

Behind the lens

by [Scott Derrickson](#) in the [January 30, 2002](#) issue

Most people, on some level, love movies. Yet as both a Christian and a filmmaker, I'm persuaded that Christians have not excelled at filmmaking because they haven't really loved the cinema. They may love the power of cinema. They may appreciate the social impact of cinema. Yet many Christians remain suspicious of film, and that's a problem if one wants to succeed in the creative endeavor of making films. In order to do what I do, one must know and love the entire history of film, and believe that filmmaking is an expression of creativity that glorifies God.

Ernest Hemingway would not have been able to become the writer he was if he had not read Shakespeare, Dickens and other great writers. In the same way, Paul Thomas Anderson couldn't have made *Boogie Nights* and *Magnolia* if he hadn't studied Martin Scorsese. And Scorsese couldn't have made films like *Raging Bull*, *Taxi Driver* and *The Last Temptation of Christ* if he had not studied Sam Peckinpah (*The Wild Bunch*, *Straw Dogs*). And we wouldn't have Peckinpah without John Ford (*The Grapes of Wrath*, *The Quiet Man*). Prospective filmmakers have a responsibility to understand the history of cinema—both American and international. If we don't know the work of Jean Renoir, Federico Fellini, Ingmar Bergman and Akira Kurosawa, our cinematic vocabulary is limited.

Only by knowing where cinema has come from—by knowing, for example, what constitutes the essential qualities of the French New Wave, of Italian neorealism or of American film noir—can we understand where film is now and perhaps participate in where it is going.

Now this is a risky business because it means being willing to fill our minds with all kinds of images and all kinds of thoughts from all kinds of people. Of course, implicit in all of this is the necessity of watching contemporary movies. We need to know the state of the art and to observe the work of the great living directors. It's also important to pay attention to what makes certain films financially successful. Steven Spielberg's success is only partly due to his directorial talent. There are other directors as good as, if not better, but no director in cinema history has ever

combined such excellent craftsmanship with such an astonishing sensitivity to the state of popular culture. He has a sixth sense for what our dreams are, and he's constantly visualizing them for us. When he speaks about his work, he talks as much about the audience as he does about his films. He's making films because he wants people to see them. And as he's gotten older he seems to be making films that are not only entertaining but also rich in thematic and historical ideas. *Schindler's List* and *Saving Private Ryan* will certainly go down in cinema history as two of the great artistic achievements of the '90s.

Excellence in filmmaking is always dependent upon great writing. Those who want to work in cinema must develop their writing skills. My University of Southern California thesis film *Love in the Ruins* played in many film festivals, won numerous awards and even got me a good agent—but it didn't get me a job. If the studios are looking for a young first-time feature film director for a project, they are far more inclined to pull somebody from the pool of top music video directors or commercial directors than to hire a film school graduate who has made a great short film. The best way into a first-time feature directing job is to write a script somebody wants so much that, in order to get it, that person is willing to risk letting the writer direct it.

The second requisite for success in the business of making movies is often hard for Christians to tackle. Anyone who wants to succeed in this business has to be willing to wrestle with difficult ideas and situations. It's a complicated business, and film is a complicated art form. To succeed at it, a person has to be willing to get into the messiness of dealing with the issues of sex and violence. The Christian tendency is to oversimplify these issues. I've read many Christian periodicals that evaluate the "acceptability" of a film solely by the amount of sex, violence and profanity it contains. Those publications count the cuss words and describe the frequency and intensity of the episodes of sex and violence. I always secretly wish they would make such an "evaluation" of the Bible. If they applied their standards of acceptability to Holy Scripture, it would surely be found "unacceptable." Much of the Bible is profane, violent and lurid, yet it's a profoundly moral book. The moral quality of a movie is not determined by its MPAA rating. Of course, there is such a thing as excessive violence or gratuitous sex, but we have to become much more thoughtful about how we determine what constitutes excessiveness or unacceptability.

Taxi Driver, one of my favorite films of all time, has taught me more about filmmaking than any other picture. It's a very violent movie that inspired a real-life act of violence—John Hinckley's shooting of President Ronald Reagan. It's also a

great work of art, a film that captures a profound sense of human loneliness and examines how urban America breeds alienation—and the film does so with great compassion.

In contrast, *Reservoir Dogs*, though it has far less on-screen violence than *Taxi Driver*, stylizes violence in such a way that it makes murder seem trivial and even amusing. In biblical language, the film seems to be “calling good that which is evil.” Its hip irony will be lost on most viewers—especially the young and uneducated. Though it is a very well-constructed and fascinating film which should be seen by those interested in cinema, it is neither truthful nor responsible.

My work in the horror genre has made me controversial among Christians. But as a Christian, I defend horror films. No other genre offers audiences a more spiritual view of the world, and no other genre communicates a more clearly defined moral perspective. Haunted-house films like *Poltergeist* and *The Uninvited* offer a perspective rare in cinema—the recognition that there actually is a spiritual realm. Zombie films like *Dawn of the Dead* are satirical indictments of American consumerism, but they also present the uniquely Christian idea of bodily resurrection. More mainstream horror films like *Angel Heart*, *The Exorcist* and *Rosemary's Baby* explore the satanic and demonic realm with feverish moral passion. And even the so-called slasher genre ought to be appreciated as the only kind of film that makes murder truly horrific. Though slasher movies seem to take the extreme and disturbing view that if you're young and have sex, you deserve to be butchered, the usual perspective of contemporary films seems to be equally extreme in the opposite direction, for they imply that teenage sex is altogether exempt from moral judgment. More than any other genre, horror clearly communicates the distinction between good and evil.

In part, teenagers love horror films for the same reason they love roller coasters—most of them are thrill seekers and adrenaline junkies. Their lives are so full of pressures and extreme feelings that they look for an outlet or an escape. Drugs often become their escape, and real-life violence occasionally becomes their outlet. Far more healthy outlets are cathartic art forms such as rock music, which articulates their displaced feelings, and horror films, which tap into their primal fears. Horror films allow people to experience fear in a safe environment. They provide a safe psychic release valve for repressed fear and anxiety.

Violence is not just a youth issue—it tends to be a distinctively male issue. We don't see young girls shooting up their schools. David Fincher's film *Fight Club* holds a key to understanding tragedies like that at Columbine High School. Fincher's film explores the way American culture relentlessly tries to turn young boys into consumers, leading some to a primal reaction of violent rebellion and an angry search for identity. Dylan Klebold and Eric Harris had found no spiritual father figure to emulate, and they lived in an upper-middle-class culture that worshiped a consumer aesthetic of beauty and popularity from which they felt forever excluded. They lashed out in a way that they thought was hip and cool. They were obsessed with video games that depersonalize violence and reward players with points every time they shoot somebody. It came as no surprise to me when I saw a picture of Klebold wearing a *Reservoir Dogs* T-shirt. What would have surprised me, however, would have been to discover that Harris and Klebold were horror-film fanatics. Horror films offer a moral worldview in which murder is evil and terrifying, not stylish and trivial.

Trying to be both an artist and a Christian involves one in an inevitable tension. While religion draws lines and sets boundaries, the role of the artist is to stretch boundaries, to find new ways of looking at things, to question, to break free of constraints. An artist who wants to remain a part of the Christian community will be forced to live in the tension between the two roles. An artist who is also a practicing Christian can't be entirely free. The restrictions of Christian boundaries and requirements push and pull against the artistic responsibility to stretch and redefine them. The late Christian singer Mark Heard summed up the dilemma when he sang, "I'm too sacred for the sinners, and the saints wish I would leave."

The church loves truth in its prescriptive form, truth that says, "Here's what's wrong, and here's how you fix it. Here's the diagnosis, and here's the cure." The truth of the artist, although far more often descriptive, is still truth. Church people are uncomfortable with too much descriptive truth. It's often ugly, confusing, disorienting, problematic, wild and sensual. But prescriptive and descriptive truth don't cancel each other out. They coexist. Films and screenplays can contain prescriptive truth, but unless they're also saturated with descriptive truth they won't work. The most common problem of Christian art is that it tries to get to grace too quickly. It's uncomfortable with tension. It's uneasy with any questions left hanging.

My work on *Hellraiser: Inferno* was in some ways a personal rebellion against all this. I wanted to make a movie about sin and damnation that ended with sin and

damnation. After all, isn't that the experience of many people? Isn't that descriptively true? Some Christians who have seen that film like to quote Philippians 4:8 to me: "Whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report . . . think on these things." And I have to stop them and say, "Wait a minute, what was the first thing you said? Whatsoever things are true." Things that are true are not necessarily lovely, and St. Paul is not saying that all the qualities he lists together have to characterize everything. Perhaps truth is named first for a reason.

Filmmakers must be willing to portray pure descriptive truth, and recognize that it's impossible to prescribe answers unless the questions have been properly asked. If we create with an agenda that people perceive before they feel the descriptive truthfulness of our story, they'll resist it. Why? Because we are giving them propaganda, not art. Every "Christian film" I've ever seen is propaganda. Christian films are often resistible because Christian screenwriters have the habit of writing about what they believe instead of about what really moves them.

People love Ingmar Bergman's films even though they may find his view of the world antithetical to theirs. Bergman's films are about a world in which God has not communicated with humanity. God is silent. Yet his films are irresistible even to those who strongly disagree with him. They so truthfully describe his experience that we cannot help but be drawn into them. We not only understand what he is saying; we also come to better understand that part of ourselves that doubts, and sometimes wonders where God has gone.

Nothing is more easily resisted than subcultural religious language. One of our primary responsibilities as artists and Christians is to invent a new language for old ideas. It is impossible for me to successfully talk with people in Hollywood about sin and salvation. Those words are no longer alive for them. Words are socially born and they socially die, and we have killed off much of our Christian language. In popular culture, words like "sin" and "salvation" have connotations and associative meanings that are so antiquated and negative that it's impossible to use them effectively. What artists can do is to take the truth of sin, the truth of salvation, the truth of redemption and find new ways of representing them. *Love in the Ruins* is the parable of the good Samaritan retold in a Los Angeles gas station. *Hellraiser: Inferno* is about the enslaving chains of sin that can lead to eternal damnation; it is about how, without God's mercy, our flesh tears away at our spirit.

To succeed as a filmmaker who is also a Christian, I must be committed to maintaining my own spiritual health. I must be an active member of a church, a Christian community, even if I don't agree with or like everything about that community. To succeed in Hollywood as a Christian, one needs the support of other Christians. Many Christians in the film business have developed a unique ability to compartmentalize their faith. Their lives are like a TV dinner, and their faith is like the upper-left-hand section where the corn always goes. When they're with Christians they cover up the rest of the tray and keep their faith on display. Their job is the main section where the Salisbury steak goes, and they uncover that when they're working. The dessert section is made up of their spouses, hobbies or even their addictions.

Christianity is not meant to be lived like that. A real Christian must love Christ as much when he is around the studio head as when he is around the pastor. That doesn't mean that we must shout the name of Jesus at inappropriate times. Jesus himself was very clever about how and when he spoke about God, and we should be similarly mindful. The Christian filmmaker, a sheep among wolves, must be "shrewd as a serpent and as innocent as a dove."

A studio president once asked me if I believed in angels and demons. (My writing partner, Paul Boardman, and I had written them into a script the studio head had just purchased.) Sensing that he was really wanting to know if I was a Christian with an agenda, I said, "I think what I believe is irrelevant. What's important is that people want to believe in spiritual realities." He thought for a minute and seemed to decide that he didn't really care what I believed, just so long as I wasn't there to proselytize him or the audience. He nodded, the meeting went on and the subject never came up again. I didn't deny my faith. I simply didn't answer the question—a little trick I learned from Christ himself.

On the other hand, I was very forthright with the executives at the Disney studios about a script my partner and I are working on for a film called *The Mystic*. It was very important to me that the executives knew up front that, as a Christian, I would insist on portraying the film's Appalachian snake-handling Christians in a thoughtful and dignified manner. They actually seemed pleased to know that the material was personally significant to me. It's important to pick one's battles.

And finally, one does have to be willing to turn down a job in order to preserve one's integrity. After *Hellraiser: Inferno* I was offered a seven-figure deal for two movies

which my partner and I would write and I would direct. But the studio's offer also included an option for six more films at other prices. It was one of the hardest decisions of my life, but we rejected this offer. Knowing the kind of films this studio wanted me to make, I realized that they would give me plenty of money and work, but in five years I would not be making the kinds of movies I want to be making.

Some Christians pride themselves on losing a job because they refuse to compromise. They consider it a moral victory when their integrity gets them thrown off a set. But it's a sad thing to lose a job for any reason. So I'm not saying, "Go out there and fail for Jesus!" I'm just saying be willing to pay the price when you have to.