



10-5-2012

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Recommended Citation

Ingle, Zachary (2012) "Celluloid Sermons: The Emergence of the Christian Film Industry, 1930-1986, by Terry Lindvall and Andrew Quicke (NYU Press, 2011)," *Journal of Religion & Film*: Vol. 16: Iss. 2, Article 14.
Available at: <http://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/jrf/vol16/iss2/14>

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Celluloid Sermons: The Emergence of the Christian Film Industry, 1930-1986, by Terry Lindvall and Andrew Quicke (NYU Press, 2011)

Abstract

This is a book review of *Celluloid Sermons: The Emergence of the Christian Film Industry, 1930-1986*, by Terry Lindvall and Andrew Quicke (New York University Press, 2011).

Author Notes

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“Paracinema,” those films that lie outside of the mainstream, whether they be propagandistic, exploitative, educational, or pornographic, have drawn increased attention in film scholarship. Unfortunately, this has not been the case with religious films, which have been around for almost a century, as churches made films not only to compete for attention in a society obsessed with motion pictures, but also to assist in educational and missionary endeavors. Only recently have a select group of film scholars like Terry Lindvall and Andrew Quicke sought to correct this oversight and give attention to the history of religious films.

Covering the period of 1930-1986, *Celluloid Sermons* follows Lindvall’s *Sanctuary Cinema: The Origins of the Christian Film Industry* (NYU Press, 2007). A third volume is planned to cover “box-office Christianity” in the last two decades. All told, this trilogy will help legitimize the untold history of the Christian film industry from its origins to the present day, or “the unexpected development of an underground movement of religious pictures...an odd revelation, a mixing of oil and water, of God and mammon” (ix). The title comes from the authors’ contention that “celluloid sermons are remembered more frequently than verbal sermons” (xii).

This period covers an era when both Protestants and Catholics were united against perceived immorality in the movies, but *Celluloid Sermons*, like *Sanctuary Cinema*, focuses primarily on Protestant (both mainline and evangelical) efforts to educate and evangelize through the medium of film. Although 1986 as an end date for the book may appear somewhat arbitrary, it seems to tie to the death of the film rental market by the mid-1980s, in which the Christian film industry awkwardly made the slow transition to the video market.

Sanctuary Cinema details how churches produced and exhibited films during the silent era; *Celluloid Sermons* picks up when film work slowed by the 1930s as talkies were more cost prohibitive. After beginning with a few pages summarizing the rise of religious films in the silent era, chapter 1 of *Celluloid Sermons* describes some of the early genres that emerged in religious filmmaking, with five coming to the fore: biblical, missionary, historical, biographical, and dramatic. The biblical films tried to capitalize on the success of *King of Kings* (1927), although obviously not able to compete with DeMille's sense of spectacle. Missionary films were typically made for both the training of potential missionaries and to gain support from churches and denominations. While these genres would eventually become more advanced, early biographical and historical films (also labeled "church activities" films) were initially little more than filmed sermons. Early dramatic films were typically social problem movies, including those reflecting the progressive ideals of liberal denominations.

Chapter 2 describes "evangelical film auteurs" James Friedrich, Carlos Baptista, and Irwin Moon, all known for their ecumenical films. Friedrich headed Cathedral Films, best known for the serials *Life of St. Paul* (1949-1952) and *Living Christ* (1951-1957), but also he directed the unfortunately titled *In the Footsteps of the Witch Doctor* (1950) about the Belgian Congo, which was also photographed by Ingmar Bergman's celebrated cinematographer, Sven Nykvist. Venezuelan-born Baptista and his Scriptural Visualized Institute did not make biblical films, instead opting for the overtly didactic, including their animation films *Thankful Dandelion* (1946) and the feature-length *Pilgrim's Progress* (1950). Moon was critical of most dramatic evangelical films, calling them "religious horse operas." His nature films shortly preceded Disney's True-Life Adventures series, as Moon presented the animal kingdom within the "grand

teleological purposes of God's grand design," (51) while still largely eschewing the evolution/creation controversy.

Yet these auteurs were not the only ones involved in the Christian film industry, as the denominational film efforts, especially of the Methodists, Lutherans, Baptists, Episcopalians, and Presbyterians receive due attention in chapters 3 and 4. These are histories that will be of interest to historians of these denominations, regardless of their interest in film. Still, they took religious films into new realms, and Lutherans even had their crossover triumphs that will be familiar to readers, such as *Martin Luther* (1953, nominated for two Academy Awards) and the Art Clokey-produced claymation television series *Davey and Goliath* (1960-1973), whose mainstream success prefigured that of the popular children's video series *VeggieTales*. But these denominational efforts do not preclude the ecumenical work of the Protestant Film Commission, also discussed by Lindvall and Quicke.

Following the early denominational efforts, an increased emphasis on ecumenical productions was sought after in the hopes that such films would reach a larger market. Such studios and distributors included Gospel Films, Ken Anderson Films, Billy Graham's World Wide Pictures, Gateway Films, and Mark IV Pictures. As Lindvall and Quicke note, the Christian film industry was not without its artistic successes during this era, such as the Gateway Films co-production of *Shadowlands* (1985, not to be confused with Richard Attenborough's 1993 adaptation starring Anthony Hopkins), which won two BAFTAs and an International Emmy for Outstanding Drama. Gateway's work with European co-productions and production facilities was lauded.

But Graham was not the only notable evangelical to use films as a ministry tool, as Francis Schaffer and James Dobson also saw the merits of spreading their messages through

film. While most of the film titles will be unfamiliar to be readers, some have certainly impacted American culture. Before turning to low-budget science-fiction and horror films in the eighties and nineties, Franky Schaeffer and his famous theologian father Francis made *Whatever Happened to the Human Race?* (1979) in conjunction with C. Everett Koop. Concerning this surreal abortion horror film series, it has been “suggested that perhaps more than any other single event, the release of the film series roused an evangelical awakening to the controversy, putting the issue of abortion onto the front lines of the nation’s political struggles” (129). Dobson’s ultra-right organization Focus on the Family also made several films distributed to churches and later the home video market, including films on parenting, controversial topics, and children’s animation. Indeed, Focus on the Family was one of the first organizations to see the merits of video, including lower costs and increased distribution.

Hollywood stars such as Christopher Plummer (*The Gospel of John*), Katherine Heigl (*Love Comes Softly, Love’s Enduring Promise*), Martin Landau (*Billy: The Early Years*), and Mira Sorvino (*Like Dandelion Dust, Trade of Innocents*) have recently worked in the Christian film industry, but as Lindvall and Quicke note, this is not a new phenomenon. A partial list of major stars who appeared in Christian films include stars such as Sidney Poitier (*Mark of the Hawk*, 1957), Ethel Waters (*The Heart Is a Rebel*, 1958), Liam Neeson (*Pilgrim’s Progress*, 1977), and Orson Welles (*The Late Great Planet Earth*, 1979), in addition to other film, television, and stage stars who lent their voices as narrators or for animated films. Mel White, father of screenwriter/actor Mike White (*The Good Girl, School of Rock*), became known for his *Charlie Churchman* series and documentaries, before leaving the evangelical right to found Soulforce, a gay Christian advocacy group. Irvin “Shorty” Yeaworth, director of *The Blob* (1958), later made several notable Christian films, including *The Gospel Blimp* (1967), a satire

about an airship that mass evangelizes by “firebombing” religious tracts. As the authors point out, this “brilliant” and “self-effacing” film poked fun at evangelistic technophilia and modern evangelistic methods, “which incidentally included film” (127).

In the main, Lindvall and Quicke do not comment on the aesthetic qualities of the films, but more so when the films take a novel approach, avoid overt preachiness, or tackle social issues. Critical comments are kept to a minimum, but do appear (e.g., the “corny but sincere acting of Pat Boone and Erik Estrada” [159] in *The Cross and the Switchblade*, 1970). Some films are described so vividly that the reader will surely wish they were more available, even though many are only accessible in a few archives such as the Regent University Religious Films Archive.

Chapter 7 (“Mark IV and Apocalyptic Film”) addresses the apocalyptic films that prefigure the generic films that revived the Christian film industry at the turn of the century: *The Omega Code* (1999, followed by a sequel) and *Left Behind* (2000, followed by two sequels). The authors justify the genre within the Christian tradition: “From the wild *merkabah* chariot literature of Ezekiel to the enduring presence of evil and the devil in popular culture, all with an impending sense of imminent political, ecological, and cosmic disaster in a secular Armageddon, the seemingly bizarre links of Christian faith and horror film are not as far-fetched as one might think” (171). Mark IV’s *A Thief in the Night* (1972) may be the most enduring Christian apocalyptic film from this era, while others toiled in this genre, such as schlock-turned-Christian horror filmmakers Ron and June Ormond, who “decided to transform their exploitative blood fests into spiritual lessons” (179) and made films with the provocative titles of *The Burning Hell* (1974) and *The Grim Reaper* (1976). For a fuller account of the Ormonds’ films, consult Jim Ridley’s chapter “Christian Scare Films: The Unlikely Pairing of Director Ron Ormond and

Preacher Estus Pirkle” in *Cinema Inferno* (edited by Robert G. Weiner and John Cline, Scarecrow Press, 2010).

The penultimate chapter addresses global evangelism films. In earlier decades, missionaries made films in missionary fields to show while on furlough in the U.S. In the 1970s, however, there were numerous Euro-American attempts (such as International Films) to make films in African, Asia, and Latin America with indigenous talent in order to aid in missionary endeavors. Quicke served as a language version editor for the 1979 film simply titled *Jesus* (aka *The Jesus Film*), which has long claimed the record for most-watched film in history, and according to Rick Warren, is the “most effective evangelistic tool ever invented” (193). (Those familiar with the reverence this film has garnered in missionary circles may take delight in some of the behind-the-scenes “dirt” on the film, including an episode involving a pig and a grenade.) Although a minor quibble, the authors cannot seem to nail down a tally for the number of languages in which the film has been in shown (450? 1000?), but they claim that record as well. Another successful film in the same vein, *Karunamayudu*, an Indian film in the Telugu language, has been arguably more popular in India due to its all-Indian cast. The authors also recount the controversies that both films have caused in India.

One central problem with the book is an unfulfilled promise in its introduction. Authors Lindvall and Quicke, equally well versed in film and evangelical culture, credit religious films as “both a symptom of and a contributing factor to the secularization of liberal denominations in the 1950s and the 1960s,” a statement that, if true, would certainly change the way twentieth-century American religious history is told. Unfortunately, the authors fail to address this issue and seemingly never return to this thesis. Also, some readers might have liked a filmography, with notes on viewing availability.

Celluloid Sermons stands as a notable work of scholarship, as the authors address a neglected cinema. While the historians avoid reflecting on and theorizing about the place of the Christian film industry, those involved in the industry consider it a cinema that counters Hollywood hegemony, as another type of “third cinema.” When completed, this entire impeccably-researched, three-volume history of the Christian film industry will have few (if any) rivals as it serves as a one-stop source for those interested in the significant players, films, and moments in Christian film history. These books may spur others in the field; J. Ryan Parker’s *Cinema as Pulpit: Sherwood Pictures and the Church Film Movement* (McFarland, 2012) takes a more narrow approach than what Lindvall and Quicke have in order, but it effectively addresses how one church in Georgia has made a splash in the independent film scene with films such as *Fireproof* (2008) and *Courageous* (2011). Although these books will primarily be of value as research references, they could also be used as textbooks for film courses in Christian institutions, especially for those students wanting to be involved in making religious pictures. Even those not invested in the topic of the Christian film industry from 1930 to 1986 may find something of interest in filmmakers attempting to incorporate their faith into their work.