

The Passion of the Marketers

By Sharon Waxman
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In the summer blockbuster movie *Mr. and Mrs. Smith*, from 20th Century Fox, Brad Pitt and Angelina Jolie play godless suburbanites and professional assassins. But when they steal their neighbor's car for an extended chase scene, a crucifix hangs conspicuously from the rearview mirror, and in the next scene the actors wear borrowed jackets that read "Jesus Rocks," as they go on the lam.

"We decided to make the next-door neighbor, whose crucifix it is, be hip, young, cool Christians," explained the movie's director, Doug Liman. "It's literally in there for no other reason than I thought, This is cool."

Mr. Liman isn't alone. Mainstream Hollywood, after decades of ignoring the pious - or occasionally defying them with the likes of Martin Scorsese's revisionist *Last Temptation of Christ* and Kevin Smith's profane parody *Dogma* - is adjusting to what it perceives to be a rising religiosity in American culture.

Certainly, the odd provocation still occurs. Billboards for the heavy-metal rocker Rob Zombie's *Devil's Rejects*, set for release on Friday by Lions Gate Films, shows a murderous band of outlaws in a pose that mimics the Last Supper.

More often, though, producers, directors, studio executives and marketing specialists have been looking to either mollify or entice an audience that made its power felt with last year's *Passion of the Christ*. That film, directed by Mel Gibson, took in an astonishing \$370 million at the domestic box office when released by Newmarket Films in February 2004 and - along with the empowerment of a Christian conservative bloc after the last presidential election - helped change attitudes and practices in an industry usually known for its secularism.

"Mel Gibson did us a service," said Bob Waliszewski, a media specialist with Focus on the Family, an evangelical group that was invited with about 30 other such organizations last February to see an early trailer of Disney's *Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*. The studio, which is producing *Narnia* along with Walden Media, is making a concerted push to include Christian organizations throughout the production and marketing of what it hopes will become a major franchise. (The film is to open in December.)

"The Hollywood elites' eyes widened big time," Mr. Waliszewski said. "They said, 'I thought the church was dead. I didn't think people cared. Is it possible that we don't know what's happening in state after state?' And the answer is a resounding yes."

Evangelical and fundamentalist Christians number an estimated 30 million in the United States, and Hollywood - faced with a prolonged slump in ticket sales - has followed its natural instincts in trying to tap one of the country's most powerful niche markets.

"There's definitely more of an awareness, but it's just another group to be marketed to, albeit a very strong one, with incredible grass-roots tentacles," said Russell Schwartz, president of theatrical marketing at New Line Cinema, a Time Warner company.

Universal Pictures' vice chairman, Marc Shmuger, said, "It's a well-formed community, it's identifiable, it has very specific tastes and preferences and is therefore a group that can be located and can be directly marketed to." He added, "In every fashion, you need to customize your message to your audience."

In some cases, such customizing has meant sanding the edges off dialogue that might offend churchgoers. For example, the actor Peter Sarsgaard, speaking at a tribute to his work during the Seattle Film Festival recently, said he was instructed to strike the word "Jesus" from his dialogue during shooting this year of the forthcoming Disney thriller *Flightplan*.

"They said: 'You can't say that. You can't take the Lord's name in vain,' " Mr. Sarsgaard said he was told by the film's producers. He said he offered to say the line more reverently, but "they wouldn't buy it. I had to say 'shoot,' and that isn't as good."

Similarly, studios throughout the industry have been turning to newly minted experts in Christian marketing to scan their family-friendly scripts for objectionable content and to devise marketing plans to reach the Christian audience.

Paul Lauer, who on his Web site calls himself an expert in the "faith and family" market, has been hired to work on *The Chronicles of Narnia*, based on the C. S. Lewis literary fantasies, which Christian groups regard as an explicit allegory of Christ's Resurrection. Jonathan Bock, a former sitcom writer who founded Grace Hill Media to specialize in Christian marketing, was hired to help sell Universal's *Cinderella Man*, Fox's *Kingdom of Heaven* and Sony Pictures' *Christmas With the Kranks*. And he is currently advising Sony on what is likely to be one of the most problematic movies of the coming year for Christian moviegoers, *The Da Vinci Code*, based on the best-selling novel that challenges basic Christian dogma.

Mr. Bock declined to discuss any of his current projects specifically, saying only by e-mail message that "we have roughly a dozen studio projects between now through the summer of 2006." He said he had already worked on 11 movies this year.

Sony declined to discuss plans for *The Da Vinci Code*. But Mr. Schwartz of New Line Cinema said Mr. Bock reviewed the script for that studio's 2004 Hilary Duff movie, *Raise Your Voice*, about a small-town girl at a Los Angeles performing arts school, to see if it would appeal to Christian moviegoers. Mr. Bock said it might. By contrast, he found New Line's recent PG-rated *Son of the Mask*, about an infant empowered by a magical mask, too rough for Christian audiences.

The meaning of the term “Christian moviegoer” may vary from one movie professional to another. But over all, specialists talk repeatedly about affirming Christian values and biblical truths. They speak about removing all profanity and explicitly evoking Jesus and prayer and church attendance.

Marketing specialists and Christian producers are urging the studios not only to expunge objectionable language, but also to include more openly Christian symbols and characters in scripts.

Universal, for example, showed *Ray* at various churches to promote it by word of mouth but learned that while churchgoers loved the film, they objected to profanity using the word “God.”

The director Taylor Hackford, who had already expunged from the script stronger four-letter obscenities to satisfy his Christian financier, Philip F. Anschutz, made the choice not to edit the film further. But it cost the studio the active support of some church advocates.

Mr. Hackford, who says he is not religious, said that Mr. Anschutz’s restrictions forced him to be more creative in making *Ray*. “It’s impossible for Hollywood not to reflect the nature of the country, and Bush has made his religion clear,” he said. “People in Hollywood aren’t stupid. It flies in the face of what I believe, but you’re still working in the movie industry, not the movie art form.”

Some studios are even becoming involved in producing overtly religious fare, though it is far different from that of an earlier era, with its warmhearted priestly portrayals by Pat O’Brien, Spencer Tracy and Bing Crosby.

Sony, for instance, has partnered with the Christian production company Cloud Ten Pictures to make the third installment of the *Left Behind* series, about the end of days. “We started coming to Hollywood in early 2003 to tell the studios, ‘There’s this business out there,’ ” said Peter Lalonde, chief executive of Cloud Ten, who works in partnership with his brother Paul. “We offer an understanding of the marketplace; they have the capital and the distribution clout. My vision is to build a faith-based genre. I think there’s an audience out there that devours this material.”

The first two *Left Behind* films, based on the best-selling books by Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins, proved the point; the second one, released in 2002, sold more than 2.5 million DVD’s, according to Cloud Ten.

For the most part, specialists say, Hollywood still does not really know the Christian viewer. “They don’t understand the audience as well as they should,” said Chris Bueno, a producer in Carmel, Calif., who makes small Christian-theme movies. He recalled a Hollywood producer who recently tried to insert Christianity into a television movie by having a character fall to his knees on a beach and say the Lord’s Prayer. He declined to name the producer.

“Christians aren’t going to do that, it’s a cliché,” Mr. Bueno said. “Not that they don’t pray; they do. But it seemed contrived.”

According to Mr. Bock, the consultant, many in Hollywood make the mistake of assuming Christian moviegoers are vastly different from the average audience. “The truth is, followers of Christ are everywhere and everyday folks,” he wrote in an e-mail message.

“It would naturally follow,” he wrote, “that a large percentage of Christians are watching - and enjoying - *Desperate Housewives*, *The Amazing Race*, *American Idol* and even Red Sox-Yankee games.”

And just to complicate matters, a new study by a leading Hollywood marketing firm, MarketCast, suggested that not only do Christians watch mainstream entertainment, but the most conservative among them are also drawn to violent fare.

The study of 1,000 moviegoers asked respondents to define their level of religiosity and their leanings, whether conservative, traditional or liberal, based on a list of social issues. About 70 percent of respondents said they were “somewhat” or “very” religious. The researchers found that “when it comes to popular movies and popular shows, tastes don’t differ at all” between religious and nonreligious, said Joseph Helfgot, president of MarketCast. “What you find is that people with conservative religious doctrine are the most likely to see movies rated R for violence. If you compared it to liberals, it’s a third more.”

Mr. Helfgot concluded that catering to the religious audience was trickier than it might at first appear, and that Hollywood would do well to explore those complications. “There’s a wind going through the production community about responding to religion,” he said. “But when it comes to movies, people distinguish between moral issues and entertainment issues. And most people, even the very religious, are very happy with their movies.”