



Movies and Culture Report

A Cinematic Mixed Bag

Some potentially good films come out the end of January—*The Way Back*, *Beautiful*, *The Rite*. A number of blatant junk piles are also heading our way—*No Strings Attached*, *The Mechanic*. This mixture of smart and dumb movies means there should be something for everyone hitting the screens over the next couple of weeks.



Continued



THEATRICAL RELEASES

January 21



The Way Back (PG-13 for violence, nude image, strong language – Newmarket) Peter Weir directs this adaptation of a Slavomir Rawicz novel, a story of escape from a Siberian gulag. Weir is best known for directing impressive, insightful, but depressing films (*The Year of Living Dangerously*, *Witness*, *The Truman Show*, *Dead Poets Society*, *Picnic at Hanging Rock*, *Gallipoli*). He is one of the best living filmmakers, capable of

presenting slow material in an engaging way. A good example of this skill is seen in his last film, *Master and Commander: The Far Side of the World*.

It will be interesting to see how American theater-goers react to this display of conditions in a Soviet gulag since, for the last 90 years, the cruelty of the Russians has been whitewashed by the American media—many journalists and people within the entertainment industries concur with Communist ideals. If done properly, *The Way Back* could open eyes to the fact evil wasn't monopolized by the Nazis. Colin Farrell, Jim Sturgess, Ed Harris, Saoirse Ronan.



No Strings Attached (R for sexual content, language, drug use – Paramount) A successful man and woman choose to have meaningless sex with the promise neither would develop feelings for the other. Obviously, this doesn't work out.

I have not seen this film, but I'm still comfortable predicting it will be littered with all manner of lewd jokes and sexual content—yeah, I know, I'm going out on a limb. And it will probably end with the two either falling in love or breaking off the relationship because it can't work.

The film probably won't end with the two continuing to rut on one another; it may *appear* to promote not sleeping around, but both characters could look straight into the camera, insist pre-marital sex is wrong, and this film would *still* promote frivolous sexuality. Now think of all the children who'll see the poster (above), the trailer, and other marketing. Advertisements teach us as much as the films, themselves, do. They alert us to social mores. With





THEATRICAL RELEASES, continued

the display of promiscuous sexuality as happy, clean, and attractively dressed (or undressed as the case may be), everything about this production publicizes loose sex as acceptable.

The film's [official site](#) asks, "Can sex friends be best friends?" Seems safe to assume the filmmakers will not go out of their way to be discreet for the sake of public decency. ([Watch the trailer](#).) Natalie Portman, Ashton Kutcher, Cary Elwes, Lake Bell, Kevin Kline.

Also

The Company Men surviving corporate downsizing;
Ben Affleck, Tommy Lee Jones

Applause Danish film on past mistakes and finding forgiveness

Dhobi Ghat (Mumbai Diaries) India production follows the intersection of four lives

January 28



The Rite (PG-13 for language, frightening imagery, violence – Warner Bros.) Based on the book by Matt Baglio, this film follows an American priest as he travels to Italy to be trained in the Vatican's Rite of Exorcism. The *book* explored the world of actual exorcists and focused on the American priest's conversion from skeptic to full-fledged believer in spiritual warfare.

The cast for this production is extremely impressive. The script was penned by Michael Petroni (*Possession*, *The Chronicles of Narnia: The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*). The problem is this film's directed by Mikael Håfström, responsible for lifeless films like *1408* and *Derailed*. I can give you a Lamborghini but if you can't drive, well....

A number of possession/exorcism movies have released in the recent past; all tried to capture the brilliance of *The Exorcist*. They almost all fail. Shifting this film's focus from the demon to the clergyman may help the audience

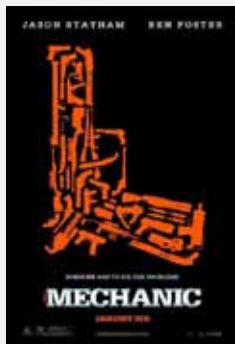




THEATRICAL RELEASES, continued

understand spiritual warfare is more sinister than vomiting pea soup and spinning heads in circles. ([Watch the trailer.](#)) Anthony Hopkins, Ciarán Hinds, Rutger Hauer, Alice Braga, Toby Jones.

The Mechanic (R for strong brutal violence, language, sexual content, nudity – Universal) Have you ever seen a Jason Statham movie? If so, you really have seen them all. Perhaps this will be the film that stands out of the crowd of garbage he has produced, but that's very unlikely.



Once again Statham kicks butt and takes names. This time the loosely constructed plot meant to give this butt-kicking some context is a hit man training in a new guy—and you thought your summer internship was rough. So, remember: it's okay to kill tons of faceless bad guys as long as you can make snarky comments and look good with your shirt off. ([Watch the trailer.](#)) Jason Statham, Ben Foster, Donald Sutherland.

Also

Biutiful Spanish production; “This is a story of a man in free fall. On the road to redemption, darkness lights his way”; nominated for a Golden Globe as Best Foreign Language Film. Rated R.

From Prada to Nada Latina spin on Jane Austen's *Sense and Sensibility*; two spoiled sisters are left penniless when their father suddenly dies. Rated PG-13.

Ip Man 2: Legend of the Grand Master Hong Kong production; R-rated martial arts film.



You Are What You See:
Watching Movies Through
a Christian Lens

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DVD RELEASES

January 18



Lebanon (R for bloody, intense violence – Ariel Films) In the summer of 1982, during what has become known as the First Lebanese War,¹ an Israeli tank crew is confronted with both the moral consequences and the mortal terror of war. Filming is very claustrophobic since all action takes place inside the tank.

It doesn't matter which side of a war someone is on, no one comes out unscathed. Seen around the world, this challenging film now makes its way to America. With our often-simplistic view of Middle Eastern issues, this film could put human faces to the innumerable headlines that pass by every week.

Unique in its presentation and very controversial in its display of Israeli soldiers (they commit war crimes), this is not a film for all viewers. Those who can handle cinematic violence and want to see a different take on the war genre may want to search this out. Yoav Donat, Itay Tiran, Zohar Shtrauss.



Buried (R for language and some violent content - Antena 3 Films) Apparently January 18 is National Claustrophobia Day. Ryan Reynolds stars as Paul, an American contractor employed in Iraq. Following an attack by Iraqi insurgents, Paul wakes to find himself buried in a coffin with only a lighter and a cell phone.

Since this film takes place in Iraq instead of the billion other places an everyman could have woken up to find himself buried, expect blatant criticism of the Iraq War and the American military.

Also

Stone slow-moving psychological drama highlighting the acting abilities of Robert DeNiro as a cop nearing retirement and Edward Norton as a convicted arsonist nearing potential parole

Takers crime drama with Chris Brown and Matt Dillon

Freakonomics see [Oct 1, 2010, issue](#) for full description





DVD RELEASES, continued

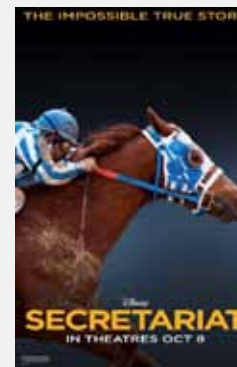
January 25



Like Dandelion Dust (PG-13 for mature content including domestic violence, alcohol abuse – Downes Bros. Entertainment) Made the way Christian films should be—like every other movie. A well-balanced story of a wealthy couple who struggle to get their adopted son back after a legal loophole returns him to his birth parents, the father being a drunkard and abusive ex-con.

Quietly released, this film didn't make a big splash at the theaters. It is absolutely worth the price of rental. I think it's also worth the price of the DVD. Audiences around the world voted it a favorite with more than 30 International Film Festival awards. It won the Audience Choice Award for Best Feature Film at the TriMedia Film Festival. Actor Cole Hauser won the Jury Award for Best Actor.

If you want Christian-based film to improve, you need to financially support the filmmakers of these more-impressive projects. ([Watch the trailer.](#)) Mira Sorvino, Barry Pepper, Cole Hauser, Kate Levering. [Read the review.](#)



Secretariat (PG for brief mild language -Walt Disney Pictures) Little more than *Seabiscuit* in heels, this film is about the famed race horse and its determined owner, Penny Chenery Tweedy (Diane Lane). Many viewers found this film to be inspirational and well produced. I found it to be a little too impressed with itself and missing a deep emotional center. Then again, I'm a bit of a curmudgeon.

What I find interesting is that in order to produce a film about the trials of an independent woman we must step into the time machine to find a viable story. ([Watch the trailer.](#)) Diane Lane, John Malkovich, Dylan Walsh, Fred Dalton Thompson, Scott Glenn. [Read the review.](#)

Also

RED Bruce Willis comedy crime-action

The Girl Who Kicked the Hornet's Nest Swedish crime thriller

Nowhere Boy docudrama on John Lennon's childhood; did not do well in theatres





Culture Quote

“The *product* of the artist has become less important than the *fact* of the artist. We wish to absorb this person. We wish to devour someone who has experienced the tragic.

In our society this person is much more important than anything he might create.”²

– David Mamet

(writer and director, *Hannibal*, *Lost Masterpieces of Pornography*, *The Postman Always Rings Twice*, *Heist*)

Scott's Response

“This is a great way of expressing the celebrity culture we live in. It really doesn't matter anymore if a musician writes great music or an actor works in great films. What matters is WHO they are not WHAT they produce. It is the reason why Paris Hilton exists on the public stage. In our culture she's as relevant as most artists.”





A Call for Christians to get Serious about being *Artists*³

by Scott Nehring

Christian culture is often the enemy of quality. Independent Christian film, in particular, has a history of being seriously and deeply flawed and has been routinely dismissed both by secular critics and audiences as intellectually vacant and disconnected from reality. The term Christian film has become synonymous with substandard production values, stilted dialogue and childish plots. Why is Christian film no more than a side note to modern culture? Why are Christians left behind?

Throughout the 1960s, heavy-handed Christian values were overthrown by the hippie generation. Christians retreated, overwhelmed by social changes—but we still wanted the pleasures of modern culture, only without any tempting content or foul philosophy.

Our reaction was to build a wall complete with self-prescribed content filters and an isolationist attitude. This cocoon was a

comfy place for Christians, but it became a time capsule. We spent decades discussing what we hoped the world was like rather than dealing with how things are.

Our isolation bred well-intentioned but poorly trained artists. Instead of playing with the big boys, Christian filmmakers remained in the minor leagues.

Christian audiences learned to accept substandard artists who make substandard works. We no longer have any expectations of quality.

A preachy pig

Even with successes (*Bella*, *Like Dandelion Dust*) we are on the outside looking in. A huge budget, skilled, experienced technical crew, and a firmly executed marketing plan can't overcome a pedantic script cast with summer-stock-reject actors. Your better-looking product is simply lipstick on a pig. Throw in Christian film's inherently agenda-driven plots and dialogue and you have lipstick on a preachy pig.

Rather than develop organically, the average Christian film is more pushy and sanctimonious than a global-warming agenda movie. Violence is almost non-existent, salty language never happens, unmarried people never struggle with lust, and evil is never very bad; to show various forms of sin is not allowed. Everyone is converted and life is reduced to an after-school special with prayer thrown in for good measure. For me, this is where the dry heaving begins.

Restrictions on content are there, presumably, because people believe it to be biblical. Such restrictions keep me from producing a movie accurate to Scripture, itself. It is a





tough argument to think modern Christians cannot handle rough language when God allowed Joshua to slaughter thousands behind the walls of Jericho.

But it is wrong to blame only the artists and producers for the saccharine muck that lines the walls of Christian bookstores. We, the audience, are to blame for the failure of Christian culture. Christian artists cater to us, give us what we want, and Christians' expectations have tended to not stress biblical truth, moral clarity, or technical achievement but a watered-down, unrealistic view of the world.

Audiences in general have had their tastes dumbed down to accept the pitiful, disposable paradise of the corporate cinema. We simply are not taught the Arts in this society. Lack of education coupled with the tsunami of crud flowing at us on a daily basis has left us unequipped to discern the good from the bad from the ugly.

So, what can we do?

We must be ready to offer a viable alternative to today's smutty nonsense. We have something genuine to offer that secularists can only dream of: **Truth**. Life in Christ feeds the hungry spirit and gives definition to life. No amount of existential claptrap will ever compete with the nourishing truth of Christ.

If a film claims to be Christian, it was supposedly done for the glory of God, but we do not glorify God by making lousy movies.

We need great films.

A two-pronged approach is needed; the focus should be on two separate groups: artists and audience. Artists are partners in the development of a movement, but without an informed, alert public, who will hold the artist accountable? Who will keep them focused?

We have the makings of a movement that can change this culture. I honestly believe this. But I also believe the first step toward establishing the groundwork for a vibrant, relevant cultural movement based on scriptural thought is to stop producing Christian films or Christian music or Christian art and simply have Christ-followers who create great Art.

Culture is like a garden. You must keep it healthy and growing or the weeds take over. It is not the artist who is the gardener; it is the audience. We are responsible for which artists take root and grow, and which ones die on the vine. With work, we can cultivate a healthy culture that will flower and bear fruit.

We must maintain a need for a moral, just culture. We must demand quality.

We must be open about our faith. That's why it's more important for the filmmaker to be identified as Christian than his work to be labeled as such. Even a pagan can make a movie and label it Christian. When a Christ-follower produces a film that speaks to Biblical truth and morality, he has made a Christian film. The production should not carry the label; the artist is the Christ-follower. ☒





Culture Links

Trent Reznor, front man for Nine Inch Nails, [has been tapped to compose the music](#) for David Fincher's English-language adaptation of *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*.

Reznor has had a deep influence on our culture and most people don't even know who he is. Despite his addictions and openly self-destructive activities, musician and producer Trent Reznor was a leading creative force behind Industrial Music⁴ in the early nineties. His music from that period was dark and demonic; it often referred to personal decay with grotesque sexual imagery.

Reznor has been composing soundtracks for film and video games since 2001. His video for his song *Closer* displays vivid sexuality with religious undertones; it featured numerous controversial elements including a rotting animal corpse, a monkey being crucified, and sadomasochism. The tone and content of the video was a clear influence on the opening credits and overall look of David Fincher's film *Se7en*—the opening credits sequence is backed by the song *Closer*.

The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo is from a series of books from Swedish journalist Stieg Larsson's *Millennium Trilogy* which delves frankly into rape, sexual criminality, homosexuality, and

violence. The book series and film adaptations are extremely popular in Europe. Director David Fincher (*Se7en*, *Fight Club*, *The Social Network*) will helm the American adaptations, which means it will be popular here as well.

A [Goliath New Project for Director Scott Derrickson](#) (*The Day the Earth Stood Still*, *The Exorcism of Emily Rose*). Derrickson graduated from [Biola University](#) with degrees in humanities, communications, and theological studies.

Derrickson seems a good choice to bring the tale of David and Goliath to the screen. *The Exorcism of Emily Rose* was a patiently delivered horror film that succeeded because of Derrickson's sensitivity to his subject matter. ([Here is an interview with Derrickson](#) on that topic.) Then again, this is the same guy who scripted one of the *Hellraiser* video games, so those theological studies may not have sunk in too far.

Relativity Media plans an adaptation of the book [The Bible Code](#), Michael Drosnin's controversial claim that within the Hebrew text of the Torah there's an embedded code.

Since there doesn't seem to be enough drama in the Bible, let's just focus on the mystical nonsense goofballs make up in their spare time. If you're making a movie about the Bible and





Culture Links, continued

can find similar programming on The History Channel, you should know you're barking up the wrong theological tree.

[Breaking Dawn Producer Explains How The Birth Scene Will Be \[Sanitized to Win a\] PG-13](#). The fourth installment in the *Twilight* series, *Breaking Dawn*, contains graphic scenes both of (*spoiler warning*) the hot-and-heavy wedding night of Bella and Edward (the vampire) and of the birth of their half-vampire child, which ends with Edward completing the cycle and making Mom a vampire, too.

The film's producer, Wyck Godfrey, acknowledged that the final two films are "based on a much more mature book. We need to progress and be more sophisticated."

Katey Rich, managing editor for CinemaBlend.com, relates that "even though Bella and Edward finally get between the sheets, it's not going to be all candlelight and sexy music. Again, we're talking PG-13 **for teenage girls**. [Producer Godfrey says,] 'It does not become soft porn. It is a legitimate and important part of the movie, romantic and sensual.'"

That slippery slope has become a slip-n-slide right into a sink hole.

Editor's Notes

[Andrew Sullivan of TheAtlantic.com](#) found Scott's [article on Relevant.com](#) and wanted his readers to know.

"When faith is a kind of neurosis to protect us from modern reality - which a lot of fundamentalism is - its cultural artefacts have to create an alternative reality as well. So we get Hallmark Christianity -"

Not a small mention. Thanks, Andrew.

~ also ~

[John Bucher](#)⁵ e-mailed us recently:

"I read your book over the holidays and really enjoyed it. It provides a fresh perspective and is a greatly needed tool in our community. ... I plan on incorporating some of your concepts into my teaching as we help train the next generation of storytellers. ... you'll be featured alongside Blake Snyder, John Truby, and Steve Turner in the class. ... Mainly, just wanted you to know how much I enjoyed the book. Thanks for writing it."



Movie Watching Tip

Political Movies

When watching a politically charged movie—left or right—be most careful with productions that align with your thinking.

Political movies are always propaganda; there's no getting around that fact. When that propaganda disagrees with your natural inclinations, it's easy to see the bias and manipulation. When it is something that has your head nodding, portions of the agenda can slip by you unnoticed.

Remember, because you agree with something doesn't mean it's right. Pay attention to how things are being phrased, displayed, and handled. Are you being manipulated? If so, how?

Never let politically friendly images blind you to the fact that the filmmaker is trying to change you to their point-of-view or, in some cases, to reaffirm a set of beliefs which may or may not be correct.





At Rest [Daniel 12:13](#)



Pete Postlethwaite (1946–2011)
Actor

His face was unforgettable. His name was unknown to most people. Pete Postlethwaite became a supporting-cast presence in the early 1990s with roles in *Alien³* (1992) and *The Last of the Mohicans* (1992). His big break came with his Oscar-nominated performance as Giuseppe Conlon in *In the Name of the Father* (1993).



David in *Alien³*

Following his Oscar nomination, Postlethwaite was ever-present in numerous A-list films including *The Usual Suspects*, *The Lost World: Jurassic Park*, *Amistad*, *Clash of the Titans*, *The Constant Gardener*, *Inception*, and *The Town*. His final cinematic performance in *Killing Bono* will be released posthumously.



Married and the father of two, Postlethwaite died on January 2, 2011, at age 64 of the cancer he had battled decades earlier.

as Fergus 'Fergie' Colm in *The Town*

Peter Yates (1929–2011)
Director

Although his production slowed down after the early 1990s, director Peter Yates was responsible for a number of memorable films that helped shape American cinema in the 1970s.



His best and most influential work was *Bullitt* (1968). The famous car chase speaks for itself—Yates was personally selected by star Steve McQueen due to his skill at directing such chases. *Bullitt* was also the first American film to use the vulgarism B.S. and to use blood packets with squibs to simulate gunshot wounds. He was nominated for a BAFTA for the film.

Yates directed a number of other notable films including *Murphy's War* (1971), *The Deep* (1977), *Breaking Away* (1979), *Krull* and *The Dresser* (1983), *Suspect* (1987), *An Innocent Man* (1989), and *Year of the Comet* (1992).

Yates died in London at the age of 81.





ENDNOTES

1. Editor's Note: For additional information on this subject, read Brigitte Gabriel's [Because They Hate: A Survivor of Islamic Terror Warns America](#). St. Martin's-Griffin. NY. 2006.
2. David Mamet. *Writing in Restaurants*. p 42. Viking Press, 1986. Emphasis added.
3. Excerpted from *You Are What You See: Watching Movies Through a Christian Lens*. Chapter 29: Less Christian Art, More Christian Artists. Scott Nehring. RightLine Publishing. 2010. p 229-34.
4. A style of music spawned in the 1970s; "deviant artists" experimented with noise and aesthetically controversial topics such as fascism, serial killers, and the occult ([Wikipedia](#). Jan 16, 2011).
5. John Bucher is a writer, award-winning filmmaker, and culture communicator; former head of Communications and Film at Nyack College on both the Nyack, NY, and Manhattan campuses; Exec. Dir. for the Damah Film Festival in L.A.; Dir. for Story Development for the Global Short Film Network; and professor at the Los Angeles Film Studies Center.





Information

Learn more about Story. Buy the book: YouAreWhatYouSee.com.

Find Scott Nehring's latest film reviews: GoodNewsFilmReviews.com.

Scott is a film critic whose reviews have been published on a number of websites across the United States, Australia, and India including Reuters.com, USAToday.com, *The Chicago Times*, FoxNews.com, and a variety of local news stations across America.



As a former screenwriter, Scott is focused on balancing his love of story structure and cinema with his Christian faith. He loves to teach film studies to Christians, showing them how to read films and how to deal with the sometimes thorny subject of engaging modern culture.

Scott was a co-founder of the [Catholic Media Review](http://CatholicMediaReview.com). His current reviews can be found at [Good News Film Reviews](http://GoodNewsFilmReviews.com) and at ChristianCinema.com.

Good News Film Reviews (GNFR) was established in June 2007 to discuss film and culture from a Christian perspective. From the first post onward, Scott has called for Christians to change both the way they view film and how they engage in culture. GNFR fell quiet following a short sabbatical, was re-launched in January 2008, and has been going strong since. GNFR is also home site for the Carnival of Cinema, a bi-weekly collection of film-related posts submitted from around the world. The Carnival of Cinema has been in operation since September 2006.

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