but they must not exist primarily as this. They must first succeed as a piece of storytelling art, not as an advertisement. Today's audience is too experienced in the visual language; they know when someone is trying to sell them something. While it's good to have a story or script that serves a higher purpose, don't be fooled. The most noble of motivations can't overcome a poorly conceived film.

Secondly, investors and filmmakers must remember that creating a film is more like starting a business than like creating a product. Every film is its own individual, entrepreneurial endeavor and therefore

"... businesspeople who invest in Hollywood often check their business sense at the door."

has the kind of risk that any other business start-up has. But this risk can be minimized if the film has distribution or has strong potential for distribution. If the film does have distribution, it is a good idea to ask if the distributor is also putting money into the marketing of the film. If the distributor is not investing in the film, there is less to lose and thus less motivation to see the film succeed.

Also, an investor should know how much money the producers intend to use to market the film. In film terms this is called the prints and advertising budget. (This should take up about one-third of the film's total budget.) Oftentimes, the producers' creative process gets out of hand and ideas

drive budgets beyond what can be returned. As a result, the advertising is compromised and the film flops.

Frequently, businesspeople will invest in a film. But how many successful investors invest in only a single product? Investors need to invest in more than a single film. Why should the law of diversification apply less in this investment than in any other? Again, this is evidence that businesspeople who invest in Hollywood often check their business sense at the door. Good intentions do not make up for poor business practices, no matter what the industry.

One of the ways for investors to spread out their investment, have an impact in the film industry, and thus influence society is to invest in training the coming generation of filmmakers. Young filmmakers and film students can be influential, but they need several things to launch themselves: real world experience on a film set, access to relationships within the film business, and excellent training by industry professionals. By investing in schools and programs that provide these tools, especially those few faith-based film schools, investors can begin to lay a solid foundation for the growth and social impact of their investments.

The media, and particularly films, play a large part in forming what our world will look like. If we want faith and virtue to have seats in the public square, then it is time to start investing in the media. It will take time and it will not be easy. Like all worthwhile ventures, it will involve risk and there is a sharp learning curve. But the only risk greater than investing in the media is the risk of not investing in the media.

Cort Langeland is a producer and an instructor at Compass Academy.



Photos: Courtesy of John L. Pottenger

as you get wider out from the studios, you get into a lot of different producers and production companies that are vying for attention, trying to rise above the noise level of the marketplace. And some of that is done by just being provocative, and attracting eyeballs to television sets or butts to seats in the movie business in order to sell your particular product. A lot of what drives that business, I think, is trying to get up front and get some attention. Some of that comes out as poor material. Now, the studios are not immune from that. I think they put out stuff, as well, to make a buck. But I do believe that there's some social responsibility in those people at the head of the studios. I've dealt with a lot of those guys, and they're not out to destroy culture. If you were to ask them this question, they'd be offended. And I think they'd put example after example of the kinds of movies and entertainment that they've made, sponsored, and developed that are good, positive, helpful things. But they're in a business that makes a lot of different kinds of movies from tadpole movies to comedies. And a lot of people like seeing a comedy that might not be down the middle for Christians to go see, something like *Wedding Crashers*. But if you like entertainment, it's a funny movie and it's not meant for kids. But it's got an entertainment value that the culture wants and responds to. I should also say that these movies

would not be successful if Christians did not go see them. R-rated movies would be flops if Christians didn't go see them. So, there's a double standard out there of Christians who say, "Pornography's wrong and R-rated movies and all that," and yet, you know, pastor after pastor gets convicted with pornography on their lap-tops or caught with their pants down. It's a bit of a double standard.

So are you saying that if people weren't consuming this stuff, it wouldn't be getting made?

I don't know if that completely answers the question, but I think that's a strong factor in all this. Some of the movies out there seem to be sort of senseless—it's surprising how many people go to see them. Now, even as a Christian, I probably draw the circle wider. Actually, a friend of mine, Scott Derrickson, a Christian director, has a movie coming out called *The Exorcism of Emily Rose* [released September 9.—ed]. He's a strong proponent that one of the best ways to discern the story of good and evil is through horror movies. And he says that's the clearest picture of what the Gospel is about because of good guys and bad guys. He's quite an eloquent defender of that idea and has written about it in *Christianity Today*. Not that everybody that consumes horror movies has thought through stuff to that level, but Scott has, and he is a pretty interesting, creative talent out there trying to make horror

movies that have some substance to them.

Do movies have a role to play in promoting human dignity and virtue?

Absolutely. I'm trying to develop with the studio a movie on C. S. Lewis's book, *The Screwtape Letters*. And I think it definitely is an R-rated kind of movie when you get into the nitty-gritty of what Lewis is writing about [but it also offers] something very positive about morality, about culture, and about what we should aspire to in the human journey. I also get excited about movies like *Gladiator*, in terms of values, what he fights for, and what a hero is. I think movies are best when they tell us stories that ask good questions and inspire us to go further. It's like a good sermon on Sunday morning: it inspires you to go back and look at the text and say, "I

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“There are so many choices [for entertainment] out there for people. I think there are more choices, and I’m not sure that we’re getting smarter about it.”

want to go further; I want to know more.” Movies that ask great questions are like that for us and are making a contribution to our culture.

Do you think that people choose entertainment less discerningly than other products? Do you think there’s more of a tendency for consumerism with entertainment?

Absolutely. There are so many choices out there for people, I think that’s probably right. The movie industry and certainly the music business are worried about how many options there are for consuming entertainment. They’re worried about the new guys coming into town and taking some of their market share. [The movie studios] worry about the Internet, cell phones, and games taking people away from spending their money in the movie theater. They worry when people buy video games, PS2, and X-Box games they can play for hours and find the same kind of entertainment as DVDs. I think there are more choices, and I’m not sure that we’re getting smarter about it. We’re probably inundated with more and more choices and spending more and more time with our entertainment. It’s like that Neil Postman book, *Amusing Ourselves to Death*. We’re spending a lot of time doing that.

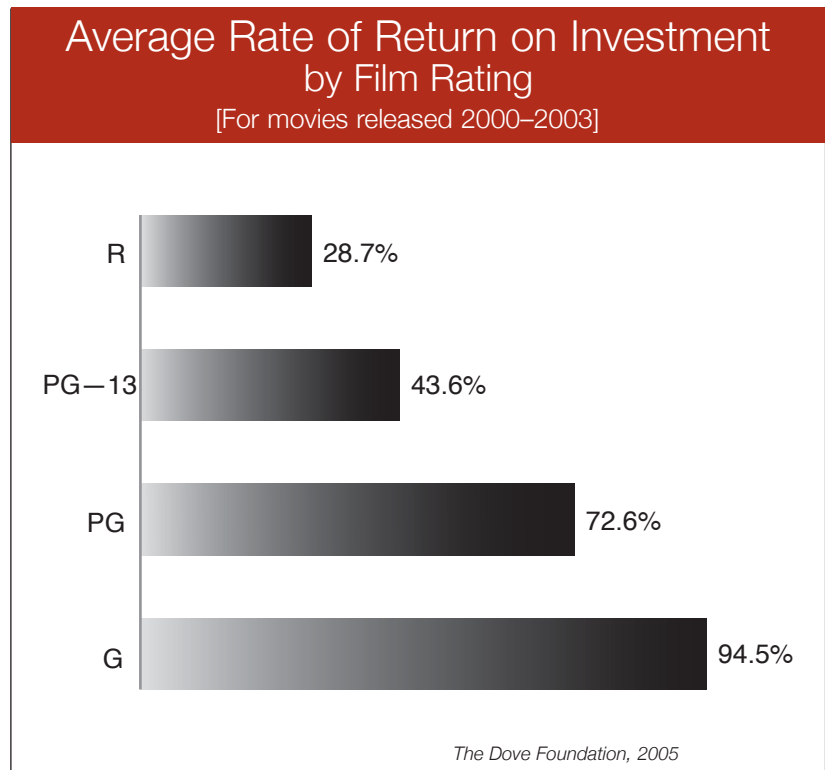
If we’re doing this and we’re spending less time thinking about what we’re doing, what is the role of the government in censoring the materials we consume, particularly with regard to film? Does it have a role? Should it have a role?

Interesting. I don’t know that I’ve really thought very much about this. I guess there certainly are limits to pornography and things like that that the government should be enforcing. But beyond that, I’m not sure what the role is for government to legislate what filmmakers, artists, directors, or writers want to say or do if there’s a market out there that wants to see what they’re producing.

What would you say to religious leaders regarding your industry and how it fits into promoting virtue?

I think we’ve got to pay attention to the stories and not the surface material. And I think that you’re probably talking about people who are thinking clearly and honestly studying some of this. [These religious leaders] are probably well versed in entertainment and stories and seem to value them. There are a lot of folks who dismiss a movie like *American Beauty* because what’s seemingly at the surface seems bad, and thereby, I think, miss pow-

erful stories underneath because it’s rated R. Or *Shawshank Redemption*, which had a greater life in DVD than it ever did in the theater. I think some of that is changing though. I think across the country there are some changes afoot, [with] Christians, in particular, who are not open to seeing R-rated movies, but are willing to embrace stories that are of value and see past some of the language, for instance. And at least the studios are labeling these movies so that you’re not tricked into thinking that you’re seeing a PG movie when it’s truly an R movie. The labels are there, and they’re there for a reason. But there are some valuable stories out there that we should be embracing and could be using as tools to teach the next generation about how we live, how we get along, and how we treat each other. There are plenty of those stories out there that we can discover and support. And I think if we can support more of those stories, more of those will get made.



Ronald Reagan [1911–2004]

Born in Illinois, Ronald Reagan might have been remembered by history as a famous film actor. While serving as a captain in the U.S. Army in the 1940s, he made training films for troops. After he was discharged from the army in 1945, he signed a million dollar contract with Warner Brothers. By the end of his long Hollywood career, he had over 120 film and television credits.

But Reagan was not destined to be remembered primarily as an artist. In 1964, Reagan announced himself to the political world as an advocate for individual freedom and responsibility. In a televised speech supporting presidential candidate Barry Goldwater, Reagan reminded a national audience of their heritage: “They also knew, those Founding Fathers, that outside of its legitimate functions, government does nothing as well or as economically as the private sector of the economy.” Sixteen



years later, Reagan himself won the presidency in a landslide victory over Jimmy Carter. And for the next eight years, Reagan instituted in policy and in government the principles of classical liberalism, perhaps more so than any other figure in history.

A resolute foe of communism,

Reagan never failed to speak candidly about freedom and human dignity. Together with British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher and Pope John Paul II (another former actor), Reagan redefined the struggle of freedom against totalitarianism in terms of good versus evil. In

“The truth is, politics and morality are inseparable. And as morality’s foundation is religion, religion and politics are necessarily related. We need religion as a guide.”

a 1983 speech, he introduced a phrase that to this day serves as the moniker for Soviet Russia: the “evil empire.” Reagan challenged Gorbachev in Communism’s own backyard when, under the shadow of the Berlin Wall, he publicly commanded him to “tear down this wall.”

Reagan strongly condemned the “threat posed to human freedom by the enormous power of the modern state,” and worked to limit the power of government at home as well as abroad. Although some initially ridiculed his economic policies and predicted economic ruin, his tax-cuts and business incentives sparked great economic growth. Reagan embraced free-market economics so tightly that the term “Reaganomics” is still used today by detractors and adherents alike.

Reagan was also known to be a sincerely, if quietly, religious man, never shy to remind Americans that their heritage was a religious one on which their freedoms were founded and by which they were safeguarded. In a 1984 speech to the National Association of Evangelicals, he affirmed that “all our material wealth and all our influence have been built on our faith in God and the bedrock values that follow from that faith.” Taking his cue from Abraham Lincoln, he denounced as “absurd” the idea that he could be a successful president without prayer.





The Market, the Movies, and the Media

Every responsible parent knows not to permit their children indiscriminate access to movies, television, video games, and the Internet. The dangers to heart, mind, and soul may not be more prevalent in our times than previous times, but technology seems to have made them more accessible. And thus does the urgency of a parental response present itself. One need not be a puritan to insist on caution and even severity on the subject.

This is not the same as censorship, which is a political action that prevents citizens from having the freedom to choose what they read. Censorship is dangerous because it gives power to political elites to determine what is best for us, and their decisions are not based on morality and virtue but on political priority. Also, political controls on speech and media often backfire by inviting even more curious eyes to discover what it is they are not suppose to know. I've seen censorship in operation too often in authoritarian countries, and it is not suited to a free or virtuous society.

But if we are to live in a society with no political controls on information, the urgency of private controls becomes all the more intense. Institutions such as families, churches, and schools need to exercise their cultural influence and shame companies that market violence and immorality to children. Advertisers that misuse their access to the public should feel the sting of a negative public opinion. These kinds of controls can often be more effective than political controls. And let me state this very clearly: it is not censorship to shield young eyes from evil or keep certain books out of your home or strictly control Web browsing. This is your right and your obligation.

There is yet another way, however, that responsible citizens with a moral sensibility can exert influence over the cultural impact of the media. Our buying decisions dictate to producers what to make and to merchants what to sell. It is consumers that make violence and moral degradation in movies prof-

itable. The best way to discourage this is by refraining from buying. This not only the best means to protect ourselves and our families personally; it is a way to send a signal to those in the industry.

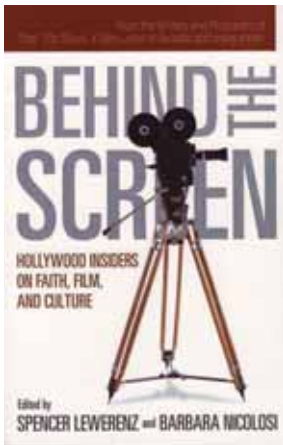
The market works rather well in this regard. Much attention is given to the morally corrupt media forms that are everywhere but far too little attention is given to the alternative. The Dove Foundation keeps careful track of movies and has documented how family entertainment is eleven times more profitable than the alternative. We also do well to remember that there are more movies made today than ever before, which means more bad movies but also many more good ones.

There is no evading our moral responsibilities as producers and consumers. This has been true in all times, and is especially true in our times. We are surrounded by inspiring examples of how Christians and other people of faith have harnessed market forces in their favor, bringing their religious programming to

“... if we are to live in a society with no political controls on information, the urgency of private controls becomes all the more intense.”

millions, building billion dollar industries, and becoming a vibrant part of the nexus of the global exchange economy.

This approach of heavy market infiltration is the best possible strategy to counter the problem of the bad influences that the media can have on our society. We must provide an alternative and make that alternative accessible through every means we have. This is the major reason why the Acton Institute works so very hard on our Web site, our media outreach, and our op-ed program, and why we devote so many resources to putting our scholars on television, our books in libraries, and our journals in the hands of students, pastors, and teachers of all sorts.



Behind the Screen: Hollywood Insiders on Faith, Film, and Culture

Edited by Spencer Lewerenz and Barbara Nicolosi • Baker Books,

Grand Rapids • 224 pp. \$14.99

Review by Acton staff

It can't be denied: many people of faith view the entertainment industry with a measure of suspicion. To answer some of this suspicion, Barbara

Nicolosi and Spencer Lewerenz have compiled a collection of essays, *Behind the Screen: Hollywood Insiders on Faith, Film, and Culture*. Nicolosi and Lewerenz are two members of a circle of Hollywood producers, writers, and executives who conceived and support Act One, a Christian screenwriting program in Los Angeles. The essays in this collection are written by others in this circle and serve as a primer to those people of faith with some misguided notions about the entertainment industry.

While some of the more anecdotal selections in the collection are worth flipping past, the essays by Ron Austin, Thom Parham, Barbara Nicolosi, and Charles B. Slocum offer profound reflections on the meaning of cinema, society, and faith and in themselves warrant purchasing the book. Aside from explaining the common disconnect between Hollywood and people of faith, these essays provide some basic insights on the market forces that drive the entertainment industry. For example, in his essay, "Changing the Channels," Dean Batali explains how advertising—not ratings—drives television programming. (Batali is the executive producer of Fox's *That '70s Show*.) Batali says that Christians can complain all they want about the quality of entertainment, but to really affect change in the industry, they need to do the unexpected: watch more television. By actively engaging the industry instead of denouncing it, Christians can change the view that they are a small market with little consuming power. And since the decisions of television executives are dictated by advertising dollars and not their own ideologies, the market will change to fit the demand. It is a basic economic truth that money will be invested in a product with a greater likelihood of return, but the fact that it needs to be said exposes the odd notion many people have about the entertainment industry: that because it must run by the rules of entertainment, it doesn't also run by the rules of industry.

While much of this collection is spent repeatedly bemoaning the

misconceptions held by many Christians, the collection does take time here and there to offer practical solutions to the perceived disconnect between Hollywood and faith. For example, Slocum's essay, "The \$10 Billion Solution," contends that there is a means by which the faithful can influence society apart from a slow infiltration of the entertainment industry by people of faith—the modus operandi repeated time and again in this collection. Most of *Behind the Screen* preaches that Hollywood needs quality Christian entertainers; Slocum preaches that Hollywood needs quality Christian entrepreneurs, men and women who will think large and invest in a wide range of projects, studios, distribution channels, and yes, even entire multimedia conglomerates (hence the title of the article).

This book has passages of real insight that remind the audience of the traditional links between the Gospel, storytelling, visual art, and the business of communication; however, there are as many passages that come across as simplistic and patronizing. If this collection of essays has one flaw, it is that it does little to recognize that there are those outside Los Angeles who have actively and prudentially considered how to create products that better society and engage culture. More than one essay projects frustration more than encouragement: frustration that Christians just don't get it, rather than encouragement to think and act creatively. To be fair, there is much with which to be frustrated; Christians commonly mistake piety for technique. But some of these essays risk losing the part of their readership who do not need this reminder, who are eager to employ their entrepreneurial talents, and who would rather receive practical advice about this industry like that from Slocum, Austin, or Nicolosi.

And yet, this collection does one thing consistently well: it reminds the reader that the entertainment industry is a real industry where businesses and workers are subject to the same rules of excellence and quality performance as any other successful industry. Whether the matter at hand be the production of goods or the production of films, without refined technique, good intentions walk.