

SAINT SONY: DELIVERER OF CHRISTIAN CONTENT FOR THE EVANGELICAL MARKET

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Many evangelical Christians distance themselves from the mainstream commercial culture, because they perceive mainstream media and popular culture to promulgate immoral messages through representations such as sex and violence. This disconnect from Hollywood have made evangelicals a tough audience to market. Sony, however, has been able to connect with the evangelical market by producing a line of contemporary Christian films through their in-house division Affirm Films. By prioritizing the narratives of their films *Heaven is for Real*, *War Room*, and *Miracles From Heaven* to focus on contemporary Christian characters, conflicts, and settings, Sony is able to attract the evangelical audience with films that align with their conservative belief system.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

#### 1.1 Introduction

From 2014-2016, Sony, through their Christian division Affirm Films, produced a string of Christian films that include *Heaven is for Real* (2014), *When The Game Stands Tall* (2014), *War Room* (2015), *Risen* (2016), *The Young Messiah* (2016), and *Miracles From Heaven* (2016). This thesis will focus its attention on Sony's contemporary films *Heaven is for Real*, *War Room*, and *Miracles From Heaven* that were produced on relatively low budgets<sup>1</sup>. *Heaven*, *War Room*, and *Miracles* have often been labeled as "faith-based films" by popular media outlets, but my thesis refers to them as "contemporary Christian films". I believe the term "faith-based" is rather loose, because it can be appropriated to define religious films that are not Christian-oriented and can mistakenly include biblical-based films and disregard the emphasis of the need to be contemporary. In her textbook *Religion and Film* (2007), Melanie J. Wright's study focuses on films of different degrees of religious context and representations with such case studies including *The Ten Commandments* (1956), *The Wicker Man* (1973), and *Keeping the Faith* (2000). She defines that films that operate with religion in a more direct fashion deal with "religious characters, conflicts, or texts; are dependent upon religious narratives or traditions for plot or narrative; and/or make use of religion for character definitions; or set in the context of a religious community or communities" (Wright 2007: 7). Following in accordance with Wright's definition, I am tailoring contemporary Christian films as films that revolve around

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<sup>1</sup> Although *When The Game Stands Tall* is a contemporary film by Sony, I decided to not cover it because the discussion of Christianity is neither as explicit nor as consistent in comparison to the other films. I also decided not to discuss *Risen* or *The Young Messiah* because they are biblical based narratives rather than contemporary ones.

contemporary Christian characters and settings, narratives that depict Christian practices and representations, and the spiritual growth of characters.

My thesis examines how Sony's contemporary Christian films have been popular media choices with the evangelical audience. Evangelical Christians stress great importance and priority on living a Christ-influenced lifestyle, there is a tendency to filter mainstream media consumption through strict adherence to the Bible. James Russell (2010) articulates, "Some self-professed evangelicals tend towards fundamentalist interpretations of Biblical scripture and have sought a degree of cultural isolation, seeing themselves as separate from, if not actively opposed to, mainstream media culture" (393). Popular media, particularly Hollywood films and television that feature subject matter such as gratuitous sex, violence, vulgar language, etc., are met with objection. As a result, many evangelical Christians distance themselves from Hollywood and other forms of mainstream media they may deem profane or divergent from their conservative morals and beliefs.

While many evangelicals cast criticism at Hollywood for a perceived lack of Christian content, they also have the desire to have their values represented within mainstream media as well. This includes narratives that are able to spiritually galvanize them with characters and settings they can relate with and return to. My thesis aims to analyze how Sony's films are able to attract the evangelical audience because they offer narratives that align with their conservative belief system by disseminating Christian rhetoric, revolve around melodramatic stories that they are more-or-less familiar with, and contain characters and conflicts that they are able to relate to and learn from.

## 1.2 Evangelical Christians: Who Are They and What Are Their Views Regarding Mainstream Media?

According to a 2015 survey by the Pew Research Center, 70.6% of Americans identified themselves as Christian, and approximately 25.4% of Christians identified themselves as evangelical (Pew Research 2015). Evangelicalism is a movement that embraces various branches and denominations of Christianity such as “fundamentalists, mainline Protestant evangelicals, the Holiness movement, and Pentecostals” (Fisher 2011: 363) whom focus on the “born-again” experience of Christianity. Evangelicalism entails that an individual is “born-again” through conversion and indoctrination of biblical scripture upon the eventual “second coming” of Jesus Christ. According to Mary Pat Fisher (2011), the evangelical movement is defined in four characteristics:

1. Biblicalism: a particular and constant regard for the Bible
2. Crucicentrism: a stress on the atoning sacrifice of Jesus on the cross
3. Conversionism: conviction that lives need to be changed
4. Activism: the expression of the gospel in effort (363)

Evangelicals’ strict adherence to the Bible as the infallible word of their God and their sense of divine duty to share the Gospel frequently associates as a morally and politically conservative population (Hendershot 2004: 2). Heather Hendershot (2004) even points out that, “evangelicals tend to see themselves not as a *type* of Christian but as the only true Christians; they have found the one true path to heaven” (2). Evangelicals’ conservatism extends to their critique of the American public.

The conservative, evangelical mentality aligns with Rebecca Moore’s (2005) framework of “fundamentalism.” Fundamentalism is a “catch-all phrase” that widely includes many

conservative religious groups and movements (that are not solely exclusive to Christianity) whom stand in opposition of the social beliefs of the modern world (Moore 2007: 88). While many evangelicals actually perceive the term “fundamentalist” as a pejorative due to separatist connotations (Hendershot 2004), they do share a fundamentalist worldview regarding modern life. Moore explains, “Fundamentalists are responding to what they see as the weaknesses and dangers of the world in which we live. They resist accommodation to what they believe are evil and or ungodly social structures” (2005: 88). Criticism and refusal to conform to society spawn from evangelicals’ discernment that the American public-sphere is in a moral decline. These “ungodly social structures” are depicted through political and social liberalism that encourages issues such as women’s rights (particularly abortion), gay marriage, sex education, etc. This critique of liberalism also extends to both popular culture and mass media. Motivated by a perceived wickedness inherent within American public sphere, one that is believed to be valued more than God, many evangelicals stand intransigent to the vast majority of mainstream commercial culture.

Although many evangelicals may avoid or denounce mainstream media, there is no unanimous evangelical attitude because evangelicalism encompasses a wide diversity of Christian denominations, organizations and other theological institutions. According to Quentin J. Schultze (1996), many evangelicals continue to cast criticism at Hollywood and choose media with Christian-oriented subject matter, but there are a proportion of evangelicals who do not monitor their media choices in such stringent manner. He explains, “Evangelicals’ perspective on the media is best understood as the interplay between opposing views of culture—a majority view that optimistically believes the media can be used successfully to transform

culture to the will of God and the opposing minority view that pessimistic identifies the media with apostate culture" (61). Although there are contrasting stances towards mainstream media, evangelicals do share mutual agreement on basic tenets about media; media has the ability to spread the Gospel and teach nonbelievers of Christian salvation, yet it also retains the power to undermine and threaten Christian faith (Schultze 1996: 64-65).

For the evangelicals who do oppose most of mainstream media their staunch apprehension have firmly established them as a tough market segment for major Hollywood studios to attract. Russell suggests, "Arguably, the lack of obvious religious content in Hollywood films has often only served to confirm the evangelical assumption that Hollywood is an essentially irreligious institution, and to bolster the power of independent production networks" (2010: 396). However, "religious" is a nebulous term that charters a vast territory for potential myriad of narratives that display or focus on a certain measure of a divine reality, the curiosities of a divine presence within human affairs, etc. that are not just limited to Christianity. Additionally, despite the evangelical perception of a lack of mainstream religious media, Christianity, in particular, continues to have a dominant influence within popular culture and mainstream media. Wright point outs that,

The Bible was foundational for the Western literary canon, and so persists, post-Christendom, as the text that is most widely alluded to in Western literature. Likewise, it is virtually impossible to conceive of a narrative film devoid of *any* trace of the religious impulses that underpin the cultural construction of feelings, institutions, relationships, and so on (2007: 7).

But, it is also difficult to provide a descriptive taxonomy of a "Christian film", this leaves one to ask: To what degree must a mainstream film contain elements of Christianity to be considered a "Christian film"?

### 1.3 Filtering the Ambiguity: Films that Depict Christianity in Direct Fashion

Amongst the more explicit examples of Christian films are biblical epics. Biblical epics are cinematic traditions that retell holy history by adapting stories from sacred texts such as the Bible (Anker 2009: 335). According to Bruce Babbington and Peter William Evans (1993), biblical epics serve as an umbrella that covers three sub-genres: The Old Testament Epic, The Christ Film, and The Roman/Christian Epic (the beginnings of post-Christ Christianity) (4). In 2014, Hollywood produced a string of biblical epics with *Noah*, *Exodus: Gods and Kings*, and *Son of God*. *Noah* and *Exodus*, respectively, adapt the stories of Noah building the Ark and Moses freeing Jewish slaves from Egyptian rule, while *Son of God* revolves around the Gospels of Jesus Christ from his early teachings to crucifixion. Although these epics bring viewers a sense of proximity to such notable biblical figures, there is a paradoxical sense of disconnect due to the historical distance. For the most part, epics prioritize the dramatization of a biblical figure's narrative and actions to awe audiences with cinematic spectacle. This recreation and dramatization of holy history can neglect depicting a biblical figure's own exploration of their faith. Roy M. Anker (2009) acknowledges this limitation with biblical epics writing, "By and large, though, they do not explore, except, perhaps by implication, the usually complex interiority of belief, meaning its rationale, either intellectually or psycho-emotionally, within the life of belief" (336). Films of Noah, Moses, and Jesus focus on their actions in accordance of a divine presence suitable for uncivilized lands or the tyrannical rule of empires. Thus, there is a lack of situational relatability between viewers and these biblical figures.

In the late-2000s, one independent company that emerged as a prominent producer of contemporary Christian releases is Sherwood Pictures. Sherwood Pictures developed as an in-

house company from their evangelical congregation Sherwood Baptist Church in Albany, Georgia. Under the direction of brothers Alex and Stephen Kendrick, both of whom originally joined Sherwood as a minister of media and an associate minister with virtually no proper filmmaking training, developed Sherwood Pictures as an economical producer of independent contemporary Christian films (Parker 2012: 59). From 2003-2011, Sherwood Pictures produced four feature-length films: *Flywheel* (2003), *Facing the Giants* (2005), *Fireproof* (2008), and *Courageous* (2011). Although Sherwood’s films were produced on diminutive budgets, they were able to haul in prodigious box office numbers after *Flywheel*<sup>2</sup>.

Table 1.1

*Sherwood Pictures’ Box Office Performances*

Sherwood Film	Budget	Domestic Box Office Gross
<i>Flywheel</i>	\$20,000	\$37,000
<i>Facing the Giants</i>	\$100,000	\$10,200,000
<i>Fireproof</i>	\$500,000	\$33,500,000
<i>Courageous</i>	\$2,000,000	\$33,456,317

Sherwood Pictures established themselves as a moviemaking ministry able to connect with the evangelical audience by removing the ambiguity and placing Christianity as the focus of their films. Sherwood crafted the formula of creating narratives that directly deal with Christian conflicts and practices, and prioritizing their marketing towards evangelicals. Despite

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<sup>2</sup> The box office statistics of Sherwood’s films were collected from *IMDb*; accessed on March 17, 2017.

their successes with *Fireproof* and *Courageous*, however, Sherwood's filmmaking practices failed to attract attention from mainstream Hollywood studios.

PureFlix's *God's Not Dead* became another unexpected contemporary Christian box office hit. In contrast to biblical films with prodigious Hollywood budgets, *God's Not Dead* was produced on a small budget of \$1.15 million, and immensely exceeded expectations by amounting more than \$9 million its opening weekend and grossing over \$62 million during its domestic run<sup>3</sup>; thus, *God's Not Dead* would outpace the aforementioned epics in regards to profit percentage. Sherwood Pictures set a new financial standard with *Courageous* and *Fireproof*, but *God's Not Dead* raised the bar regarding potential profit for relatively low budget Christian films that focused on contemporary narratives rather than sword-and-sandal biblical stories.

#### 1.4 Sony and Affirm Films' Emergence as the Forefront of Contemporary Christian Films

Sony and their Christian division Affirm Films not only continued this pattern of low budget Christian films, but also would essentially take over as the forefront producer of Christian films with *Heaven is for Real*, *War Room*, and *Miracles From Heaven* each able to generate exceptional box office revenue that mirrored similar results as *God's Not Dead*.<sup>4</sup>

*Forbes* reveals that Sony's contemporary Christian films have immensely outpaced their biblical counterparts in regards to profit percentage writing,

Many of them are mainstream melodramas, the kind of star-driven dramas that we say Hollywood doesn't make anymore, that just happen to have faith-driven angle while

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<sup>3</sup> Box office statistics of *God's Not Dead* were collected from *IMDb*; accessed March 17, 2017.

<sup>4</sup> The box office statistics of Sony's films were collected from *IMDb*; accessed March 17, 2017.

being (mostly) family-friendly to boot...And it's a reminder that mounting mega-budget fantasy isn't the only way to make money in Hollywood. For Sony, keeping the faith has meant rolling in the green (Mendelson 2016).

Table 1.2

*Sony's Box Office Performances*

Sony Film	Production Budget	Domestic Box Office Gross
<i>Heaven is for Real</i>	\$12,000,000	\$91,443,253
<i>War Room</i>	\$3,000,000	\$67,790,117
<i>Miracles From Heaven</i>	\$13,000,000	\$61,693,523

While evangelicals go to great lengths to shape and limit their consumption habits to uphold their conservative Christian values, they are fueling a Hollywood corporation that continues to produce media that do not reflect their belief system. This results in the unique conundrum and irony of evangelicals consuming Sony's Christian films, and therefore, to some extent, endorsing a studio that *also* produces media that blatantly violates their values and ideals. For instance, the revenue Sony generates from their Christian films may, to some extent, become the financial backing for other films that contain subject matter that evangelical Christians would be quick to denounce. So, yes, evangelicals may only consume Sony's Christian films, and so on the one hand seem to be achieving a reflective equilibrium of their conservative morals, but on the other hand, they are also supporting a studio that produces many types of media, including those which evangelical Christians view as corrupting Christian values. Despite evangelical Christians' efforts to distance themselves from mainstream media,

they are generating the revenue that allows Sony to further produce media they have continuously objected.

Sony has been successful in following in the footsteps of Sherwood and Pure Flix by producing contemporary Christian films on low budgets for greater profit potential, but Sony's financial rewards from evangelical support are due to placing Christianity at the forefront of their films. Although the oppositional evangelical market consumes media that continues to fuel mainstream media companies, they only choose a selective proportion of media. I refer to Stuart Hall's essay "Encoding/Decoding" (1973), which articulates how individuals accept, reject or compromise with media choices based on their social consciousness. An individual's social consciousness can include one's gender, age, religious affiliation, sexual orientation, and one's personal set of beliefs, values, and morals. Evangelicals' beliefs and morals factor into their decision-making for media that they perceive to more-or-less align with their views. To attract the evangelical audience, Sony not only prioritizes Christianity as the main focus of their films, but they also replicate narrative conventions that are similar to Sherwood and Pure Flix. Evangelicals' media choices include routine consumption habits and media they are familiar with. Sony's narratives bring evangelicals a sense of familiarity and comfort by providing narratives with Christian characters and relatable conflicts. With Sony providing films that evangelicals are accustomed to watching, this can make their decision-making process easier because of preference.

My goal of this thesis is to articulate that evangelicals not only choose media that they view as appropriate, but they also desire media that they can view as inspirational and can transform and develop their Christian identities. Building off of Hall, I explain how trailers are

often people's primary source of learning about upcoming films and media producers' first means of communication between consumers. Trailers are Sony's earliest attempt to gain the trust of the evangelical audience, and evangelicals watch and decide whether they want to see Sony's films or not. I turn to Charlotte Sun Jensen (2014) and Lisa Kernan (2004) to elaborate that Sony's trailers prioritize Christianity by the emotional and spiritual appeal of familiarity through the melodrama genre and representations of Christian conflicts and practices. Sony's media producers assemble their trailers with images they assume evangelicals wish to see in terms of family-friendly content that upholds their worldview. This also includes presenting confined contemporary cinematic worlds that evangelicals can view as similar their own. I refer to W.J. Potter (1988), who focuses on perceived realities depicted through media, to articulate the perceived authenticity of each film's diegesis bridges a connection between evangelicals and the characters. The verisimilitude of Sony's characters, settings and conflicts give greater credibility for Christian discourse, which allows Sony's narratives to be viewed as pedagogic and spiritually galvanize the evangelical audience.

## 1.5 Chapter Overviews

Chapter 2 brings more focus on evangelicals' relationship with popular culture and mainstream media. Hall is concerned with how messages of televisual discourse are conveyed in the language of a culture's hegemonic power structures, primarily, how media producers are privileged in positions of power that allow them to construct messages that uphold dominant ideologies of a culture. Hall emphasizes that media producers encode media's messages with

dominant beliefs and ideals, but individuals who receive those messages possess agency by producing their own “reading”. He explains,

By the word *reading* we mean not only the capacity to identify and decode a certain number of signs, but also the subjective capacity to put them into a creative relation between themselves and with other signs: a capacity which is, by itself, the condition for a complete awareness of one’s total environment (1973: 84).

Despite opposition with mainstream media, evangelicals have been vocal about wanting to see more family-friendly mainstream films with Christian-oriented narratives. In order to tap into the evangelical market Sony provides clean entertainment that reflect Christian ideology in order to develop a social and economic relationship with the evangelical audience.

Chapter 3 further articulates how Sony is able to gain the trust of the evangelical audience by deconstructing their films’ trailers that promote Christian rhetoric. Sony’s marketing strategies entail more than trailers to reach evangelical audiences, but trailers function as the main driving force for film companies because of their reachability from theater spectatorship and across many online platforms. I also focus on Sony’s trailers, because trailers are the first messages that most viewers will come across to decide to see any film. In this chapter, I argue that Sony’s trailers aim to ideologically persuade evangelical audiences through the use of Christian rhetoric. My analysis refers to Charlotte Sun Jensen’s essay “Reduced Narration, Intensified Emotion: The Film Trailer” (2014) which articulates that trailers are designed to be “monomaniac” or to focus on a particular emotion of the film’s genre to arouse the emotional registry of viewers. With Sony films as Christian melodramas, I deconstruct their trailers via the following elements: 1) the reliance of a recognizable genre, 2) inclusion of identifiable characters whose values reflect the audiences’ 3) representations of Christian practices and/or symbols of Christian ideology and 4) use of popular Christian music. By

prioritizing these elements of appeal, I will analyze how Sony's trailers are arranged to galvanize evangelical audiences by engendering spiritual galvanization. As the first means of communication between producers and consumers, Sony's trailers function to gain the trust and initial intrigue of the evangelical audience.

Chapter 4 is a formal critical analysis of *Heaven is for Real*, *War Room*, and *Miracles From Heaven*. In this chapter, I argue that these films function as parables. Parables are commonly found throughout the Bible as open-ended and metaphorical stories that challenge readers' moral and ethical knowledge. Accordingly, I organize this chapter by separately analyzing a concept of spirituality that each film revolves around; prayer for *War Room*, belief in heaven for *Heaven is for Real*, and the struggle of one's faith for *Miracles From Heaven*. With each section, I argue that the ultimate goal of discussion for each film is repentance. The protagonists of Sony's films each display their own degree of lack of Christian practice or a disbelief in God.

The conclusion reflects on the ability of Sony and Affirm Films to connect with the evangelical audience, and how their successes have established contemporary Christian films as a practice to be replicated by other media companies. I also suggest limitations and areas of future research that the can continue the study of the relationship between contemporary Christian films and the evangelical audience.

## CHAPTER 2

### EVANGELICAL CHRISTIANS AND THE MAINSTREAM MEDIA: WHY THE OPPOSITION AND WHERE DO THEY GET THEIR MEDIA?

#### 2.1 Introduction

*God's Not Dead* (2014) centers on Josh Wheaton (Shane Harper), an evangelical college student with aspirations of attending law school, who begins his first day of classes by enrolling in a philosophy class taught by Professor Jeffery Radisson (Kevin Sorbo). Radisson, an atheist, begins his lecture by telling his students that in order to succeed in his class they have to disavow their religious views. Radisson proceeds by ordering his students to write the declaration "God is dead" on paper as their first assignment. Josh is the only student in the class to refuse to do the assignment by stating that as a Christian he cannot. In response, Radisson requires Josh to debate the existence of God over the course of the next three class lectures in front of the class, which will decide the winner. After debating about the big bang theory and the theory of evolution for the first two debates, Josh's final defense is the question "Why do you hate God?" aimed at his professor, which ignites a fiery exchange.

Josh: Why do you hate God? You've seen the science and the arguments. Science supports his existence. You know the truth. So, why do you hate him? Why? It's a very simple question, Professor. Why do you hate God?

Radisson: Because he took everything from me. Yes, I hate God. All I have for him is hate.

Josh: How can you hate someone if they don't exist?

Following Josh and Radisson's exchange, the students start rising from their seats one by one saying "God's not dead" as they declare Josh the victor of the debate.

I refer to this brief synopsis of *God's Not Dead* as a measure to illustrate the social and power relations between mainstream media producers and evangelical consumers. Jeffery Radisson is portrayed as a member of elite institutionalism that many evangelicals view as the promoter of ideology that undermines Christianity. While Josh Wheaton is reflective of the evangelical population that seeks to spread the truth of God and detest the subversion of Christianity. In this chapter, I use Stuart Hall's essay "Encoding/Decoding" (1973) to explain evangelicals' relationship with media. Particularly, why many evangelicals mistrust mainstream media and why they have a greater tendency to consume alternative Christian media instead. In a study performed by *LifeWay Research*, "All the preaching, teaching, music and entertainment beamed by Christian TV and radio is primarily consumed by evangelicals and weekly churchgoers—the folks most often found in the pews. Meanwhile, 2 in 3 Americans are tuned out" (Smietana 2015). *LifeWay Research* also found that only 40% of consumers watched a Christian film in 2014, and 74% of that proportion consisted of evangelical Christians (Smietana 2015). Thus, it is not surprising that evangelical Christians primarily consume Christian films.

As mainstream U.S. media producers create films, they are embedding ideologies that are prevalent within popular culture and continue to permeate throughout American society. In his essay, Hall explores how producers of media (the encoders) and the consumers of media (the decoders) interpret messages differently. Ultimately, this chapter argues that Sony has been able to bridge a relationship with evangelicals by placing Christianity as the dominant ideology in their films *Heaven is for Real*, *War Room*, and *Miracles from Heaven*. By providing

the evangelical market with films that appeal to their social consciousness, Sony is able to cultivate a reliable and faithful audience.

## 2.2 Sending the Wrong Message: Evangelicals and Their Negotiation with Mainstream Media

Evangelical Christians, like all audiences, participate in personal arbitration about media through various judgments that determine their viewing choices. The media that individuals choose to consume is based on the communication that is relayed between media producers and consumers. Hall suggests that the communication between sender and receiver is an active and complex process. He argues that media producers encode dominant ideologies or beliefs that are valued within a culture as messages depicted through audio-visual representations in media, and consumers decode or interpret messages differently based on the negotiation of their social consciousness. Negotiation is more complicated than simply accepting or rejecting a message, it is about meaning making. In other words, negotiation is a process of decoding meaning for oneself.

Despite evangelicals' concerns with mainstream media's lack of Christian content, Christianity has retained an indisputable presence as the dominant religion within the mainstream culture in the U.S. While films can propagate various ideologies, some ideologies remain more prominent than others. Dominant ideologies are the set of ideas and assumptions that are most prevalent within any given culture (Benshoff 2016: 20). Dominant ideology within the United States (and other Western societies) tends to revolve around white-patriarchal-Christian-capitalism. Films and TV are media that represent messages and dominant ideologies that are organized through meanings and signs that translate into discourse. Producers include

all individuals involved with the media making process such as directors, writers, producers, and those involved with marketing, and audiences receive, interpret, and accept or reject messages. The encoding process involves media producers consciously and unconsciously deciding what and how they want their text to communicate meaning. "Reality exists outside language," Hall writes, "but it is constantly mediated by and through language: and what we can know and say has to be produced in and through discourse" (1973: 55). Discourse shapes what is knowable and speakable of social, political and cultural relations, the relationship between discourse and media can be influenced to privilege a particular point of view or perspective. Media producers create and uphold the reality of their perception through mediated images via media production.

Media producers within the mainstream Hollywood sphere dictate the discourses and images that circulate within the popular commercial culture, which incline them to produce media that best suits their economic agendas. It suffices to argue that media professionals, such as Sony's filmmakers, are linked with the elite who seek to capitalize disseminating dominant ideology. Marxist theorist Louis Althusser argues that elite members with institutional power in capitalist societies are able to replicate their desired ideologies with people through ideological state apparatuses. Ideological state apparatuses involve institutions that are able to propagate ideology without the use of force or coercion such as schools, churches, family, political parties, religious institutions and media (Stam 2000: 135). Churches are institutions that are able to promulgate Christian ideology, and media is able to exploit the indoctrination of Christianity and promote it as the dominant religion to attract Christian audiences. Media companies recognize there are varieties of market sectors that vary in age,

race, gender, and religion, and evangelicals have been identified as another profitable sector of the marketplace. Films that commodify Christianity are able to interpellate evangelicals by naturalizing Christianity as the mainstream affiliation. With Sony selling Christianity, evangelicals can justify their interest because Sony's films uphold their religion.

For Hall, popular culture is a constant power struggle between consumers and the producers who actively impose hegemonic ideologies. He explains,

Any society/culture tends with varying degrees of closure, to impose its classification of the social and cultural and political world. These constitute a *dominant cultural order*...We say 'dominant' because there exists a pattern of 'preferred readings'; and these both have the institutional/political/ideological order imprinted in them and have themselves become institutionalized (57).

Media professionals are ranked amongst selective elite that are privileged by their access to financial resources and ideological apparatuses of filmmaking of the media corporations and studios that oversee production. Despite media producers' position of power and their efforts to promote dominant ideologies via mass media, however, consumers possess agency with their abilities to read meaning and interpret ideologies.

Consumers' decoding processes occur when they are exposed to media. Within the communication process, the exchange between producer and consumer is known as a "determinate moment" (Hall 1973: 52). A determinate moment can occur for both parties: producers deciding what they choose to encode as their message, and when the consumer receives and interprets the producer's message (Hall 1973: 52). It should be noted that a consumer's determinate moment of interpreting a message is not necessarily limited to watching a film during its theatrical release. Any exposure to a film (e.g. seeing a trailer, or discussing it with a friend) involves a process of interpretation. A trailer contains the same

images and messages as its film, and audiences form opinions about the film by watching the trailer. Similarly, if one individual has seen a particular film and is discussing it with another individual who has not, the second individual would be able to determine if the film fits his/her own personal taste based off their conversation. Hall's research suggests that not every consumer is going to interpret a message in the ways that the producer(s) intended. Social location, ideologies, and personal beliefs and interests influence how individuals react and interpret cultural products or commodities (Hall 1973: 60). The ways individual consumers engage with media reveals their rejection or approval of preferred or dominant ideology.

Hall posits there are three positions that consumers establish in relation to dominant ideology.

*The dominant-hegemonic code* reading produced by the consumer who operates within dominant ideology/code and its subjectivity; *the negotiated code* reading by a majority of audiences whom recognize what ideology is defined as dominant while reserving their right to operate outside the dominant code; *the oppositional code* reading produced by those whose social situation and consciousness place them in a directly oppositional relation to dominant ideology (Hall 1973: 59-61).

Many marginalized audiences such as women, people of color, LGBT, struggle with dominant ideologies, which are arguably only representative of straight, white, educated males. All of which may require a negotiated or oppositional readings of texts that do not reflect their social consciousness.

Evangelical Christians may produce an oppositional reading and reject or filter popular media due to subject matter that creates friction with their moral values or beliefs. As an example, one of the more notable films that drew large amounts of backlash and objection from evangelical consumers was *The Wolf of Wall Street* (2013). Martin Scorsese's Oscar nominated film depicted the rise and fall of stock broker Jordan Belfort (Leonardo DiCaprio)

who built a financial empire by defrauding wealthy investors. The film stirred much controversy for evangelicals for portraying Belfort's hedonistic lifestyle through excessive and gratuitously detailed accounts of sex, drug use, and profanity; according to *Variety*, the film even set an all-time record for the usage of the word "fuck" (506 times) in a US feature film (2014). Along with moral disparagement, many Christian consumers called for boycotts of the film (Tapper 2014). Not only does the subject matter of *The Wolf of Wall Street* go against the religious core of evangelical Christianity, but can be read as the celebration of a state of sin that permeates through American society as well.

### 2.3 What Films are Evangelicals Looking For?

Evangelicals look for media that confirm and uphold their Christian beliefs and values, and most often turn to the Christian industry for their media choices. The Christian industry is an alternate media sphere that encompasses a wide spectrum of Christian producers that create media (film, TV, music, and publishing) that emphasize Christianity, and is primarily aimed at and consumed by Christian consumers (Parker 2012: 134). The Christian industry consistently keeps their media tailored to Christian ideology as a buffer from what evangelicals perceive as immoral ideas that circulate within the mainstream commercial culture. The Christian industry's domains of production operate as a circuit that is strictly fixated on drawing from ideas and other sources that will promote Christianity. Within the Christian industry, evangelicals have been able to establish their own sector of media production. Evangelical Christians have long understood if mass media can propagate secular messages, it also possesses the capabilities of spiritual enlightenment. Quentin J. Schultze and Robert H. Woods

(2008) explain that “evangelical media” is media that is primarily produced and consumed by evangelicals (26)<sup>5</sup>. Evangelical media is generally designed more closely around biblical literalism and Christian salvation, but all products of evangelical media vary in levels of religious intensity (Hendershot 2004: 7). Christian media is a safeguard from media evangelicals perceive as immoral by presenting Christianity as the main focus.

Whether evangelicals prefer Christian or evangelical media, they still negotiate with mainstream films with narratives that feature content and messages that more-or-less align with their tastes and views. So, this leaves one to ask: what types of films would interest evangelicals if a mainstream company like Sony produced them? Like all consumers, evangelicals also base their consumption on previous media choices. In regards to film, individuals choose types of films they have a predilection for and want to see again. Individuals condition their media tastes by preference for immediate comfort. Evangelicals’ organize their media choices by their belief system and narratives they prefer from watching Christian media. For many evangelicals, they look for films that are similar to Sherwood and Pure Flix’s films and offer Christian characters, relatable conflicts, and uplifting messages.

## 2.4 Conclusion

The abundance of secular products and the lack of Christian-oriented media are reflective of the reality that evangelicals are not a primary audience that mainstream media producers wish to target. Heather Hendershot (2004) elaborates that “evangelicals are rarely

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<sup>5</sup> Schultze and Woods clarify that evangelicals consider “Christian” and “evangelical” media synonymous, but they emphasize the availability of media produced by evangelicals for evangelical consumers’ use.

directly targeted as desirable consumers by the mass culture industry. Advertisements may sometimes be conservative and speak to old-fashioned values, but they rarely risk alienating non-born-again by using overtly Christian discourse" (2004: 31). Hollywood and the commercial culture largely remain "conservative", however, mainstream producers are still wary to mass-market media that is overtly Christian. "[The mass culture industry] preserves the status quo by rejecting didactic Christian media out of hand" Hendershot writes, "Not surprisingly, of course, evangelicals are likely to describe mass culture not as conservative but rather liberal, left-wing, or even satanic" (2004: 13). This has culminated in many evangelicals' disassociation from the mainstream culture.

Nonetheless, evangelicals have been clear in wanting to see more mainstream family-friendly films with religiously conservative messages. DeVon Franklin, a former minister and a producer of *Heaven is for Real* (2014), echoed the desires of evangelicals, "The audience is saying and consistently saying this year that 'we want more movies like [*Heaven is for Real*], we want more movies that are faith-affirming, that are life-affirming, that are up-lifting, that are inspirational, that we can take our whole family to" (Khatchatourian 2014). Mass media operates in a loop with producers sending their films to consumers, and consumers sending their praise/criticism after viewing. Hall elaborates that, "circulation and reception are, indeed, 'moments' of the production process in television and are reincorporated, via a number of skewed and structured 'feedbacks', into the production process itself" (1973: 80). Sony is trying to tap into the evangelical market by making films targeted to their values with narrative conventions that evangelicals prefer.

As briefly mentioned, evangelicals are rarely a target audience for mainstream media companies despite their profound demographic size and their box office influence. Kevin Sorbo expressed his concerns with mainstream media companies by articulating,

Hollywood stopped making fun of comic book nerds because they learned the value of that audience. They should understand that a conservative Southern Baptist Republican has just as much money to go see movies, so why not serve that audience with as much passion and focus as they serve the comic book audience (Honeycutt 2016).

Films such as *Courageous*, *Fireproof*, and *God's Not Dead* do not utilize conventional mainstream production or marketing techniques such as visual spectacle or star power compared films with larger budgets such as *Noah*, because they rely on selling Christian ideology. Chris Stone, founder of Faith Driven Consumer, says, "The market is there, and if you look at places where Christian values are still important, those movies will do well" (*Variety*, 2016). Sony responded to evangelical feedback by looking towards popular Christian literature. *Heaven is for Real*, *War Room*, and *Miracles From Heaven* are each based on true events that proved to be popular selling novels within the Christian industry. By adapting popular Christian literature, Sony is building off a predilection that evangelicals already hold with those stories. Sony's films are melodramas that revolve around families dealing with commonly shared tragedies of terminal illness and loss of family members or loved ones. The films present non-denominational or commonly shared Christian ideologies in a positive manner. For evangelicals, Sony's Christian films are "as close as [they] are likely to come to [media that closely reflects their social consciousness] 'for all practical purposes'" (Hall 1980: 86) as they still position Christianity as the main focus.

## CHAPTER 3

### GAINING THE TRUST OF THE EVANGELICAL MARKET: SONY'S DISSEMINATION OF CHRISTIAN RHETORIC THROUGH TRAILERS

#### 3.1 Introduction

Marketing initiates the communicative process between producers and audiences. In the previous chapter, I discussed how media producers draw ideas, agendas, and sources from audiences of various socio-cultural and political backgrounds for media production. The same can be argued about the development of marketing strategies. Within the communicative process, media producers refer to feedbacks via circulation and reception from audiences that are reincorporated into production process. These feedbacks not only entail the types of media audiences want, but also how media companies gather market research to study whom their target audiences are and determining how they should reach them. According to Hall, media producers' marketing strategies are considered re-entry points into practices of audience reception that undergo complex negotiation. He writes, "Before this message can have 'effect' (however defined), satisfy a 'need' or be put to 'use', it must first be appropriated as meaningful discourse and be meaningfully decoded" (1973: 80). For Sony, this involves integrating Christian ideology in their marketing strategies in order to reach out to the evangelical audience. In this chapter, I argue the trailers for *Heaven is for Real*, *War Room*, and *Miracles From Heaven* are able to ideologically persuade evangelical audiences to see their films by communicating narratives with explicitly Christian oriented conflicts.

To analyze how Sony's trailers are able to ideologically persuade the evangelical audience to see their films, I will focus on the structure of the trailers. My analysis will refer to

Charlotte's Sun Jensen's essay "Reduced Narration, Intensified Emotion: The Film Trailer" (2014), which explores how trailers possess their own alternative narratives that are constructed through the fragmentation, reduction, and reordering of their referent's complex narrative. Jensen argues that trailers are constructed "prioritizing the genre of the film—that is, its basic emotional tone—as its primary dissemination project, which at the expense of the narrative chronology and the enlarging nuances, because it only includes the narrative parts from the film which support, and sustain the basic emotional tone" (2014; 107). My analysis of Sony's trailers will primarily focus on their structure and genre as Christian melodramas which aim to arouse an emotional experience of spiritual galvanization from evangelical audiences through selected footage and the accompaniment of Christian and popular music.

### 3.2 The Role of Trailers

Trailers serve as essential and fundamental promotional projects that encompass the codes and messages that are intended to appeal to target audiences. As hybrid texts that meet at the intersection of narrative and promotion, trailers are quintessential persuasive cinematic texts. Lisa Kernan (2004) suggests that trailers are a "cinema of (coming) attractions" whose concise, promotional rhetoric operates as montage of images and sound that attract and sustain spectators' attention (2004: 2, 7). Trailers offer a unique form of filmmaking as promotional short film texts that reconfigure narratives by rearranging the space and action of characters, dialogue, music, and narration with the commercial purpose of selling the film to potential audiences.

Trailers have to simultaneously sell the film, but without revealing too much of the narrative. Jensen articulates that trailers have a “metonymic character, which means that it can only take material from and show fragments of the same film it has to sell. This constitutes an inner tension in the trailer, which can be said to be its motor, because it has to communicate its film and at the same time it has to hold it back” (2014: 106). Like every media company, Sony has one to three minutes to persuade their audience and communicate formal information such as the title of the movie, the release date, and the notable actors and filmmakers involved. Trailers’ restrictive nature requires the complex semblance of multimodal codes such as pictures, sound, title cards, motion graphics, diegetic and non-diegetic music that are synchronized with selected footage and cut to manipulate time, space and characters pieced in non-chronological order. Trailers have to give in to narrative causality and piece together these “various modes in a meaningful synthesis so the semantic contents of the product clearly appear in short time” in order to both appeal to and inform the audience (Jensen 2014: 107). For Sony, their trailers are the rudimentary stage of their marketing-communication strategy of communicating to evangelical audiences that their films are appropriate for consumption.

### 3.3 Structuring Sony’s Trailers: Building an Emotional Atmosphere

Trailers are crafted from fragments of images, sounds, and graphics, but their construction is not random or unintentional. Media producers organize material that supports elements of appeal into engaging short narratives for audiences. Trailers are bound to the audio-visuality of their referents, but media producers have to rearrange and repurpose material into coherent and understandable texts. Audiences understand trailers’ commercial

function, but they must be able to understand what they are shown. Trailers' narrative structures are assembled through what Kernan coins as "discontinuity editing" which, "operates through the alternation, combination and abbreviation of scenes to construct a new, *trailer* logic, differing from (yet obviously, related to) the narrative logic" (2004: 10). The rearrangement of scenes and images, overlapping of sounds such as dialogue as voice-overs and music, graphics, and editing all contribute to create a new narrative that is derivative of a film. This unique form of filmmaking allows trailers to be viewed as alternative narratives, because of their dual purpose to communicate and sell an open-ended story.

Building off Jensen's argument that trailers are organized to prioritize its genre, the structure of a trailer's narrative is determined in relation to how viewers' emotions are designated to interplay with its genre. Jensen clarifies,

To intensify the experience, the trailer is also made monomaniac—it gets a tight, clear focus—so one only has to deal with one primary emotion and the more complex (object related) emotions that might be linked to this. In this sense, you can say that the producers attempt to create a prototype—a predominant main atmosphere (2014: 119).

Following this mode of construction, media producers will only use images or repurpose scenes to support a trailer's emotive register. This also involves creating falsifications for the interest of promotion. Kernan explains that trailers can imply false plot developments, can contain conversations that never happen by juxtaposing lines of dialogue that are unconnected within a film, and some scenes that appear in a trailer may not appear in the final cut of the film (2004: 11). Organizing scenes to fit a primary emotion reduces narrative complexity by having a clear tonal direction. The primary emotion becomes a driving force of the narrative that becomes related with audiences' desires of what they wish to experience. The constellation of Sony's

trailers is crafted to establish the ideological parameters of their films, and amplify an emotional experience of spiritual galvanization. Evangelical viewers perceive Sony's upcoming films as a reflection of their reality. Sony aims for evangelical viewers to generate an emotional attachment to their films because they involve characters that share similar Christian beliefs, endure similar everyday conflicts and allow viewers the opportunity to experience extraordinary, divine events.

For a more formal analysis, Jensen suggests a framework that governs the "general temporal and structural organization" that appears as common tendency for trailers:

- 1) They are typically characterized as by starting in a slow tempo gradually increasing the pace between scenes.
- 2) We meet the protagonists in medias res while they are in quiet intimate situations, which allow the viewer a more immediate identification for the character(s).
- 3) The tempo and the level of intensity are incremented significantly at the outbreak of a new conflict, and this is visually expressed in a montage mainly consisting of emotional, isolated reaction shots.
- 4) The montage is followed up by an epilogue, which didactically—often by use of non- or extra-diegetic voiceover or intertitles—makes sure the viewer has really understood the project by emphasizing the title of the film, release date, themes, or genre (Jensen 2014: 117).

Organizing trailers with slow build up around the characters allows viewers the opportunity to become familiar with the films' diegetic worlds. The opening moments of a trailer presents a setting, characters, and plot that are more-or-less similar to previous filmic experiences. Jensen also points out the slow build up to the last hyper intensive part of a trailer is to frame the emotions of the viewer (2014: 121). Trailers function to pre-register the emotions of viewers to make their emotional interpretation process easier. Evangelical viewers will cognitively understand why a certain scene or action is sad or spiritually uplifting. Sony's

trailers gradually build up to aim for evangelical audiences to become attached to their characters and emotionally react simultaneously to the actions that take place.

### 3.4 Elements of Sony's Trailers: Appealing to the Evangelical Audience

As I noted in the introductory paragraph, media companies refer to market research to learn about their target audience(s). Market research of an audience can include geographic location, demographics, media that individuals generally tend to consume, etc. However, audiences as wide as evangelicals can include a wide variety of men and women who differ in each research component. To narrow audience complexity, Kernan suggests "Trailers attempt to position spectators within the imaginary, in an illusory security of unitary identities constructed for us as audiences by the film industry (of which, in turn, we construct an imaginary identity)" (2004: 38). Trailers are inherently crafted to appeal to a unitary identity that represents all individuals of a target audience, because media producers have to carefully assemble trailers with images and other material they believe will appeal to everyone in their target audience. Unitary identities are created from media producers' assumptions of the kinds images, stories, messages, ideologies, etc. that certain audiences wish to see based on market research. I examine the following elements of Sony's trailers uses to appeal to the evangelical audience: 1) the reliance on a recognizable genre with the Christian melodrama 2) inclusion of identifiable characters whose values reflect audiences' values 3) representations of Christian practices and/or symbols of Christian ideology and 4) use of popular Christian music.

Genres operate through frameworks of similarity. They are often perceived as stable categories with established criteria; genres can have certain checklists that tell viewers what to

expect in terms of stock characters, iconography, themes, and plots. The melodrama genre has consistently carried its own form of narrative structures and elements around domestic spaces and familial conflicts. In his study of big budget, post war melodramas of Douglas Sirk, Nicholas Ray, and Vincente Minnelli, Thomas Elsaesser (1972) outlines common characteristics of the melodrama genre such as 1) dramatic narratives with musical accompaniment that marks emotional effects 2) the focus on middle class American families and 3) use of mise-en-scène to articulate claustrophobic atmosphere of the bourgeois home and/or the small town setting (500, 508). While genres such as the melodrama maintain certain defining features, they are also malleable and can be repurposed to meet the desires of a target audience. According to Rick Altman (1984),

Most genres go through a period of accommodation during which the public's desires are fitted to Hollywood's priorities (and vice versa)...it is because a common ground has been found where the audience's ritual values coincide with Hollywood's ideological ones (13-15).

By taking evangelical feedback and reincorporating it into their production processes, Sony establishes a social and economic relationship with the evangelical audience that repurposes the melodrama genre with Christian conflicts and emotionally loaded family situations.

Repurposing the melodrama frames a Christian-oriented narrative and serves to establish Christian ideological parameters of a generic space. Sony's trailers mediate comfort by presenting Christian representations their media producers assume evangelical audiences are familiar with and want to see. Kernan points out,

The promotional appeal of genre as a whole rests heavily on familiarity, on the lure and comfort of the known. Generic worlds are instances of a particular kind of cinematic place where we want to go again and again, whether by re-viewing favorite genre films or by revisiting such a place via a new film of the same genre (2004: 45).

For many, the decision to attend, buy, rent, or stream a particular film is determined by preconceived notions of a generic diegesis one may want to experience or assumed desires one believes a film will be able to fulfill. For instance, the trailer for *War Room* begins with the titles “From the creators of *Courageous/ Fireproof/ and Facing the Giants*” that are correspondingly accompanied by a very short clip of each film by evangelical filmmakers Alex and Stephen Kendrick. *Variety* reports

Thanks to low-budget hits like ‘Fireproof’ and ‘Courageous’, the brothers have transformed themselves into the Steven Spielbergs of Christian cinema. Their names above the title are enough to open movies that are firmly pitched to the faithful... ‘it’s a great example of the power of brand’ said Chris Stone, founder of the consumer advocacy group Faith Driven Consumer. The Kendrick brothers’ films have an authenticity with this audience. They have consistently delivered a good product that resonates with the community (Lang 2015).

The Kendrick brothers bring a sense of familiarity and assurance for evangelical audiences. By providing these clips prior to the beginning of the trailer’s main narrative, it establishes that *War Room*’s diegesis will essentially reflect similar generic parameters as the Kendrick brothers’ previous films. This recognition communicates to evangelical audiences that they can return to a cinematic place they are familiar with.

By depicting Christianity as the dominant ideology, the appeal of familiarity extends the representations of an apparent reality. Sony’s trailers aim to present cinematic worlds that reflect a sense of authenticity, which evangelicals can perceive to be similar to their own. W.J. Potter (1988), focuses on perceived realities depicted through media, provides criteria of observation that viewers use to distinguish a socially and culturally shared reality. His dimensions of an apparent reality include

- 1) The magic-window reality: the most important dimension, a belief in the literal reality of the television message

- 2) The perceived utility: the applicability to one's own life of what a viewer observes
- 3) The identity reality: the feeling of closeness to the characters who appear in a particular program (Potter 1988 in Tan 1996: 67).

Ed S. Tan (1996) further comments that "Both magic-window reality and utility reality are based on socially shared knowledge, that is, on stereotypes and cultural beliefs...Natural viewers tend to be attracted by the kind of film that fits their beliefs" (73). The cinematic worlds of Sony's films are constructed to reinforce heterosexual Christianity. Sony's films focus on heterosexual Christian families and tight communities where individuals who do not fit within these domains are omitted; for example, there is no presence of individuals who openly identify as part the LGBT community.

While Sony reinforces conservative Christian ideological parameters within generic spaces, their trailers present films that include identifiable characters whose Christian values reflect the evangelical audience's. Due to trailers' short format, however, it can be difficult to make immediate connection or identification with the characters. To break this barrier, Sony's trailers introduce their characters in media res enduring everyday situations and spiritual adversity. Sony's characters deal with issues concerning terminal illness, loss of loved ones, and disintegrating marriages. Consequentially, Sony's trailers portray their characters struggling with their faith, turning to prayer, and trying to comprehend divine intervention.

To further appeal to the evangelical audience, Sony's trailers depict representations of Christian practices and symbols of Christian ideology that evangelicals and other Christian viewers interpellate. Hall explains that certain visuals and representations have achieved near-universality and have been profoundly naturalized, because they have been so widely distributed in a specific language, community or culture that they do not appear to be

constructed (1973: 82). For instance, all of Sony's trailers contain images of characters seeking divine guidance by either praying, in attendance at a church, or perusing through a Bible. By displaying images of Christian practice and symbols, Sony's trailers operate as ideological state apparatuses that uphold Christianity as the dominant ideology and do not present any images that may jar the dominant ideology.

Sony's trailers contain characters and representations that share similar Christian ideologies with the evangelical audience, and they incorporate popular Christian music to construct an emotional atmosphere<sup>6</sup>. Media producers load trailers with engaging material to appeal to viewers, but Jensen articulates "the viewer's desire not only regards the narrative, because the trailer also seeks to arouse a desire in the viewer to get more of the emotive register in the film" (2014: 109). By incorporating popular Christian music in their trailers, Sony aims to galvanize the evangelical and create a sense of spiritual attachment. Klaus R. Scherer and Marcel R. Zenter (2001) propose that musical stimuli can provoke emotional reactions in similar fashion to any emotion-eliciting event based on previous evidence that suggests that musical sounds can generate strong suddenness/novelty and, in particular, intrinsic pleasantness evaluations (364). Scherer and Zenter's proposal, however, is more focused on preferential bias and aesthetic qualities that link to higher levels of appraisal. If an individual listens to music (a certain song, album, artist/band or genre) that they have a strong predilection for, their criterion of appraisal has the likelihood of being met with a greater degree of satisfaction.

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<sup>6</sup> It should be noted that *Heaven is for Real* does not contain any Christian or popular music, and is orchestrated by score only.

For evangelicals, their choices of music reflect their Christian values. Scherer and Zenter explain “the evaluation of the compatibility of a stimulus event with the external standards (norms, cultural values) and internal standards (personal values) as part of emotion antecedent is highly relevant for emotion elicitation via music” (2001: 368). Because of their conservative belief system and preference for Christian media, many evangelicals have a preference for Christian or worship music. An individual’s preference of music is the result of a person growing accustomed to it over a period of time, and thus, the music becomes conditioned stimuli. This may include a parent sharing music they grew up with their child or acclimating to a space that plays a particular sound such as worship music at a church. The music in Sony’s trailers is recognizable and familiar to evangelical audiences and consistent with their values and preferences.

### 3.5 *Heaven is for Real* Trailer (2014)

The trailer for *Heaven is for Real* begins with a god’s-eye-view of rural plains followed by an exterior shot of the home of the Burpo family, the protagonists of the film. The camera takes viewers into the living room of the Burpo house that shows Sonja Burpo (Kelly Reilly) folding clothes with her son Colton (Connor Corum) while her daughter Cassie (Lane Styles) is listening to music and coloring. A low angle shot of Cassie is accompanied with a voiceover of Colton asking his mother, “Did you know I had a sister?” which quickly turns into an unexpected revelation.

Sonja: You didn’t know Cassie was your sister?

Colton: No, I have 2 sisters.

Sonja is stunned and kneels eye-level with Colton.

Colton: You had a baby die in your tummy, didn't you?

Sonja in complete disarray: Honey, how did you know a baby died in my tummy?

Colton: In Heaven, this little girl came up to me and told me she died in your tummy.

Sonja is in tears, and looks up to her husband Todd (Greg Kinnear) who just entered the living room.

The trailer suddenly shifts to a flashback of Colton being rushed on a gurney into ER. Within this sequence, an iris opens and closes slowly around isolated shots of an "Emergency" sign, Todd, Sonja, and Colton which are accompanied by voiceover of Todd saying "The pain that I suffered watching my son that close to death" ends the sequence with a shot of Colton's left hand stretched under the rail of his gurney dropping his Spider-Man action figure.

Following this sequence, the camera shows Sonja alone in the hospital lobby crying on the phone and calling her friend Nancy (Margo Martindale). Sonja's voice is used as a voiceover saying, "We're in trouble here. He's much worse. Will you call some friends for and pray for him?" that is attached over shots of Nancy in a greenhouse of flowers, firemen forming a prayer circle and taking their helmets off, and construction workers in a warehouse in a single-file line with their heads tilted down and helmets over their hearts. The proceeding shots show Todd and Sonja waiting in the lobby accompanied with a non-diegetic sound of a heart rate monitor losing a heartbeat. The scene then transitions with a voiceover of a female doctor saying, "The hospital staff said that your son was not expected to survive. They used the word 'miracle'" as Todd and Sonja surround a conscious Colton in a tender embrace in his hospital bed.

Within the exposition, *Heaven's* trailer introduces characters and provides a generic space that evangelical audiences are familiar with. The trailer addresses that Todd and Sonja

are Christians that experience the terrifying moment of possibly losing their son, and retreat to prayer for a sense of hope. The trailer presents Todd and Sonja as relatable characters, because of the sense of identification they are able to draw from viewers that have experienced or could imagine a similar situation. However, the trailer also provides a sense of distance because we learn, unlike other families, their son Colton has profound knowledge of heaven and the people he met there. In one particular scene, Todd and Colton are on a seesaw in a park and Colton recollects his supernatural experience during his surgery. As Colton recalls, "I lifted up and then I looked down. Mom was in one room, and you were in another room yelling at God", the trailer mimics Colton's commentary with the camera lifting above an comatose Colton and doctors in surgery, an isolated shot of Sonja in the lobby, and Todd, in frustration, tossing a chair in the hospital's chapel.

*Heaven's* trailer presents Colton as a modern prophet. After his divine experience in heaven, Colton tells others of his experience and helps others in need of spiritual assistance. For instance, Nancy, whose son was marine that died in battle, asks Colton if her son went heaven. The trailer depicts Nancy's son in uniform smiling while holding a flower during a reception at Todd's church, and Colton replies, "Don't worry. He told me everything was alright". Although the beginning of the trailer shows people performing Christian acts of praying, the trailer portrays the Burpo family's community as antagonistic because of Colton's own divine acts. In one scene, Todd is in conversation with his friend Jay (Thomas Haden Church) who says, "We all want to be supportive, but we can't have our town turn into a circus". The following scenes show a large crowd of people outside a church.

Unlike *War Room* or *Miracles*, *Heaven's* trailer is only accompanied by its score rather than any Christian or popular song. The progression of the score functions accordingly with the progression *Heaven's* trailer; it begins slow and gradually builds up in tempo and rhythm as the arrangement transitions from only containing a piano to the grouping of horns and strings. The buildup of the score mimics Todd's search for answers about Colton's visit to heaven. In one scene, Colton and Todd are in a cemetery and Colton reveals he had been there before when he met Todd's grandfather "Pop". Todd shows Colton of elderly looking Pop, but Colton says no because everyone in heaven is young. Todd then finds a picture of a much younger picture of Pop, and Colton confirms that's the pop he met. Immediately, the score gathers tempo and rapidly orchestrates the last half of *Heaven's* trailer. The score stays in fast pace as it follows Todd as he gets closer to putting the pieces together of Colton's encounter in heaven, and teases viewers of whether Todd will actually discover if Colton's afterlife experience actually happened.

Through the appeal of divine intervention, *Heaven's* trailer attempts to spiritually implicate viewers whether they believe Colton or not. In one scene, Colton is on a swing asking his father, "They don't believe me, do they?" and Todd replies, "Some people are afraid to believe". Noel Carroll (2007) suggests that networks of macro- and micro-questions structure narratives. Accordingly, micro-questions govern on a scene and sequence level and macro-questions structure the overarching narrative and resolution (Carroll 2007: 6). For instance, a micro-question that *Heaven's* trailer poses is what happens to Colton that causes him to be sent to the hospital? The trailer tells us that Colton endures a near-death experience, but we are not provided information about what causes this event. A macro-question could be does

the community actually change their minds and believe Colton? Sony aims to interpellate and motivate evangelical audiences to show their support of Colton by standing by him and attending the film. The trailer uses promotional titles that read "Unlock The Mystery" and "Discover What Is Real", followed by two voiceovers of Todd saying "Haven't we already had a glimpse of heaven? From the first cry of a baby, the courage of a friend, the love of a mother and a father; I see it, so I believe it" and a third-party voice asking viewers "Do you?". The film ends with a question inviting audiences to see the film, and to decide for themselves if Colton's story is real/believable. *Heaven is for Real* aims to implicate the audience and challenge their faith by posing if you believe in God do you believe in heaven? Theatrical spectatorship presents opportunities individuals cannot experience outside of a theater. *Heaven* presents audiences the opportunity to witness Colton's supernatural experience of heaven first hand.

### 3.6 *War Room* Trailer (2015)

The trailer for *War Room* opens with a god's eye view of an affluent suburb followed by the camera cutting to Tony Jordan (T.C. Stallings) picking up his daughter Danielle (Alena Pitts) from jump rope practice. Following an exterior shot of the Jordan family's home, the camera cuts inside as Tony criticizes his wife Elizabeth ("Liz") (Priscilla Shirer) in front of their daughter about Liz transferring money between accounts without his knowledge, and Liz pleads if they could talk about it later. The next scene is an exterior shot of the home of Miss Clara (Karen Abercrombie) as she greets Liz (who we learn is a real-estate agent) about putting her house on the market. The camera transitions inside showing Miss Clara and Liz entering the house, and follows them upstairs as they stop in front of an empty spare room.

Miss Clara: This is my favorite place in this house. I call it my "war room".

Liz enters the room and examines the walls, which are covered in pieces of paper written with scripture and various notes: You wrote prayers for each area of your life?

Miss Clara: Prayer strategy.

The narrative quickly transitions to an interior shot of the Jordan's household with Tony leaving Liz in frustration in the background, and their daughter sitting down at their dining table alone in the foreground.

The narrative transitions back to a two shot of Miss Clara and Liz standing next to each other with Elizabeth saying, "I sure could use some of that".

Within these opening moments, Tony and Liz Jordan's marital and religious positions are presented as the epicenters of conflict. We understand that financial issues and a lack of communication cause tension between Tony and Liz's marriage. The audience perceives Tony and Liz to be Christian, but Liz acknowledges there is a lack of Christian practice in their lives. As a result, conflict emerges from Tony and Liz's ideological imbalance within a Christian social setting. According to Thomas Schatz (1981), genres such as the melodrama do not possess conflicts that are indigenous to a particular locale, but instead arise from conflict between values, attitudes, and actions of its principal characters and the "civilized" setting they inhabit (458). He elaborates that the melodrama genre operates within "indeterminate space", which

incorporate a civilized, ideologically stable milieu, which depends less upon a heavily coded place than on a highly conventionalized value system. Here conflicts derive not from a control over of the environment, but rather the struggle of the principal characters to bring their own views in line with either with one another's or, more often, in line with that of the larger community (Schatz 1981: 29).

*War Room's* trailer establishes the Christian ideological parameters of the film's diegesis by depicting children in prayer underneath a flagpole outside a public school, and people gathering inside a church. These images provide a sense of ideological containment that

upholds Christianity as the dominant religion whose practice extends from family households to social institutions that govern communities.

*War Room's* trailer presents Tony and Liz's disintegrating marriage within an ideological frame of war. *War Room* operates within indeterminate space because there is (fortunately) no physical conflict, but Tony and Liz's home is ideologically conveyed as a battlefield. There is no peace within the Jordan household with emotional conflict that is saliently described through commentary and exposition. In one scene, Danielle is in her bedroom with her friend Jennifer (Jadin Harris) saying, "I wish I lived at your house. Whenever my parents are together, all they do is fight". The proceeding montage shows an isolated shot of Tony intensely glaring that is matched with an isolated shot of Elizabeth avoiding Tony's eye line and staring off screen, and a voiceover of Liz saying "If there's one thing we do well, it's fight" that accompanies a shot of Liz comforting a crying Danielle in her arms that fades into a scene of Elizabeth in her office sitting to the right of her colleague Mandy (Beth Moore). Mandy proceeds to tell Liz, "You do not want World War Three to break out in your home". Schatz suggests that genres that function within indeterminate spaces "rely upon progression from romantic antagonism to eventual embrace", and displays of affection (usually a kiss) are signals of the principal couple integrating into the larger community (1981: 29). For Tony and Liz, however, eventual embrace and stability of their marriage can only be achieved through progression from a lack of to reliance on prayer. Miss Clara's voiceover is used as instructional voiceover for Liz saying, "Just because you argue a lot doesn't mean that you fight well. You got to plead with God, so that he can do what only he can do. Then, you got to get out of the way and let him do it". During Miss Clara's voiceover, the

trailer shows Liz picking up her Bible and entering her closet to begin constructing her own war room by taping scripture and notes on a wall.

To help frame a spiritual atmosphere, *War Room's* trailer incorporates Christian music to elicit an affective response from evangelical viewers. The trailer uses the song "Good Fight" by the Christian band Unspoken to draw a sense of spiritual attachment. After Miss Clara tells Liz "You need to do your fighting in prayer", the next scene shows Tony walking into Liz's closet as he starts to examine the notes on the wall. The song immediately fades in with the lyrics "Keep fighting the good fight, keep letting the light shine" to orchestrate a montage and close out the trailer. The trailer uses repetition of prayer and the idea of prayer as tool for faith to reinforce Christian practice. Kernan argues,

Frequent repetition with narration, titles, and visual motifs connotes sameness (again and again) and newness (unprecedented abundance). Repetition also generates rhythm, and rhythm is an important structural feature of trailers' sensory appeal...repetition functions within trailers' rhetoric of genre in overdetermined ways redoubles and reinforces a conception of audiences craving repetition and familiarity in genre films (2004: 48-49).

Promotional titles that read "Prayer/is powerful weapon" are supported by a voiceover of Miss Clara that overlaps images of Liz crying and praying with clenched fists in her closet and Tony sitting on his bed looking at a picture of Liz in her wedding dress directing both of them "It's time for you to take off the gloves and fight for your marriage". Images of a father reciting a prayer to his child, a man on a rooftop raising his hand to the sun in worship fashion, and children praying in a classroom are accompanied by the repetition of the lyrics "keep up the good fight". The trailer concludes with a prayer from Miss Clara as she rejoices, "Lord, we need an army of believers. Lord, call us to battle. Raise 'em up, Lord. Raise 'em up" with the final shot

a close up of Tony and Liz's hands held together in a church. The trailers' repetition of prayer and Miss Clara's prayer, function to rally spiritual morale from the evangelical audience.

### 3.7 *Miracles From Heaven* Trailer (2016)

In the trailer for *Miracles From Heaven*, we are introduced to the Beam family with opening shots depicting them enjoying time together outside on their ranch eating pizza, Christy Beam (Jennifer Garner) dropping her children off at their school, and Christy and her husband Kevin (Martin Henderson) in a tender embrace saying, "It's a good life". Within these opening moments, viewers can perceive the Beam family as a wholesome, nuclear family. These moments of the trailer serve to give viewers enough time to engage with the film's diegetic world and to identify with the Beam family as well. Unlike the previous trailers discussed, *Miracles'* trailer does not begin with characters in initial crisis. Tan explains, "the course of the plot also plays a vital role in determining the appeal of particular character: how she reacts to events determine whether she arouses sympathy or antipathy among viewers" (1996: 160). Even though *Miracles'* characters may be introduced in the most positive of social aspects, total appeal and identification may not be realized in a single instant or moment. The outbreak of conflict is used as a catalyst for identification.

In the following sequence of events, Christy is awakened in the middle of the night by her daughter Anna (Kylie Rogers) crying in pain. As the trailer shows Kevin carrying Anna in his arms, a voiceover of Christy saying, "When Anna got sick, I couldn't understand it. Why was this loving little girl going through this?" overlaps into images of them rushing to a hospital with isolated shots of Christy and Kevin watching Anna being treated by medical specialists and

doctors. A following montage shows doctors suggesting that Anna is lactose intolerant or appears to have minor digestive issues, Christy responding in emotional distress, "Everything is not fine," Anna laying in her hospital bed in agony, and doctor telling Christy she needs to calm down as Christy yells back "I'm not leaving this hospital bed until I know what's wrong with my daughter". When attempting to identify with characters in trailer/films, viewers share universal social schemas that help determine their impression of a character. Social schemas can be based on stereotypes of protagonists and antagonists (good guys are sympathetic, bad guys are not), characters based on certain professions (doctors, teachers, etc.), or a character's motives or intentions (Tan 1996: 168). Christy can easily be read as a concerned mother willing to do anything for the well-being of her daughter. Christy is able to resonate with many viewers because of shared universal concerns of being parent. Because Christy is an identifiable and sympathetic character, she takes on the role as the emotional epicenter of the trailer/film.

Christy is able to create a connection with viewers as a concerned parent, but also as an individual who may struggle with one's faith during times of crisis. A god's eye view of Boston transitions to a scene of Anna undergoing a MRI scan and medical specialist Dr. Samuel Nurko (Eugenio Derbez) confirms to Christy that Anna is very ill and there is currently no cure for her condition. Following scenes of Anna climbing a magnificently sized tree on her family's ranch and Dr. Nurko making Anna smile with a sock puppet, a frustrated Christy is in conversation with Kevin "We need a solution. We need it now". Kevin responds, "We're going to get it, by not losing our faith", and Christy turns away in annoyance. As Anna and her older sister Abby (Brighton Sharbino) are sitting on branch of the tree, the camera shows an isolated shot of Christy sitting on her porch staring into the sky crying to God, "Free her from this. Can you even

hear me?". Tan explains that a character that acknowledges their vulnerability can elicit sympathy from viewers. He explains sympathy creates proximity and intimacy with a character when he/she communicates their deepest feelings to another character or some in oblique fashion (1996: 178). After enduring much emotional exhaustion, Christy evokes sympathy from viewers because of her sense of helplessness. During her moment of vulnerability, Christy's emotional frustration is understandable because of a situation that is beyond her control.

Unlike *War Room*, *Miracles'* trailer uses a pop song to orchestrate a divine act of God and sense of spiritual renewal. Christian music may draw sense of appeal with evangelical viewers, but Sony's trailers do not necessarily have to incorporate music with explicit Christian songwriting to connect to evangelical audiences. Evangelicals make compromise with all forms of media, including music. For many evangelicals, they may be likely to compromise with a song that does not reference sex, violence, etc. Rather than a Christian song, *Miracles'* trailer uses the popular 2016 Billboard Hot 100 song "Fight Song" by Rachel Platten. The song is used to appropriate the theme of faith in *Miracles'* trailer, and is used to frame the act of divine intervention. After Christy's cry to God, the camera shifts to the tree branch holding Anna, breaking and causing her to fall along to Platten's lyrics "I can make an explosion" as if narrating God's divine act in real time.

Soon after, the trailer shows Christy with Dr. Nurko trying to comprehend Anna's mysterious cure.

Christy: So, you're telling me that when this baby girl fell thirty feet she hit her head just right and it didn't kill her and it didn't paralyze her...it healed her?

Dr. Nurko shrugging his shoulders and nodding his head without explanation: Yes.

Christy in tears: But, that's impossible.

Platten's song is used to score a montage of the Beam family in jubilation with images of them embracing each other in the hospital, and Anna and her family back in joyous company together on their ranch similarly as the trailer started. "Fight Song" may not be recognizable or intended as a Christian/worship song, but it may still influence evangelical viewers to be caught up in the emotions they observe on screen. John A. Sloboda and Patrik N. Juslin (2001) suggest that because emotions are contagious, emotional responses reach full manifestation by observing other people through a process called social referencing (86). Evangelical viewers reciprocate similar emotions of joy as they watch the Beam family rejoice to Anna's miraculous recovery along to Platten's song.

*Miracles'* trailer operates in a similar fashion as *Heaven's* trailer by creating an "us vs. them" mentality. After Anna's re-diagnosis reveals that the her fall miraculously cured her, the trailer shows news reporters arriving to question the Beam family, a man in church full of people saying, "Some people are just trying to look for publicity", followed by Platten's lyrics "I don't really care if no one else believes". The trailer poses the notion of how individuals may believe in God, yet may have disbelief in divine intervention. The trailer's promotional titles "How do we explain/the impossible?" the trailer seeks to arouse evangelical interest in experiencing God's divine power first hand in a contemporary setting.

### 3.8 Conclusion

Trailers are the main driving force behind media companies' marketing strategies, but there are other strategies, methods, and events that are used to reach target audiences. For instance, to forge a direct relationship with evangelical audiences, one of Sony's marketing

strategies involved scheduling private screenings of their Christian films at churches across the United States. *Miracles From Heaven* producer DeVon Franklin flew to multiple churches to not only screen the film, but also to share the vicarious nature of *Miracles From Heaven* that is able to connect with evangelical viewers. *The LA Times* reported, "At one gathering of 400 people in Baltimore, [Franklin said], audience members responded to the film by sharing their own stories of healing and loss...It's more than a ticket sale at the box office. It becomes real-life ministry" (Faughnder, 2016). During these screenings, evangelicals and other Christian audiences are able to respond enthusiastically to Sony's films because they address conflicts that ordinary Christians experience and share their own experiences with others in attendance as well.

However, there can be limitations to private screenings in terms of reachability. Sony's marketers can only reach a conceivable number of religious institutions and audiences within a limited period of time to promote their films. Trailers, on the other hand, are cinematic traditions that continue to operate as a driving marketing tool for media companies for their reachability. Trailers, of course, have the traditional custom of appearing on television screens and as previews for feature films at theaters, but have also marked themselves as a staple for marketing online as well. Especially after the emergence of Web 2.0 and the further development of mobile devices, trailers are now easily accessible by logging onto social media sites such as YouTube, Facebook, or Twitter; with each of these sites capable of amassing over millions of views for any particular trailer.

Kernan argues that trailers' illusory power and persuasive rhetoric are at their greatest during theatrical spectatorship. She writes,

Theatrical trailer spectatorship is, however, a heightened spectatorial mode, an arena where spectators tend to evince greater awareness of themselves as a collectivity, even

as they are subjected to a more pointed ideological thrust by trailers' specifically promotional forms of address than they may be in the general experience of film spectatorship (2004: 5-6).

A viewer's sense of excitement can be heightened by their awareness of being part of a large audience. A theater's audience collectively engages with trailers by laughing, hissing, shrieking, or applauding together. They can also have short discussions about the trailers they just witnessed with each other. Because of this awareness, the trailers that build up anticipation before a feature film can further develop a viewer's excitement.

For many viewers, trailer spectatorship is their primary source of knowledge about upcoming films and theater spectatorship is the primary *site* where many spectators "shop" for upcoming films. Audiences are in a more aware and active position as a consumer in a theater, and a trailer's promotional rhetoric is arguably at its most influential during theater spectatorship. Film spectators may be in an anticipatory or enthused state prior to seeing the feature, and media producers aim to exploit that state by providing engaging short texts.

Kernan elaborates,

If a trailer can 'piggyback' the captive and willing movie audience's desire to see a given film (the one they've come to presently see) onto, first, a desire to see another film (the one being promoted), and next to *other* desires the audience is believed to hold, the audience is more likely 'sold' on the promoted film...Through trailers, the use value of narrative (enjoying a film) is subsumed to its exchange value (wanting to see another film) by a process of transforming the codes of narrative fiction into the codes of promotional rhetoric (2004: 9).

As "free samples", Sony's trailers function to appeal to evangelical viewers by offering another film that is (more-or-less) similar to the feature they are in attendance for.

## CHAPTER 4

### THE PARABLES OF SONY

#### 4.1 Introduction

Sermons function to help individuals learn and grow in their faith. Sermons are generally tailored around understanding ethics discussed in biblical texts, and often refer to narratives of biblical characters for discourse. Harry P. Nasuti (2018) suggests characters in biblical texts are presented as “moral exemplars” that offer constructive dialect to help shape readers’ moral development. Nasuti explains,

these characters’ stories are ‘paradigmatic’, in that they illustrate the specific virtues that are an important part of humanity’s relationship with God. The stories of such exemplars invite and inspire readers to imitate these virtues and to engage in similar actions (2018: 2-3).

Biblical characters’ stories are viewed as instructional guides of conduct and spiritual morale. They offer insight into living a Godly lifestyle and developing one’s Christian identity. Sermons and biblical texts allow for Christian audiences/readers to learn and adopt ethics for imitation; biblical epics allow for Christian viewers to witness the heroics of biblical characters.

In the Introduction chapter, I mention that in the post-*Passion* era there have been a limited number of large budget biblical epics, because they do not guarantee prodigious profits. But they have proven themselves to be a popular genre, because they provide narrative immediacy to historically distant biblical characters. Anker (2009) explains, “That appeal arises from appetites for awe and inspiration, the longing to be struck firsthand by the majesty of the divine” (2009: 335). There was a brief resurgence of biblical epics in 2014 with films such as *Noah*, *Exodus: Gods and Kings*, and *Son of God*. These films provide the appeal of familiarity with arguably the most recognized figures of the Bible with Noah, Moses, and Jesus.

Biblical texts/epics and Sony's contemporary narratives both point to fundamental moral principles of having faith in God, yet Sony's films take on a pedagogic and epistemological approach as parables. C.H. Dodds (1961) defines "parable" as

a metaphor or simile drawn from nature or common life, arresting the hearer by its vividness or strangeness, and leaving the mind in sufficient doubt about its precise application to tease it into active thought (5).

Evangelicals are familiar with parables through the Gospel teachings of Jesus and throughout the Bible. In biblical texts, parables are metaphorical, open-ended stories that are designed to challenge readers' conceived notions of morality and their own understandings of themselves. However, they do not dictate specific conduct because "as religious language [parables] present not simply a series of ethical paradigms or exhortations, though they are often so interpreted, but *a vision of reality which becomes a presupposition to ethics*" (Donahue 1988: 17). Sony's films similarly function as parables, because they are texts that encourage viewers to act and think differently in regards to their faith. By presenting narratives with contemporary characters, settings, and conflicts, Sony's films are able to challenge and galvanize viewers to reflect or rethink their faith and Christian identity.

In this chapter, I examine how *War Room*, *Heaven is for Real*, and *Miracles From Heaven* function as parables that focus on prayer, belief in heaven, and the struggle of one's faith to articulate repentance. The protagonists in each of these films display either a lack of Christian practice or a certain disbelief in God, and are placed in positions of grief or suffering to learn to transform their Christian identities. Paul P. Parker (1997) elaborates, "Repentance does not necessarily mean gloom or remorse, much less self-flagellation. Though repentance can include deep regret, it can also alternatively be accompanied by relief or great joy" (1997: 209).

Repentance grants Christians agency to turn away from faithlessness and immoral actions for a new way of life. Sony's films take on the pedagogic approach of sermons through narratives as parables that focus on their characters' repentance and reconciliation to turn back to God.

#### 4.2 Parameters of Contemporary Parables

Sony's narratives are comparable as parables because they require a course of reflection and action from viewers. In *A Theory of Narrative* (2008), Rick Altman describes parables as a genre that "constantly insists on the reader's participatory status" that requires the special weight of one's reading process because "every time we read and interpret we are constituting ourselves" (174-175). Sony's narratives focus on both extraordinary events such as Colton Burpo visiting heaven to everyday obstacles such as Tony and Liz Jordan's disintegrating marriage. Although viewers may not have personally experienced these types of occurrences, Sony's films challenge viewers to acknowledge the narratives' relevance beyond the context of the films.

The most practical characteristic of parables is their potential for multitudinous applications. Sony's films have fixed plots, but they are non-prescriptive narratives, meaning an individual does not need the personal experience of marital conflicts or a divine miracle to learn from the narratives' rhetorical import. Amy Côté (2014) explains parables "do not prescribe a one-to-one correlation between tale and moral interpretation" and that "the moral truths to be drawn from [them] can be malleable" (64). Parables are not direct comparisons, and can be interpreted from multiple lenses. More important than the context of the narratives' situations are how a viewer applies his/her interpretation of the narratives' concerns of social, moral, and

religious vicissitudes of life to a make change in one's own life. Susan Colón (2012) terms this an "embodied response" as parables demand action from audiences by offering "an invitation to think very differently about things one thought one knew...[and to] act very differently, according to a new construal of reality" (7). While notable biblical parables such as The Prodigal Son, The Good Samaritan, and many others have proven to be timeless pedagogic narratives that have helped Christians transform their social and moral Christian identities, Sony's narratives are privileged to bridge a connection with contemporary characters that deal with familiar issues of spiritual adversity.

The appeal of Sony's contemporary narratives is that viewers perceive them to occur in realities similar to their own. Michael Bird (1982) suggests that religious films such as Sony's contemporary Christian films operate within "mundane realism" (9). Accordingly, religious films that operate within mundane realism revolve around commonplace obstacles of everyday life. Anker (2009) adds,

These stories of everyday reality most often tend to be tales of offense, guilt, and grace, or a path from lostness to meaning, patterns that are readily understandable to most audiences...Almost everything that transpires in the film takes place within a crisp and limited diegetic world (336).

Plausibility dictates narratives that operate according to the confines of a conceivable cinematic place. This even includes reducing the spectacle of divine intervention. Within the realm of mundane realism, the grand domains of God's divine presence are confined to a palpable state. Rather than showcasing the incredible supernatural powers of God via environmental elements (floods, fire, lightning, etc.) as presented in biblical epics, the representations of the divine are made suitable for the banality of Sony's constructed realities.

Displays of God's intercession with human affairs are limited to smaller scale features of divine intervention.

#### 4.3 Compatibility between the Melodrama Genre and Mundane Realism

The diegetic worlds of Sony's films are able to fashion the melodrama genre with mundane realism because they are able to maintain focus on the American family. Sony's films continue the melodramatic aesthetic of revolving around nuclear American families living in small-town communities. Within these crisp and limited worlds, conflict, to a certain extent, remains contained with the family. *War Room's* basis of conflict centers on marital strife between Tony and Liz, and *Miracles* features Christy's frustration with Anna's health and financial issues causing friction with Kevin. In both films, each family eventually reestablishes a state of tranquility. This concentration of the family creates a paradox where the family is both the epicenter of conflict and the source of resolution (Schatz 1981: 228). Sony's films carry conventionalized narrative components of the melodrama in regards to settings and characters, but tailor their plots around Christian ideology.

Conflicts that arise from Sony's narratives pertain to ideological imbalance. The Jordan, Burpo and Beam families are each situated within stable, heteronormative civilized communities whose belief and value systems are structured by Christian ideologies. Rather than physical conflict, it is emotional grief or suffering that cause Tony, Liz, Todd, and Christy to experience their own form of ideological conflict that affects their spirituality and relationships. Anker further notes that within mundane realism a character's religious progression is deemed reasonable within their psycho-spiritual history and the events of the film, and the viewer

understands the course of the character's spiritual direction (2009: 336). Sony's films aim to show that Christians will endure a certain degree of spiritual adversity, regardless of the perceived strength of their faith or given effort into Christian practices. Liz Jordan identifies as Christian but is reluctant to believe that prayer will help save her marriage. Whereas, Todd Burpo is a revered pastor of his community who experiences his own form of regression in his faith as he explores the plausibility of his son Colton visiting heaven. By witnessing Sony's characters' transformation of their Christian identities, audiences perceive their religious progressions as more credible and pedagogic.

Sony places much attention to providing a sense of familiarity and recognition through the representations of Christian practice, themes, and characters to placate evangelicals' demands for family-friendly content. By establishing these ideological parameters, evangelical viewers can safely assume that these films concerning contemporary Christian issues will ultimately be resolved. Schatz comments, "once we recognize the familiar cultural arena and the players we can be fairly certain how the game will be played and how it will end" (1981: 30). Simultaneously, however, because Sony's films are prototype products of transforming the structure of the melodrama genre with Christian conflicts. By localizing issues of spiritual adversity within small households and communities that are perceived as real, Sony's films implicate evangelical viewers to apply and reflect on their own faith and personal spiritual adversity. Sony's mundane realities aim to interpellate viewers to learn from "plausible, sensible understandable grace [that] manifest in conduct and attitude" (Anker 2009: 337). Sony's contemporary Christian films are "non-generic narratives" that are driven more by ideology rather than plot. Schatz clarifies viewers must rely on both real world and previous

narrative-filmic experiences to make sense of stories (1981:30). Rather than linear plot development or cause-effect, Sony's films are driven more by viewers' emotional engagement and what lessons they come away with.

#### 4.4 The Power of Prayer

*War Room* opens showing Miss Clara standing at a grave, and the film cuts to a scene of army soldiers standing in a war room. A voiceover of Miss Clara explains that a war room is a space where an army gathers to plan the strategy of attack before departing for battle. The film then transitions to the home of the Jordan family. We learn that Tony Jordan is the top salesman at his pharmaceutical company and Liz is a well-respected real estate agent, but their relationship is turbulent. Tony is emotionally cold and confronts Liz about withdrawing \$5,000 from their savings account to help her poverty-stricken sister. Tony demands that Liz put back the money and tells her that he is in charge of their finances.

The next day Liz meets her new client Miss Clara, and Miss Clara initiates conversation about Liz's church and prayer life. Liz explains that her family occasionally goes to church and that the Lord is important to her like most Christians. Miss Clara asks while getting coffee, "So, if I was to ask you what your prayer life was like, would you say if it was hot or cold?" Liz replies, "I don't know if I would say it's hot. I mean we're like most people we have full schedules, we work, but I would consider myself a spiritual person. I'm not hot, but I'm not cold either. Just, you know, somewhere in the middle". After Liz goes into greater detail of her relationship with Tony, Miss Clara shows Liz her war room and explains that she experienced similar marital problems with her late husband as well. She explains,

I used to do what you and your husband are doing, but it got me nowhere. Then I really started studying what the scripture says, and God showed me that it wasn't my job to do the heavy lifting, no. That was something only he could do. It was my job to seek him, to trust him, and to stand on his word.

Miss Clara encourages Liz that she can teach her the proper way to pray in order to save her marriage.

In the Introduction chapter, I discuss that Christianity is a polyvalent phenomenon that appears differently across the United States in terms of identification, belief systems, and how many choose to practice. While there is immense diversity of how individuals choose to practice Christianity, prayer is a basic tenant that is universally practiced. Prayer can be complex to define because many individuals have different approaches to how they pray. But, Peter R. Baelz (1968) suggests that prayer can be defined in three aspects: prayer is a dialogue with God, it is practicing the presence of God, and the lifting up of heart and mind to God (14). Prayer can be viewed as a soliloquy where one voices their gratitude, concerns, fears, etc. to God. Prayer functions as the root of developing a relationship with God as Christians initiate dialogue for spiritual guidance.

Praying is also an act of self-evaluation that allows individuals to assess themselves during communication with God. As a foundation of developing one's relationship with God, prayer often involves Christians acknowledging their own flaws. Praying allows individuals to reflect who they are as a person within God's presence and confess need for spiritual improvement. Don E. Saliers (1977) elaborates,

But, confessing and acknowledging our rebelliousness before God also is fitting to indelibly human features of our life. If praising and thanking are essential to our full humanity, so is confession. There is a correlation between the attributes of God's holiness and righteousness and our own lack thereof (57).

After Liz agrees to have weekly meetings with Miss Clara to discuss prayer, their first discussion is about Liz's marriage.

Miss Clara: Do you still love Tony?

Liz : There's love in my heart for Tony, but it's just buried underneath a lot of frustration.

Miss Clara: So, he needs grace.

Liz: Grace? I don't know that he deserves grace.

Miss Clara: Do you deserve grace?

Miss Clara educates Liz that no one is righteous, and therefore, no one deserves grace. But, she continues that everyone is able to receive forgiveness if they turn to him. While finishing the construction of her war room, Liz receives a text message from her colleague that says she spotted Tony within another woman on his business trip. In response, Liz grabs her Bible, sinks to the floor of her closet and repents to God acknowledging she has not prayed or followed him as she should and cries that she needs him more than ever. In her intimate moment of vulnerability with God, Liz recognizes and admits her faults and desire to learn to love her husband again.

Re-establishing a stable relationship between Tony and Liz not only requires prayer, but also restoring ideological balance within their household. Tony and Liz live in a civilized domestic space, and as discussed, their attitudinal conflicts derive from marital issues regarding finances, constant arguing, and a lack of compassion for one another. As previously mentioned, Liz's frustration inhibits her ability to fully love Tony, and Tony possesses antagonistic feelings towards Liz. Although there is no physical conflict, their household is ideologically conveyed as a battlefield. Liz's war room is depicted as a bunker where she strategizes with her prayer requests to help her restore peace and love back into her home and marriage. Miss Clara

lectures Liz that prayer is the solution to save her marriage with Tony and her weapon to combat the real enemy of her joy and marriage: Satan. Miss Clara tells Liz that Satan is,

The real enemy that wants to distract you from the Lord and your husband...Satan comes to steal, kill, and destroy, and he is stealing your joy. He is killing your faith, and trying to destroy your family. If I were you I'd get my heart right with God, and you need to do your fighting in prayer, and you need to kick the real enemy out of your home.

As Liz finishes her prayer, she turns to her right-hand side of her closet and recites scripture she wrote, and finds spiritual motivation from repeating James 4:7 "Submit to God. Resist the devil and he will flee from you". Elizabeth grabs her Bible and walks downstairs to the living room of her home and begins to preach,

I don't know where you are devil, but I know you can hear me. You have played with my mind, and had your way long enough. No more, you are done. Jesus is the Lord of this house, and that means there's no place for you here anymore. So, take your lies, your schemes, and your accusations and get out, in Jesus's name.

By casting out Satan through prayer, Liz restores ideological balance by keeping God at the center of her home.

With *War Room* in the domains of the melodrama genre, resolution can only be completely achieved with the eventual embrace between Tony and Liz. Tony and Liz's spiritual and romantic progression completes restoration of the social order of their home, but also reintegrates them back into their larger Christian order of their community. This is achieved through Tony's repentance of his actions and Liz's forgiveness of Tony. Towards the end of the film, Tony reveals to Liz that he was fired from his job for stealing prescription pills, but to his surprise she remains calm about the situation. Tony continues to open up saying he deserved to get fired and how he almost had an affair with another woman.

Tony in tears: But, you know all this, and you're still here. And I see your closet and that you have been praying for me. Why would you do that when you see the type of man that I've become?

Liz: Cause I'm not done with us. I will fight for our marriage...But I am His, before I am yours. And because I love Jesus, I'm staying right here.

Tony falling to his knee: I'm sorry Liz. I asked God to forgive me, but I need you to forgive me.

*War Room* aims to educate viewers that prayer is a powerful tool that can be used for a myriad of situations. Prayer can be resourceful imitate level such as marriage or personal communication with God. *War Room* ultimately encourages viewers to resort to prayer for divine support on any matter.

#### 4.5 Belief in Heaven

In *Heaven is for Real*, Todd Burpo is portrayed as a much-respected member of his community. *Heaven* introduces Todd as a dutiful and compassionate individual performing various tasks as a carpenter, a volunteer fireman, the head wrestling coach of his town's local high school, and the head reverend of his church. Todd's multiple duties that he performs are based on the reverence he draws from his contemporaries. Schatz argues that

character's identities and narrative roles (or "functions") are determined by their relationship with the community and its value structure...he or she is the physical embodiment of an attitude, a style, a world view, of a predetermined and essentially unchanging culture posture (1981: 25-26).

Tantamount to his community service, Todd is viewed as a moral exemplar amongst his peers because of his unwavering faith in God. On different occasions, Todd suffers from his own misfortunes such as fracturing his leg and kidney stones that both temporarily prohibit him from performing his duties at his church, and financial constraints at home. Despite these

setbacks, Todd continues to show his commitment and passion to help others, and his community reciprocates their respect and gratitude for him.

Although Todd is portrayed as a role model that many in his community turn to, Todd's faith is tested when Colton shares his experience in heaven. After Colton tells his initial account of his supernatural experience of his spirit drifting above his comatose body and watching Todd yell at God, Todd begins to question if heaven actually exists. In one particular scene, Todd and Colton visit a diner to get milkshakes, and Todd asks Colton about his full experience in heaven. As Colton begins his story, the camera fades to taking on Colton's "spirit" point of view as the camera lifts up towards a ceiling and turns 180 degrees as a high angle shot looking down at Colton's comatose body being operated on by surgeons. The camera proceeds to cut to a medium shot of Colton walking across a field of grass where the horizon touches a sky full of white clouds. Colton comes across his dad's church and opens a door to let himself in. As Colton walks inside the church, the camera pans right to reveal rows of pews that lead toward an open sky with four white gleaming angels with amorphous bodies and wings singing. As Colton is sitting in the pews, the camera shows a dark silhouette of Jesus with medium length hair and a white hooded gown walking from the back of the church towards Colton. The camera transitions to a low angle that only shows Jesus's right hand to the left of the frame and Colton centered looking up at him. Jesus proceeds, "Colton, do you know who I am?" Colton nods and Jesus continues, "You're not afraid?" Colton shakes his head and responds, "Nobody here wants to hurt me". Jesus replies, "That's right, Colton. And nobody here ever will. There are some people here that want to meet you". Jesus stretches his arm out, and Colton takes his hand as they walk toward the exit of the church together.

Contrary to what *Heaven's* trailer depicts, Colton (medically speaking) never actually encounters a near death experience. Todd reveals that Colton's heart does not stop and his brain does not flat-line. Despite his medical reports, Colton is still able to have an out-of-body experience in the afterlife. Raymond Moody (1995) outlines five characteristics of a near-death experience in film: 1) separation of one's body, 2) the encounter of a being of light, 3) identifies a review of one's life, 4) strong attraction to the afterlife, and 5) a reluctance to return to the body. Accordingly, the film distinguishes that there is a separation between Colton's spirit and his body and he encounters angels singing. Going along the lines concerning a review of one's life, Tom Ruffles (2004) observes that when a character experiences the afterlife, he/she is forced to confront their failings, sins, or past traumas as a form of extreme therapy (129). One's near death experience is more of a conduit providing an ethical lesson(s) of how one should behave or transform their lifestyle when they return to earth. However, because Colton is only four-years-old, he carries the perceived innocence that does not need any sort of self-reflection. But, Colton does change as a more precocious child with a new found sense of courage as he tells Todd "we don't ever have to be afraid again" after revisiting the butterfly conservatory to hold the tarantula he was previously scared to go near, and divine duty as he sneaks past doctors to visit a terminally ill child and reassure him everything will be fine.

Filmmakers that produce religious narratives face the daunting challenge of conveying the supernatural in a visual and logical depiction. Film's hallmark has traditionally been the ability to replicate what seems objectively real, and one of its largest challenges continues to be rendering what is inherently invisible, such as the presence and acts of God. Anker elaborates,

the challenge for the filmmakers is to find appropriate cinematic means to convey whatever it is that they wish to dramatize about the divine, an entity whose nature,

agency and magnitude, most religions assert, are mysterious, immaterial, and markedly beyond human comprehension (2009: 333).

Sony's contemporary films have the challenge of depicting the divine within limited, modern cinematic spaces. The challenge of replicating the divine also includes constructing a conceivable depiction of heaven.

When it comes to a specific layout of heaven—location, geography—media representations have been rather indefinite. Heaven has often been presented as a “vast green pasture or clouds with a pearly gate entrance above earth” or “an immersion of light and love with a profound sense of security and protection” (Tate 2009: 107; Zaleski 1995: 391). The challenge of depicting heaven in media is due to various complex factors. In *Screening the Afterlife* (2012), Christopher Deacy points out that the desire to discuss the details of heaven remains a low priority amongst Christians (99-100). Christians find greater comfort in believing there is a heaven rather than its specific contents or layout. Deacy also refers to Jeffrey Burton Russell (2006) who argues that heaven is not a place in space or time, but rather an “ineffable experience beyond words” (Russell 2006: 2, Russell 1997: 6 in Deacy 2012: 100). Ultimately, Deacy proposes that no matter how substantially eschatological visions of heaven represent a transformation of present existence or as an celestial utopia, heaven tends to be depicted as rooted in the present as a mere extension of humans’ hopes and aspirations (2012: 78). Paradoxically, while media displays indefinite portrayals of heaven, they are also what shapes individuals’ conceptions of heaven. Sonja is quick to dismiss Colton’s visions of heaven as she argues with Todd, “What Colton has been telling us is an echo of every story, every song, every image he’s seen since he was a child”.

After Colton details his full experience in heaven, Todd grapples with his son's afterlife encounter and the idea heaven could actually exist. Often, Todd dismisses particulars of Colton's visit such as when Colton says he met Jesus's horse that is colored like a rainbow. In conversation with his friend Jay, Todd opens up saying, "We ask these kids to believe this stuff, and I don't even know if I believe it myself, Jay. The Bible tells us to believe his children, but what my child's telling me will get me laughed out of town. I don't know what to preach. I don't know what to say". However, Todd begins to change his views as Colton reveals information with great epistemological weight. Colton reveals that he met Todd's grandfather, who died before Colton was born, and Jesus introduced him to his unborn sister in heaven. Todd then takes it upon himself that others should learn of Colton's experience.

Rather than any physical conflict, the problem at hand is ideological disruption within Todd's community. During his first sermon after Colton's surgery, Todd reluctantly talks to his congregation about his son's visit to heaven. Immediately, the people in the pews begin to dispute his claims as he reveals to them that Colton never had a near death experience, yet was still able to experience the afterlife. After the town's local newspaper publishes Colton's interview where he recollects his experience in heaven, Todd and his family begin to be met with ridicule and discussion of Todd's removal as reverend begins to go around. Schatz writes, "Their personal and social conflicts are internalized, translated into emotional terms, with their interpersonal antagonism eventually yielding to the need for a well-ordered community" (1981: 34). In a board meeting about his possible removal, Jay tells Todd, "We all want to be supportive of Colton, but we can't have our town be turned into a circus". Soon after, Todd engages with Nancy about Colton's experience.

Nancy: Colton's trip to Heaven disturbs a lot of people. It disturbs me. Do you take it as a literal event?

Todd: What about it bothers you so much?

Nancy: What is it? All right, I don't like how it feels like some kind of fairy tale; Just a simple, easy explanation of life. I don't like how it makes our church a magnet for everyone who wants to take their brain out of their head and beat to it death with the Bible, and then seem to show how much they believe. Heaven and hell have always been used to control and frighten people.

By removing Todd from his duties as their reverend, his peers believe social and ideological order will be reestablished within their community.

*Heaven* uses Todd's final sermon to encourage evangelical viewers to continue to uphold their beliefs in heaven and Jesus. Rather than a being portrayed as a confrontation with his community, Todd invites news crews and his congregation for his final testimony of Colton's experience in heaven Without hesitation, Todd confirms that Colton visited heaven, but asks if we really need to know if heaven actually exists in order to lead better and different lives. Todd says, "Haven't we already seen a glimpse of heaven, and so often chosen the hell of hate and fear?". Todd continues that "God crushed his pride" when he first learned of Colton's experience and began to doubt his faith. Instead of Todd and his family reintegrating into the social order that his community expects them to, his congregation collectively changes its view and accepts Colton's encounter as truth. As *Heaven* discusses, there are many individuals who do not believe or may be intimidated to believe that heaven exists. But, those who are able to demonstrate their Christian belief will able to show others the truth of salvation as well.

#### 4.6 The Struggle of Faith

*Miracles From Heaven* opens with Christy Beam and her family getting ready to go to church, and singing worship prior their Sunday morning sermon with Pastor Scott Vignette (John Carroll Lynch). Pastor Scott opens his sermon with “There is common phrase ‘no pain, no pain’ with the sculpting of our bodies. But the same can be applied to the sculpting of our character and the deepening of our spiritual life”. Pastor Scott continues that when the “road gets bumpy, when the storms rain down” that one will turn to shelter such as an umbrella or a helmet. He finishes his opening monologue “But, there’s one thing we need that can’t be seen and it can’t be bought and that is faith. Faith is really the only shelter”. *Miracles* places its main focus on Christy as the film depicts her gradual regression in her faith after her daughter Anna is diagnosed with a fatal motility disorder (the inability to digest foods or liquids).

Initially, Christy is portrayed as a mother who maintains her faith during Anna’s early stages of her prognosis. In one particular scene, Christy is helping Anna trying on new clothes after her stomach has swollen in abnormal size. As Anna examines her stomach, she asks Christy, “Why do you think God hasn’t healed me?” and Christy replies, “There’s so many things I don’t know. But I know God loves you”. Christy, however, further chooses to regress in her faith and stray away from God as Anna’s continues to show no signs of progress with recovery. Christy learns the fatal extent of Anna’s condition when she learns that children with similar motility disorders generally take up Dr. Nurko’s practice until they die. Upon learning the slim possibility for Anna’s recovery, Christy cries to God, “Are you even there? Do you even hear me? Because I don’t hear you”.

Sony's mundane realities reflect God's more contemporary and discreet presence. As I have noted, Sony's diegetic worlds are crafted to reflect realities that appear as indistinguishable to viewers. This also includes viewers' perception of the presence of God; Sony's mundane realities replicate God's presence as elusive. Travis Dumsday (2014) refers to God's inconspicuous nature as "divine hiddenness" (Dumsday 2014: 1). God's hidden intercession with contemporary human affairs is to limit human culpability, and he uses suffering as a stimulant for all Christians to repent instead (Dumsday 2014: 1, Parker 1997: 209). Through suffering, Christians are encouraged to sense the urging of God to repent to turn away from faithless attitudes rather than to wait in vain. Conversely, Christy's emotional suffering and her perception of God's inactivity cause her to distance herself from God. Christy's fading trust in God causes her to ultimately stop going to church and cease religious practice all together. As Christy and Kevin have an argument about looming financial issues, Kevin tries to calm her down but Christy yells, "I can't operate under the assumption that everything is going to be okay". "It's called faith, Christy". "I don't have faith about anything. I can't even pray, Kevin".

Anna's miracle is used as a catalyst to motivate Christy to repent to God. Throughout his essay, Parker details that parts of the Christian experience include suffering and not having one's prayer requests fulfilled by God. Miraculous recoveries are familiar amongst individuals, but they infrequently occur. Parker explains, "God rarely grants his children cries of deliverance. To observe that God does not miraculously rescue the faithful from danger and death is not to deny that God is working in the world" (1997:207). However, many turn away from God due to perceived divine inactivity. In Christy's case, God's divine intervention is not only to heal Anna,

but also to grant Christy the autonomy to repent. Anna's disease is miraculously cured when the branch she's sitting on breaks, and she falls thirty feet inside the hollow opening of her family's tree. Similarly to Todd, Christy's final terms of repentance is through delivering a sermon. After Anna's recovery, Pastor Scott invites Christy to speak about her experience. In front of her congregation and the evangelical audience, *Miracles* uses Christy to preach that like many others, she lost her faith in God and her suffering blinded her from all the other miracles that God put in her life: her family, friends, and the people she met during Anna's medical trips. *Miracles* aims to inform evangelical viewers miracles are not only acts of divine power, but also the everyday people and occurrences that are often overlooked.

#### 4.7 Conclusion

Sony's contemporary Christian films operate to not only satisfy evangelicals' taste for Christian-oriented narratives, but to also draw evangelical engagement with narratives that can be interpreted as pedagogic parables. Like all viewers, evangelicals carry their own set of beliefs with them when viewing a film, and those beliefs can have correlation with certain films that contain narratives that support and uphold worldviews and value systems they live by. When evangelicals watch Sony's contemporary Christian films, it can be argued that those films can be viewed as a theological resource. Clive Marsh (2009) writes, "If the whole of life is lived with respect to God/the Divine, then it is inevitable that any cultural product—a film, for example—can be interpreted through a theological lens" (267). *War Room*, *Heaven*, and *Miracles* contain narratives that keep Christianity as the main focal point and provide interpretative worlds that evoke interaction from evangelical viewers. When viewing Sony's films, evangelicals

are actively generating affective responses to understanding and improving one's social and moral Christian identities. Evangelicals watching Sony's contemporary Christian films can be argued as a means of religion-like practice because they actively choose to learn from the narratives and perceive theological messages that allow them to act and think differently about their faith. Liz Jordan, Todd Burpo, and Christy Beam are positioned as moral exemplars as they explore prayer, belief in heaven, and struggle in their faith in God. Although each character displays their flaws, this helps bridge a connection with evangelicals and other Christian viewers by providing characters they can relate to.

## CHAPTER 5

### CONCLUSION

#### 5.1 Contemporary Christian Films: The Way Forward?

In my thesis, I elaborate about the evangelical cultural identity and how many evangelicals negotiate with media in order to articulate how Sony's contemporary Christian films are able to resonate with them. While, yes, many evangelicals' socio-political beliefs influence their consumption habits and avoid media that do not necessarily reflect their views, they are ultimately choosing family-friendly films they can enjoy. Hendershot points out, "While it is clear that *some* Christian media encourage a patently right-wing outlook...it is also clear that much of the media Christians consume are more 'personal' than 'political' and that some of it is just plain innocuous entertainment" (2004: 210). Evangelicals still watch clean mainstream films that are not explicitly Christian-oriented, but there is an incentive with films that do revolve around Christian ideology because of they offered narratives that allow them to transform their own Christian identities.

Sony recognizes the evangelical demand for Christian-oriented films within a commercial culture that frequently does not cater to them. Due to this disconnect between the evangelical audience and Hollywood, it can be initially difficult for a mainstream company like Sony to connect with an apprehensive market. Through market research, however, Sony is able to learn about the types of Christian media that evangelicals prefer and create films with narrative conventions they assume evangelicals will like. To reach out to the evangelical audience, Sony uses trailers to communicate their films keep the focus around Christianity. Sony also prioritizes the basic emotional tone of spiritual galvanization to motivate evangelicals

to see their films. *Heaven is for Real*, *War Room*, and *Miracles From Heaven* provide comfort for the evangelical audience because they are films that they can enjoy and offer spiritual value.

I wanted to write about *Heaven*, *War Room*, and *Miracles*, because I believe they can help merit the discussion of contemporary Christian films as their own sector within Christian media studies. There is available market research about evangelicals and scholarship of contemporary Christian filmmaking, but there is also a gap regarding textual analysis of contemporary Christian films. This also includes the argument of contemporary Christian films as an umbrella term that holds the potential to cover a myriad of contemporary narratives. While I am only able to explore how *Heaven*, *War Room*, and *Miracles* have been able to offer narrative elements with Christian characters, conflicts, and settings that reinforce the parameters of the Christian melodrama, I believe that contemporary Christian films are capable of encompassing other sub-genres with explicit Christian narrative elements as well. This curiosity also extends to further examine the relationship between the evangelical market and the potential production growth of contemporary Christian films from mainstream studios.

It is important to continue the study of contemporary Christian films because of their economic successes from attracting evangelicals and other Christian audiences. Independent studios such as Sherwood Pictures and Pure Flix set the standards that low budget contemporary Christian films could produce large streams of revenue, but Sony and Affirm Films proved that the financial ceiling could be further lifted for mainstream media companies. Contemporary Christian films were once a novelty with only a couple of releases a year, but the current output of Christian films has doubled since 2012 to about 12 a year with media companies responding by ramping up funds and investments (Faughnder 2018). This increased

visibility is reflective of the growth of Christian films entering the mainstream commercial culture and an evangelical audience that desires morally uplifting Christian films. As more media companies start recognize Sony's success with the evangelical audience, this leaves one to ask about the immediate future regarding contemporary Christian films. How many other studios will follow Sony's footsteps and attempt to reach the evangelical audience with their own line of contemporary Christian films? Will we see diversification in regards to narrative elements or structures? Will contemporary Christian films be able to continue their economic success?

## 5.2 Limitations and Future Areas of Analysis

Future analysis of evangelical reception could further survey if evangelicals do perceive Sony's contemporary Christian films as pedagogic resources. I suggest that a reception study could ask evangelical viewers if they perceive Sony's films as useful tools that have influenced their social and moral conceptions of Christianity? More specifically, one could ask if Sony's films also influenced their perceptions of prayer, heaven, and faith? Conversely, I also believe it merits to question the effectiveness of reaching audiences and viewers who do not identify as evangelical or Christian. Do they find Sony's films appealing or do they perceive them as films that only continue to support a dominant worldview? Also, do evangelicals perceive Sony's films as tools to spread Christian faith to non-believers or are they films that are only effective communicating with evangelicals and other Christians?

I also believe it merits to continue to investigate how Sony's contemporary Christian market their films to attract the evangelical audience. In my chapter about Sony's trailers, I

focus on how they reach evangelicals primarily from the standpoint of theater spectatorship. But, I believe it suffices to research other marketing methods outside of trailers or private screenings of how Sony films are able to reach evangelical circles? Notable methods of marketing include the effectiveness of sponsorship through screenings or sermons based on Sony's films at evangelical churches or congregations. In response, this can question how church screenings are able to ignite word-of-mouth amongst evangelicals? This may also involve researching traditional marketing such as trailers on Christian-oriented channels or conservative networks such as Fox News versus digital marketing through social media to reach evangelicals as well.

### 5.3 Conclusion

There is no question that Sony's contemporary Christian films have been able to strike a cord with the evangelical audience. Sony is able to provide evangelicals with narratives that uphold their worldview and conservative belief systems within an American society and mainstream culture they perceive to threaten Christian faith. Evangelicals are not only able to watch films that they are able to enjoy in comfort, and engage with narratives that challenge them to reflect on their Christian identities. It is the connections with characters that endure similar issues of spiritual adversity and the construction of perceivably real diegetic worlds that allow evangelical audiences to view Sony's films as a form of cinematic ministry. With films that are able to resonate with the evangelical audience and generate prodigious revenue, contemporary Christian films may be a new cinematic staple.

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