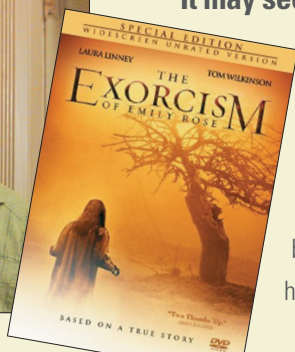


YWJ
 FEATURE


It may seem like Scott Derrickson's journey from Biola

University to film school at USC to widespread acclaim for his 2005 film, *The Exorcism of Emily Rose*, was straightforward enough. But, in fact, his struggle to clarify his calling as a Christian filmmaker took him down a long and winding road.

Here, the writer/director, who is currently working to bring John Milton's *Paradise Lost* to the screen, describes his difficult pilgrimage.

DO MOVIES MATTER?

A Filmmaker's Progress

BY SCOTT DERRICKSON

ILLUSTRATIONS BY ROGER JUDD



Part of our cultural shift from modernism to postmodernism involves a generational shift in the way Christians integrate faith with art and entertainment. The best way for me to describe this transition is to compare my journey to that of Christian, the central character in John Bunyan's wonderful allegory, *The Pilgrim's Progress*.

Christian carried a burden on his back—the burden of his own sin—and roamed the earth looking for relief, which he eventually found at the foot of the cross.

During much of the last decade, I, too, carried a burden on my back; but it was not the burden of my sin. I had become a Christian in high school, and that weight had been lifted. The burden I carried was a question: *What is the duty of a Christian in Hollywood?*

My pilgrimage in search of an answer to that question took me to the following places and people.

I began in the place where I grew up: the **Village of Passive Consumers**, which is where the vast majority of Americans reside. Citizens here mindlessly absorb art, entertainment and movies with little critical thought.



Growing up, I saw hundreds of films; and though my friends and family never dissected or discussed the meaning of what we watched, I fell deeply in love with cinema. In fact, I came to love movies so much that I wanted to become one of the people who writes and directs them. I decided I would leave the Village of Passive Consumers and head off to the faraway land of Hollywood.

As I traveled, I came upon the **Battalion of Value Changers**. This militant group of believers saw themselves as soldiers in a godly army that would “conquer Hollywood for Christ” and defeat the enemy (which was anyone else who worked in Hollywood). They told me the primary duty of a Christian in Hollywood was to inject mainstream movies with Christian values.

I admired these passionate and sturdy believers who took their faith very seriously. But as I spent time with the Battalion of Value Changers, I came to see that they didn't really love movies or the people who made them.

Most of them couldn't even tell a good movie from a bad movie. To them, movies were only weapons in a culture war. These Christians were also consumed by a destructive “us-versus-them”



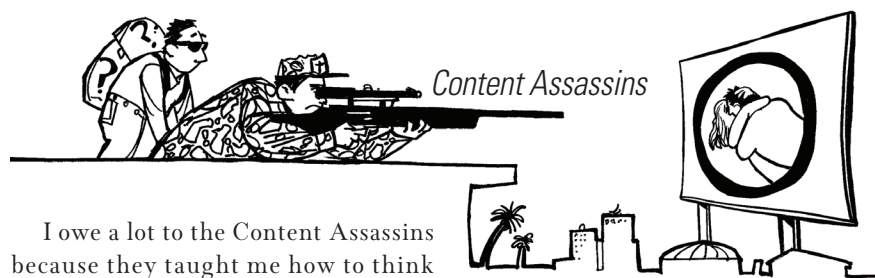
mentality toward Hollywood. Even worse was their decidedly non-Christian approach to creativity.

To enter the creative process with a carefully prescribed agenda (and an arrogant confidence, conveying that you have the antidote to all cultural ills) is a recipe for propaganda, not art.

I agree with Flannery O'Connor, who wrote, "The Christian writer does not decide what would be good for the world and then proceed to deliver it. Like a very doubtful Jacob, the Christian writer confronts what stands in his path and wonders if he will come out of the struggle at all."

For me, to create involves prostrating myself before the work itself and submitting to the likelihood that the work will change me, not that I will change culture through the work. So I left the Battalion of Value Changers, and onward I journeyed.

Next I met the **Content Assassins**, a small, educated band of Christians who took careful aim at Hollywood movies and shot holes in their non-Christian content. Some focused on sex, violence and profanity in movies, while others explored the underlying ideology of films.



I owe a lot to the Content Assassins because they taught me how to think more critically about cinema. Unlike those in the Village of Passive Consumers, the Content Assassins watched movies with their eyes wide open, carefully evaluating what they saw from a theological perspective. They deeply enriched my ability to look beneath the surface of films and, thereby, greatly enhanced my understanding of cinema.

But I found myself increasingly frustrated with their fundamentally negative approach to film. Their first thought

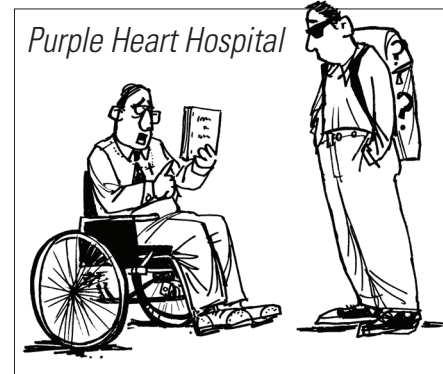
when evaluating any given movie was to expose what was wrong with it. This approach made me bristle because I preferred that my first response to any person or any creative work be to discover what is right and good, not what is wrong or undesirable.

I believe this tendency of mine is a significant part of the postmodern generational chasm in the church. Many young Christians are less interested in criticizing a non-Christian person's point of view than in seeking out how that person's point of view may be a resource for some truth.

The Content Assassins also shot holes in movies that I dearly loved, such as the films of Ingmar Bergman. Bergman's films communicate the idea that God does not exist—or that if He does exist, He is silent. I couldn't disagree more. But at the same time, his films are so beautifully made and so honestly capture his experience in the world that I am deeply moved when I watch them. Rather than criticize or reject Bergman's work, I gratefully embrace it as something that is deeply human and greatly enriches my life.

As I journeyed onward in search of an answer, I visited the **Purple Heart Hospital**, where Christians who had sought to work in Hollywood but were turned down because of their convictions licked their wounds and reveled in their unemployment for Christ.

I met a guy there who was quite proud of the fact that he had written a television script that contained such heavy Christian content that it inspired his producer to throw the script across the room.



I also met a girl who boasted to the press that she had turned down a lucrative job to write a horror script because it violated her Christian conscience.

While I greatly admired the willingness of these believers to pay the price of their convictions, I found their proclivity to boast about it rather reprehensible. And behind all the boasting, I ultimately felt as though they were encouraging me to go out into Hollywood and fail for Jesus. That was not a good answer for me, so I journeyed onward.

Next I arrived at the **Monastery of Harmless Entertainment**—a place for Christians who are devoted to living a life insulated from the world. They told me that my duty as a Christian in Hollywood was to create art and entertainment that is innocuous and harmless.



I sympathized with these people, most of whom were concerned parents. I myself have a young child and am concerned that he will be overwhelmed by exploitive material in the media marketplace. And, of course, I love a good G- or PG-rated movie.

But the people at the Monastery advocated the ludicrous idea that G- and PG-rated material is inherently superior in moral quality to PG-13- or R-rated material.

So much for the biblical story of David—a man so consumed with lust that he committed murder and stole his victim's wife. Even more "R-rated" is the part of the story where David, in his lust for Saul's daughter, slaughtered two hundred Philistines, cut off their fore-skins and put them on a plate, which he took to King Saul. That's not a G- or PG-rated story, but God saw fit to include it in the canon of Scripture.

Since I don't believe the moral quality of a movie can be determined by its MPAA rating, I journeyed on once again.

I love the truth I find in dark films, which mirrors the darkness within me. I'm drawn to stories that seek illumination within darkness. But since such films were off limits in the park, I left and continued my journey.



As my journey grew longer and my burden grew heavier, I became so exasperated with Christians' misconceptions about art and entertainment that I joined the **Eff-You Gang**. This small, ragtag group of outlaw believers was weary of the hypocrisy and self-righteousness of the church and spent much of its time mocking conservative Christians for what it considered their insidious small-mindedness. The Eff-You Gang enabled me to find temporary relief from my burden by letting me ignore it. Instead, we smoked a lot, drank a lot and swore a lot—all because it was our Christian liberty to do so.

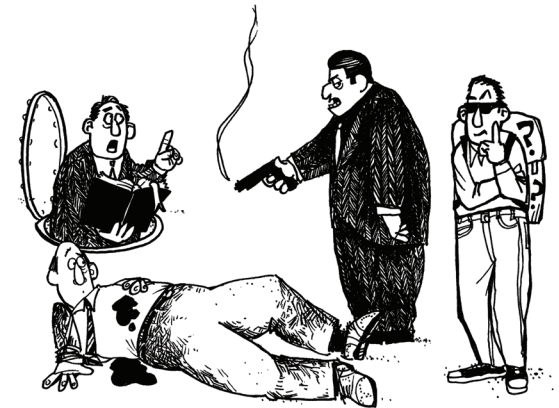
I had a lot of fun with this gang, and I appreciate their helping me discover my true liberty in Christ and escape the bondage inflicted by the opinions of others. But the more time I spent with them, the harder my heart became. I grew more cynical by the day, and my devotional life ground to a halt.

Ultimately, what drove this group was resentment; and I saw that harboring resentment is like swallowing poison and hoping that someone else will die. Furthermore, I learned that resentment against the bride of Christ is unwise, dangerous and immoral. So once again, I packed up my burden and ventured on alone.

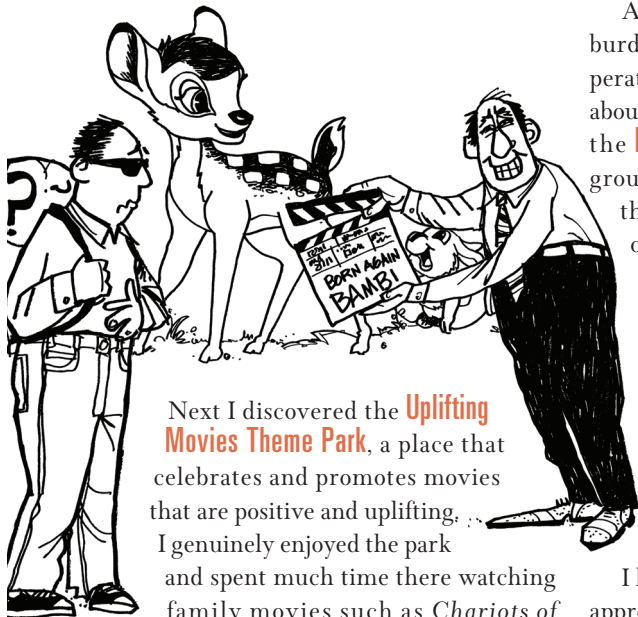
As I approached the outskirts of Hollywood, I encountered the **Covert Christian Movie Companies**. These believers felt Christians in Hollywood should make non-evangelistic, mainstream movies that featured a certain quotient of understated Christian content.

Their movies typically featured at least one Christian character who would spontaneously pray or talk about God during the movie. Unfortunately, this Christian content was often incredibly awkward, jarring and incongruent with the rest of the film.

Many great films have featured Christian characters or dealt directly with Christian ideas. *Signs*, *The Exorcist*, *The Apostle* and *Dead Man Walking* were centered on faith-based themes and characters. But the Covert Companies don't make great movies. Their Christian content stuck out like a sore thumb. That's because they were motivated largely by guilt. They did not believe that making a good mainstream movie for its own sake was justifiable. Only the presence of Christian content justified the endeavor.



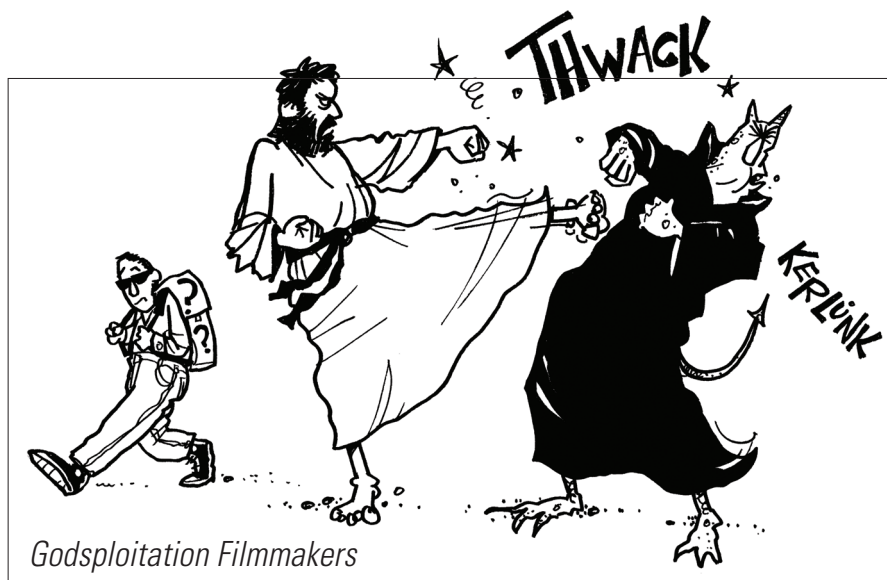
The Covert films reminded me of those posters of natural landscapes with Bible verses etched across the bottom—some poster designers obviously felt that pictures of nature were not sufficiently glorifying to God, so they added verses. But I usually wished the verses weren't there because God's work in nature is already inherently glorious and doesn't need to be spiritualized. The same is true about a good film. It doesn't need to be spiritualized to glorify God.



Next I discovered the **Uplifting Movies Theme Park**, a place that celebrates and promotes movies that are positive and uplifting. I genuinely enjoyed the park

and spent much time there watching family movies such as *Chariots of Fire*, *It's a Wonderful Life*, *To Kill a Mockingbird* and even a few R-rated movies such as *The Shawshank Redemption* and *Schindler's List*.

The park was operated by believers who truly loved and celebrated cinema; and, to my relief, they didn't view Hollywood as the enemy. But in time I grew disturbed that they refused to watch many of the "dark" films I considered the best movies ever made—*The Godfather*, *Taxi Driver* or *The Exorcist*. Instead, they cherished films that reeked of facile transcendence and cheap sentimentalism.



Another group I found on the outskirts of Hollywood was the **Godsploitation Filmmakers**. They were a Christian parallel to filmmakers such as Russ Meyer and Roger Corman, who found target audiences by including a certain amount of exploitative sex and violence. The Godsploitation Filmmakers were essentially doing the same thing, but they were targeting Christians by providing a cheap theological fix for people fascinated by an impending apocalypse.

Most of the Godsploitation movies were poorly done, but they made money. As a result, these films helped make Hollywood aware that Christians actually watch movies. But these movies deeply disturbed me because of their low quality and their bad theology. Their dramatizations of the apocalypse were propagating a dispensational eschatology that I fundamentally reject.

I still carried my burden with me when I finally entered the land of **Hollywood**. But when I was hired to write

and direct a movie, my Christian duty suddenly became quite clear: My primary duty as a Christian in Hollywood is to do my job well.

As I looked around, I saw that other Christians were working in Hollywood as writers, directors, producers and actors. All of them had one thing in common: They put a premium on the quality of their work. Many of them were part of a new, young generation of Christians who wanted to understand, appreciate and participate in cinematic excellence, both as film viewers and as filmmakers.

I joined up with these other believers and became part of a group that I will call the **Quality Club**. Our signature Bible verses are Colossians 3:23 ("Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord" [NIV]) and Proverbs 22:29 ("Do you see a man skilled in his work? He will serve before kings; he will not serve before obscure men" [NIV]).

Members of the Quality Club strive to produce work that combines excellence, marketability and moral integrity. And even though Hollywood is a place that often rewards bad behavior, we strive to treat people with love, honesty and respect.



I finally had the answer to my question: *What is the duty of a Christian in Hollywood?*

SCOTT DERRICKSON's pilgrimage was originally described in a talk he gave at the 2003 "Mere Entertainment" conference in Los Angeles, which was sponsored by Fuller Theological Seminary and Act One. This article is adapted from a chapter in the book *Behind the Screen: Hollywood Insiders on Faith, Film, and Culture*, edited by Spencer Lewerenz and Barbara Nicolosi of Act One (actoneprogram.com) and published by Baker Books in 2005.

