



Movies and Culture Report

Guns, Blue Flaming Fists, a Demon, and Some Christian Cops A Little Something for Everyone





THEATRICAL RELEASES

February 18



Unknown (PG-13 for intense sequences of violence and action, brief sexual content – Canal+) In a case of reverse amnesia, Dr. Martin Harris wakes from a coma to find no one remembers him, not even the woman he believes is his wife. Now he must confirm his identity.

This is Hollywood so, of course, he's at the heart of some conspiracy which will need to be unraveled with guns and fire. ([Watch the movie trailer.](#)) Liam Neeson, Bruno Ganz, Frank Langella, January Jones, Aidan Quinn.

This film marks the first in a coming series of movies that feature January Jones. Ms Jones has been a working actress for some time, but the success of her show *Mad Men* has elevated her into prominent roles in major productions such as *X-Men: First Class* and *The Hungry Rabbit Jumps* where she is opposite Nicolas Cage.



I Am Number Four (PG-13 for intense sequences of violence and action, language – DreamWorks SKG) A supernatural teen is on the run from mysterious enemies who want him dead. Three of his cohorts have been killed, and he's next. ([Watch the movie trailer.](#)) Alex Pettyfer, Timothy Olyphant, Teresa Palmer, Dianna Agron.

We used to watch ordinary people in extraordinary events. Now the increasing number of superhero and supernatural characters in film is intriguing. Wouldn't the film be just as interesting if the teen was a regular kid running from regular mortal thugs? Why does he need glowing fists?

Is this because of the self-esteem training today's kids receive? If you're told all your life that you're special, told

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THEATRICAL RELEASES, continued

you're the world's most perfect snow flake, does it lead to not being able to watch an Ordinary Joe do great things? Do we need resurrected Greek gods to satisfy our overly confident selves?

Also

Vanishing on 7th Street horror

The Last Lions documentary on increased poaching of lions in Botswana

Brotherhood Danish drama set within neo-Nazi training

February 25



Drive Angry (R for strong brutal violence, grisly images, graphic sexual content, nudity, pervasive language – Nu Image Films) Milton escapes from Hell to take revenge on the men who killed his daughter and kidnapped his granddaughter. Ya know, just like it says you can do in the Bible. Quick question, though: If you get to escape from Hell because you're really angry, wouldn't just about everyone in Hell qualify to leave? ([Watch the movie trailer.](#)) Nicolas Cage, Amber Heard, William Fichtner, David Morse.

Nicolas Cage makes three kinds of movies. In the old days he made some interesting, thought-provoking films (*Leaving Las Vegas*, *Raising Arizona*, *The Weather Man*). He also made bloated Hollywood fare (*The Rock*, *Con Air*, *Face-Off*). Lately he's landed on slouchy works that stink of someone simply scrapping for a paycheck (*Ghost Rider*, *Season of the Witch*, *Bangkok Dangerous*). The current release looks like a member of the third group.





THEATRICAL RELEASES, continued



The Grace Card (PG-13 for violence, thematic elements – GraceWorks) A cop tragically loses his son; bitterness erodes his life and career, then he's partnered with an officer who is a part-time pastor. Can the pastor-cop save his grumpy partner? ([Watch the movie trailer.](#)) Michael Joiner, Mike Higgenbottom, Louis Gossett Jr.

This appears to be a traditional Christian film complete with clean conversion scene at the end. I've been surprised by Christian films in the past, so give the trailer a look and see what you think.

I will ask why the cop needs to be a part-time pastor. Why can't he just be a regular ol' Christian who cares? The fact is **all** Christians should be "part-time pastors," so it seems an unnecessary element to include in the storyline.

Also

Of Gods and Men Arabic/French drama about Algerian monks threatened by terrorists

Heartless British, demonic fantasy/horror

Hall Pass comedy on extramarital affairs





DVD RELEASES

February 15



Unstoppable (PG-13 for sequences of action and peril, some language - 20th Century Fox) Denzel Washington plays his “I’m the loud-talking, confident man-in-charge” persona in this McMovie about a runaway train. The train in question, of course, is loaded with dangerous, explosive cargo and will kill a ton of hapless souls if it crashes. Denzel Washington, Chris Pine, Rosario Dawson, Kevin Corrigan.

Director Tony Scott and Denzel Washington have made a number of films together (*The Taking of Pelham 1-2-3*, *Deja Vu*, *Man on Fire*, *Crimson Tide*). This film is an extension of their efforts. Taut and brisk, the film delivers action and some fun—and that’s what it is, a straight-up popcorn flick. It doesn’t take much to make a film plot. Just a simple hook that’s easy to deliver and easy to understand. Denzel needs to stop a big train or people die. In a time when supernatural heroes and convoluted plots riddle the box office, it’s nice to see a simple movie still being made.



Waiting for “Superman” (PG for thematic material, mild language, incidental smoking – Participant Media, Walden Media) A stinging indictment of the American education system. This documentary from Davis Guggenheim (*An Inconvenient Truth*) was the must-see documentary of the year but was completely snubbed by the Oscars—not even *nominated* for Best Documentary, though it is included on *Christianity Today’s* list of “most redeeming” movies of 2010.

This film has the courage to take a frank look at the delicate subject of public education. Given that government-controlled (read “state-run”) education is one of the fattest golden calves of the political left (i.e. the denizens of the entertainment industry), the conclusions of this film probably didn’t have a chance for the best peer reviews.

Also

You Will Meet a Tall Dark Stranger comedy/romance about extra-marital affairs





DVD RELEASES, continued

February 25



Get Low (PG-13 for some thematic material, brief violent content – Sony Pictures Classics) A hermit decides to throw a funeral party for himself while he’s still alive. Why? He wants to hear his eulogies and set the record straight. ([Watch the movie trailer.](#)) Robert Duvall, Bill Murray, Sissy Spacek, Lucas Black, Bill Cobbs.

I’ve wanted to see this film since I first laid eyes on the trailer. Duvall has a respect for faith and generally only attaches himself to worthy productions. In cases such as this—the plot is interesting, the cast is fantastic, and the advertising works—I’m prone to assume the best, particularly with the trailer. If marketers can piece together a compelling and enjoyable trailer, it speaks well of the production, especially when the film’s content isn’t the typical Hollywood fire-and-guns tripe.

Another of *Christianity Today’s* “most redemptive” movies of 2010.



Megamind (PG for action and some language - DreamWorks Animation) A bad guy finally defeats his good-guy nemesis only to find his life is meaningless without a rival. Will Ferrell, Brad Pitt, Tina Fey, Jonah Hill, Justin Theroux.

Like *Despicable Me*, the bad guy is really the good guy. Nice message for kids. The same switch is in last year’s hit, *How to Train Your Dragon*. The confusion over good guy–bad guy waters down our children’s ability to discern between right and wrong. No one is really evil—the problem is you don’t understand them: “I’m not evil. I’m misunderstood.” This is post-modernist amorality in a colorful package.

Also

Due Date road-trip comedy

The Last Unicorn British short, thriller

Last Train Home Chinese documentary on peasants who must find work far from home

Mesrine: Killer Instinct French docudrama on gangster Jacques Mesrine before he became Public Enemy N°1





Culture Quote

“I want to give the audience a hint of a scene. No more than that. Give them too much and they won’t contribute anything themselves. Give them just a suggestion and you get them working with you. That’s what gives the theater meaning: when it becomes a social act.”¹

– Orson Welles

Scott’s Thoughts

I find this quote revealing. Welles was a master at connecting with his audience, a true genius and pioneer in radio, film, and theater. He was responsible for the hysteria behind the 1938 radio adaptation of *War of the Worlds*, the formation of [cinematic language](#) in *Citizen Kane*, and director of perhaps the most critical piece of live American theater in the 20th Century with his 1936 New York production of [Macbeth](#). Orson Welles is one of the most important artists in world history.

Reread his statement, then remember the last film you watched. Was there anything left for your imagination? Anything you could expound upon? Or was every last detail explained to you in monosyllables?

Those running America’s film industry today have no respect for the art of cinema, no respect for their audience. The drive for profits overwhelms being artistically profound and has taught artists to cater to children instead of adults. The devolution of artistry has, in turn, caused the decay of adult expectations. Today’s average movie-goer laps up childish crap rather than imbibing essentials from which a vibrant, intelligent culture can develop.

If Orson Welles were to show up today, would he be able to create master works? I strongly doubt it. He would probably be channeled into reworking a cheesy flick from the ’80s or reconstructing a DC Comics superhero.

Our culture will remain stagnant if we continue this lowest common denominator nonsense where the most childish and unchallenging films are produced rather than films which not only advance the artistic medium but enhance our culture. ¹





The Christian Brand is a Marketing Loser

by Scott Nehring

Terry Mattingly of the Scripps Howard News Service published an article on August 22, 2007, titled *The Ultimate Movie Stigma*.² The piece attempts to explain the financial failure, or at least the lackluster showing of *The Ultimate Gift* at the box office.

The Ultimate Gift was distributed by FoxFaith, the spiritual branch of Fox's distribution arm. Mattingly quotes the film's producer, Rick Eldridge, who was surprised and dismayed to learn his film was being released as a Christian film:

'I told the Fox people this movie was going to resonate with the Christian audience and that's fine with me because I am a Christian,' said Eldridge. 'But I was worried that this movie would get tagged as "a little Christian movie," like that was some kind of Good Housekeeping seal for the Christian marketplace.' ... I think it's obvious that this is what happened, and that

caused some people to distance themselves from this movie. There was no need for that to happen.

The film does contain both Christian messages and direct references to Christ, Himself, but it does not slather its narrative with the divine. Both Mattingly and Eldridge clearly see this label as a hindrance to public attention (and higher receipts) for an otherwise worthy piece of film.

The Ultimate Gift, which is quite good, did marginally well on DVD after doing almost nothing at the box office—a tad over \$3 million domestically. These returns are probably due to a limited release in theaters after a meek marketing campaign. It is likely that the distribution ran into some roadblocks when the film went down the same FoxFaith marketing stream that flows mostly to churches and other heavenly minded groups. Being a FoxFaith product tends to mark a work as a "Christian" film, and that limits its ability to be distributed to larger audiences. Most people probably never heard of the film, and that's why they didn't see it.

In reaction to Mattingly's article, Dr. Ted Bahr wrote a retort titled *Mean-Spirited Attacks on Faith-Filled Movies*.³ In his retort, Dr. Bahr is indignant and refuses the notion that the Christian label is an issue. He further sees the article as an attack on the faith. Bahr argues that faith-based films are solid box office winners and he points to *Facing the Giants* as an example—the film grossed over \$10 million with a budget of only \$100,000. Dr. Bahr also includes the perennial favorites *The Passion of the Christ* and *The Chronicles of Narnia* as additional examples. As much as I respect Dr. Bahr, I believe his response to Mattingly's article is littered with errors and misstatements.

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Where I believe Dr. Bahr errs is in his failure to acknowledge the inherent limitations a “Christian” label places upon a product. His argument is solidly one-sided: Christian films should be no-brainers for potential marketers. His view is that the lack of business *The Ultimate Gift* received was an issue of bad marketing or bad filmmaking, not a damaging label.

In every genre, there are winners and losers. Some children’s films bomb at the box office. Some romances bomb. Many horror movies bomb. Many movies about African-Americans fail. But, they don’t bomb just because of their genre or their faith. They bomb because of their lack of entertainment value and/or their limited marketing. Thus, poor marketing and a lackluster release in a limited number of theaters (which is another skill of the marketing craft) can doom a smaller movie, or even a big one.³

The problem I see with Dr. Bahr’s argument is that the marketing and the labeling of the film as “Christian” are inclusive of each other. A film marked as “Christian” has the inherent issue of appearing to be created with only one audience group in mind.

Horror films don’t purport to speak to any specific group while denying others entry simply by their creation. African-American films and romance films are meant to be enjoyed

by anyone, no matter their ethnicity or marital status. But when a film is labeled “Christian,” it screams that the piece is intended for Christian audiences and contains an overt and probably evangelistic message. The label gives a sense of exclusivity—and for good reason: it essentially wards off atheists, folks of other faiths, even milquetoast Christians for that matter.

The biggest hindrance for a film labeled “Christian” is every other Christian film ever made. We can cherish *The Passion of the Christ* but we still must contend with *The Omega Code*, *Left Behind*, and *The Last Sin Eater*. “Christian” films stink, and they stink badly. After years of “Christian” films being low-budget, sanctimonious, and poorly executed, people have become justifiably wary.

Dr. Bahr cites a number of films from 2006 (*The Pursuit of Happyness*, *Superman Returns*, *Cars*) as examples which prove films about faith and values are winners at the box office (we’ll overlook for the moment that *Superman Returns* promotes the hero siring a bastard child). Dr. Bahr’s argument is a misdirection. None of those films were released as “Christian” films but, rather, as films that contained moral, even redemptive themes.

If anything, the citing of those films actually works against Dr. Bahr’s concept of offering Christian-labeled films. The named films managed to successfully deliver Biblical themes without the troubling “Christian” label—and that’s the marketing model Christian filmmakers should be following.





Culture Links

CHRISTIANITY TODAY HAS A LIST OF [THE MOST “REDEEMING movies” of 2010.](#) Among them are the award-winning film, *The King’s Speech* as well as *Winter’s Bones* and the remake of *True Grit*. I’m not sure I concur with *Despicable Me*, but I agree on most of the others—in particular ***Like Dandelion Dust***.



THE SUNDANCE FILM FESTIVAL IS [SPORTING A FEW “SPIRITUAL” films this year.](#) Does this mean Christians are breaking into the secular market? Perhaps this quote from an article by director Vera Farmiga (*The Departed*, *Joshua*, *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas*) will help you decide. Regarding her film *Higher Ground*:



I hope audiences will be refreshed to see Christians depicted in a fully developed, sexualized way—not just with Sunday school values.

I don’t know about you but the idea of watching a couple of Catholics, Episcopalians, Baptists, or Pentecostals being shown in a “fully developed, sexualized way” makes me puke a little.

In another editorial on the difficulties of marketing “Christian” film, GetReligion.org has posted [Hollywood’s awkward God dance](#), which includes behind-the-scenes marketing discussions over the Justin Bieber documentary, *Never Say Never*, and his Christian roots and faith.

APPARENTLY IN THE SPIRITUAL ANIMAL FARM, WHEN IT comes to Hollywood at least, [some religious animals are more equal than others.](#)

After years of watching Muslims portrayed as terrorists in mainstream TV and movies, an advocacy group hopes to change that image by grooming a crop of aspiring Muslim screenwriters who can bring their stories — and perspective — to Hollywood.

The Muslim Public Affairs Council is hosting a series of workshops taught by Emmy-winning and Oscar-nominated veterans over the next month, an initiative that builds on the group’s outreach for a more representative picture of Muslim-Americans on the screen.





Movie Watching Tip

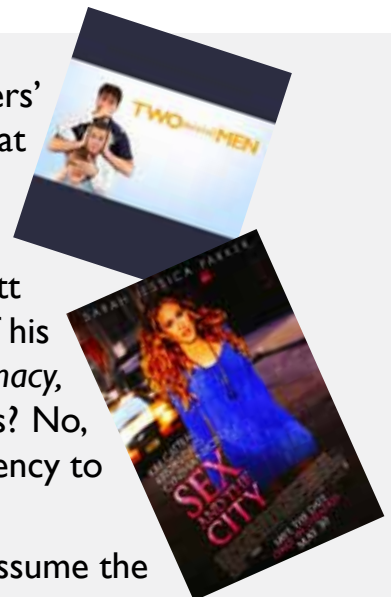
The Private Lives of Public People

With the recent troubles of folks like Charlie Sheen and Lindsay Lohan, the issue of performers' private lives is again called into question. Is it our business? Does it matter what someone does in their off-stage life?

The private lives of performers and filmmakers **are** important because they can be strong indicators of the kind of movies those people tend to make. For example, Matt Damon is open about his liberal politics. It has not been surprising to see a number of his choices in projects reflect this aspect of his life, including *Che: Part Two*, *Bourne Supremacy*, and *Syriana*. Does this mean that every Matt Damon film will promote liberal politics? No, of course not. It is not out of line, however, for the audience to acknowledge his tendency to employ his fame and professional success to forward his own agenda.

If a performer is stridently anti-Christian (Ian McKellan, Ricky Gervais), we should assume the fruits of their labors will reflect their attitudes. If a filmmaker has strong political leanings (Oliver Stone, Sean Penn), is it too much to take for granted their work will likewise be slanted?

The morality of any artist and their worldview is exposed within the works they produce. Since they perform for us, we are the consumers of their efforts. When their morality is exposed and shown to be corrupt, this can be a helpful tool for us to use to predict the values within their productions.





At Rest [Daniel 12:13](#)

Charles E. Sellier, Jr. (1944-2011)
Producer, Writer, Director



Charles Sellier was influential and very successful—one of the foundational figures of the modern Christian film industry. His marketing strategies garnered him the distinction of having more pictures in the Top 50 Independent Grossers than any other independent producer in the 1970s.

Sellier translated his natural talent for production from film to television, which lead to his nomination for an Emmy for his television film *The Legend of Sleepy Hollow* (1980). He created *The Life and Times of Grizzly Adams*, *Greatest Heroes of the Bible*, and *The Desperado* TV movie series.

Charles Sellier was also a successful author and documentary director. After meeting him, Orson Welles remarked to the young Sellier, “Young man, you are light-years ahead of the rest of the industry.”

Omar Amiralay (1944–2011)
Director: *Everyday Life in a Syrian Village* and *A Flood in Baath Country*

Omar Amiralay was an important Syrian documentary filmmaker whose work revealed the unfiltered side of Syrian life after the Baath Party took control. His work was controversial in his home country and most were banned in Syria.



The documentary-maker passed away after suffering a heart attack at his home in Damascus.

He became an influential figure in the Declaration of the 99, a petition signed by Syrian intellectuals in 2000 calling for the country’s state of emergency enforcements to be lifted and for political freedom and independence to be allowed. He was an ardent supporter of the arts and spent his life exercising his freedom of speech—a freedom his government often wanted to take away.





ENDNOTES

1. [Collier's](#), 29 January, 1938.
2. [Terry Mattingly on Religion](#). Last accessed Feb 19, 2011.
3. [WorldNetDaily.com](#). Sept 19, 2007. Last accessed Feb 19, 2011.





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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