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# ‘EVANGELITAINMENT’ IN AMERICAN MAINSTREAM FILM AND TELEVISION

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## **Abstract**

The current trends and development tendencies of media production, society and cultural environment are closely interconnected with entertainment – a specific way of social acting and communication that offers its recipients an opportunity to ‘escape’ from the pressures of everydayness and social expectations of our surroundings. Our understanding of ‘media entertainment’ as a psychological and socio-cultural phenomenon in the context of media communication is associated with a wide range of issues and questions. The author of the article reflects on portmanteau terms which have been coined in order to fulfil the need to name and determine the processes of combining serious topics and entertaining elements on the background of contemporary socio-cultural situation. The author specifically focuses on the term ‘evangelitainment’, i.e. the portmanteau word that outlines the issues of merging religion and entertainment in terms of production of American mainstream feature films and episodic television shows. The article works with a basic assumption that the portmanteau terms related to media entertainment – including ‘evangelitainment’ – help us to better understand some of the most recent production practices of the business of culture and entertainment.

*Keywords:* feature films, media entertainment, portmanteau words, religion, television shows

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## **1. Introduction**

Although their ‘entertaining character’ has been one of the key features and functions of mass media practically from the beginnings of development of mass communication, the term ‘entertainment’ itself attracted the attention of media scholars quite late – in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. At first, the interested media theorists and researchers preferred a functionalist point of view – however, media entertainment is much more than just one of the basic media functions. We may say that the term also refers to content attributes, characteristic features and effects of media communication.

Studying media entertainment is nowadays perceived as one of the most important, even crucial challenges of media studies and media research of the 21<sup>st</sup> century [1]. Since media-disseminated entertainment and its use, i.e. the

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implications of one's experience drawn from contacts with entertaining communication content are reflected on by multiple scientific disciplines – mostly by Psychology and Sociology (of media), Media Studies and Cultural Studies, Cultural Anthropology, Economy and Political Science – there is no universal and generally accepted theoretical and empirical framework that would serve as a guide to related research inquiry. This fact is also quite obvious when we take into account a large amount of theoretical concepts, research strategies, outlines and considerations associated with the given communication phenomena.

As Richard Dyer remarks, we have to seek to understand entertainment in its own terms: *“This means taking seriously the common sense of entertainment, notions like escapism, glamour, fun, stardom and excitement, as well as phrases such as ‘it takes your mind off things’ and ‘it’s only entertainment’. It also means analysing given instances of entertainment as entertainment, neither assuming one already understands what this is nor pushing the analysis too quickly on to other things.”* [2] It should be added that this is not an easy task to fulfil – the complexity of defining entertainment as well as the essence and nature of entertainment experience complicates all processes of theoretical and empirical inquiry into entertaining media communication quite considerably.

Today's scholarly views on religion – whether from the perspective of Theology, Religion Studies, Philosophy or other related fields of interest – are similarly complex. Stuart Moss claims that within contemporary (and highly dynamic) global cultural landscapes, religion continues to retain a significant place in society and together with a wide range of social institutions (including entertainment media) *“epitomizes the complexity of structures and symbols that pervades diverse cultures and traditions”*. As the author observes, it is far from obvious how linkages might be made between spirituality and entertainment [3]. On the other hand, it is quite obvious that the ways producers of entertaining media contents utilize religious topics, symbols and stories are closely related to the nature of media entertainment.

Media entertainment is a form of social communication aimed at satisfying individual needs of recipients, which are of psychological, somatic, cognitive, affective and socio-cultural character. We may even say that entertainment's position within the processes of production and reception of media communication is very firm – it is a well thought out, calculated construct aware of its own objectives, a versatile combination of popular themes, ideas, stories and symbols [4]. It is therefore no surprise that religious topics, symbols and myths, mostly those that are generally known, respected and deeply rooted in our culture, are often used in order to attract the largest possible group of target media audiences.

The article aims to reflect on so-called portmanteau terms related to media entertainment and their significance in terms of studying different forms, effects and uses of media entertainment. Our attention is predominantly focused on ‘evangelitainment’, the term that refers to media-disseminated stories involving religious and spiritual messages. As there are various possibilities of specifying

the given issue, we have decided to discuss audio-visual forms of media entertainment – mainstream feature films produced in Hollywood and American television shows. Even though the late-modern Western society is generally perceived as secular and highly individualistic, it would be wrong to assume that the mainstream audiences of the new millennium are not interested in timeless myths and universally comprehensible stories referring to religious traditions, historical figures or spiritual matters. On the contrary – as chapters three and four suggest, our fascination with divine and supernatural manifests itself in today's media culture quite remarkably.

## **2. Portmanteau terms associated with media entertainment**

Even though the term 'portmanteau' does not sound English at all, the online version of *The Oxford Living Dictionaries* claims that it is "a word blending the sounds and combining the meanings of two others" [<https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/portmanteau>]. That means a portmanteau or rather a portmanteau word is a linguistic blend of words – parts of multiple words or their sounds are combined into a new word, usually in order to diversify the existing terminology or expand it when necessary.

There are various portmanteau terms associated with media entertainment – some of them have been, in fact, used for decades. Probably the most known of these words is the term 'infotainment'. *The Oxford Dictionary of Media* by Daniel Chandler and Rod Munday defines it as "the presentation of factual information in an entertaining manner, normally in broadcast media and especially on television". The term is often used pejoratively in the rhetoric of "dumbing down" [5]. The same dictionary claims that "dumbing down" is a pejorative term for a perceived cultural trend in which "important concepts or issues are glossed-over, condensed, over-simplified, or trivialized to make them more popular or accessible to a larger (and more lucrative) audience" [5, p. 115]. A recent study by Ján Višňovský, Erika Obertová and Martin Baláž defines the term similarly, claiming that information is – thanks to (or rather due to) infotainment – more available to a wider spectrum of audiences, but its informative value and seriousness are significantly lowered [6]. Adopting a different perspective, John Hartley points out that in critical discourse, the concept in question is often used to lament the loss of 'traditional' news values. As the author reminds, those who criticise infotainment often tend to prefer modernist forms of communication, privileging reason over emotion, public over private and information over entertainment. We should not forget that the entertainment characteristics that form contemporary journalism were to be found even in its earliest incarnations – to put it simply, sex, scandal, disaster and celebrity have been intrinsic to modern journalism since the Enlightenment and thus the shift to infotainment is anything but new [7]. However, minding the need to react to contemporary issues that have arisen outside of the traditional public sphere, in 1999 John Harley coined another portmanteau term related to media entertainment – 'democrataintment'.

According to John Hartley's influential works, 'democratainment' tries to better explain the use of television, "*both in its original mass broadcast form, and now in its emergent subscriber-choice forms*", to teach two new kinds of citizenship – "cultural citizenship" and "DIY citizenship" [8] (Author's note: DIY = abbr. of do-it-yourself). As a transmodern medium, Hartley further notes, television shares many of its educational aspects with the European medieval Church, and it takes its own cultural place in the institutional setting of talk and the family. 'Democratainment', along with other recent Government-Education-Media hybrids such as infotainment and edutainment, [8, p. 530] is therefore the term claiming that "*in commercial democracies, public participation in public affairs is conducted increasingly through highly mediated entertainment media and commercial rather than public institutions*" [7, p. 61]. Respecting these notions and opinions, we may say that all existing portmanteau terms associated with media entertainment stress out entertainment's ability to pervasively cross the boundaries of other fields of media production and social discourse.

Louis Bosshart and Lea Hellmueller focus on infotainment and edutainment as well and they also recognise another 15 portmanteau terms associated with media entertainment – 'advertainment' (advertising and entertainment), 'charitainment' (charity and entertainment), 'computainment' (computer entertainment), 'crititainment' (criticism and entertainment), 'digitainment' (digital entertainment), 'docutainment' (documentary and entertainment), 'evangelitainment' (evangelism or religion and entertainment), 'Internetainment' (Internet entertainment), 'iuristainment' (law and entertainment), 'militainment' (military and entertainment), 'newstainment' (news and entertainment), 'politainment'/'confrontainment' (politics and entertainment), 'preventainment' (prevention or health care and entertainment), 'scientainment' (science and entertainment) and 'sportainment' (sports and entertainment) [9].

The first one – 'advertainment' or branded entertainment – is a specific mixture of advertising and entertainment which we experience on a daily basis, practically every time we visit a public place or use media in order to access information – on the Internet, in lifestyle magazines, shopping malls, etc. 'Charitainment' is closely related to benefit concerts on television, our general interest in charity and reality shows that involve helping people in need, i.e. those who are seriously ill, impoverished or unable to lead a normal life. One of the most commercially lucrative forms of charitainment is celebrity advocacy. 'Computainment', 'Internetainment' and 'digitainment' are all associated with various digital forms of media entertainment including digital games and virtual reality devices, while 'crititainment' draws attention to general popularity of satire, caricatures, commented online reviews and so on. 'Docutainment' might be a specific form of edutainment focused on merging drama and documentary stories or historical facts (hybrid media genres such as docu-drama); 'iuristainment' allows the audiences to safely experience 'the course of justice' via films, reality shows and television dramas portaying criminal cases and their aftermath. 'Militainment' represents war movies, media coverage of military

parades and exercises as well as demonstrations of military power and trivialization of armed conflicts and their implications. 'Newstainment' is, at least in our understanding, a form of infotainment bound to newscast; 'politainment' (or 'confrontainment') allows us to encounter the many faces of contemporary political campaigns and media appearances of public officials and people involved in politics on the local, regional and global levels – these confrontations are typically based on expressive rhetoric and emotional outbursts. 'Sportainment' refers to one of the most commercially interesting segments of the media industry – media coverage of sport events based on organising spectacular and extravagant opening and closing ceremonies, presenting sportsmen and athletes as media celebrities of the global importance and popularising untraditional, peculiar or even bizarre sports. 'Preventainment' aims to raise public awareness on prevention, vaccination or other ways of staying healthy, 'scientainment' helps scholarly circles and academicians to appeal to the general public via reality shows, lectures on television or online videos. And last but not least, we have the term 'evangelitainment'; as noted earlier this is the topic we aim to discuss in detail in the next chapter of the article.

One of the first scholars criticising media (in this case television specifically) to point out the close relationship between religious matters and entertainment (now called 'evangelitainment') was Neil Postman in his renowned publication from 1985. The author analyses the way televangelists use various entertainment methods to attract viewers in order to spread religious messages. His critical notions are reflected even in the title of the book chapter in question – *Shuffle Off to Bethlehem* [10]. As Louis Bosshart and Lea Hellmueller remark, televangelism (e.g. television and radio appearances and media-disseminated sermons by preachers) often works with “*dramatic effects, talk show formats, dramatic shows, aesthetic beauty, verbal pictures, fast pacing, and straight forward solutions*” [9, p. 14]. Even though this kind of broadcast religious entertainment is typically associated with North American culture, we are able to identify certain examples in Slovakia as well, although in different contexts. The first example refers to the internationally known case of the former Archbishop of Trnava Róbert Bezák who was unexpectedly dismissed from his position by the Roman Catholic Church in 2012, but his rare public and media appearances are still watched with a huge interest. The second highly popular religious figure in Slovakia was Anton Srholec, the Catholic priest known as a communist-time dissident and charity proponent who died in early 2016.

It might seem that the media performances of televangelists and publicly known religious figures are the most visible forms of evangelitainment. However, as we suggest below, religious topics are nowadays closely intertwined with varied and expansive fields of socio-cultural and economic life of the globalised societies of the Western world which depend on the cultural and entertainment industry in many different ways. The show business always applies economic measures and organisational as well as creative practices in

order to offer refined kinds of entertainment, (seemingly) new ideas to follow, (seemingly) new stimuli to experience and (seemingly) new stories to tell. It is not always easy to realise that almost all of these entertaining impulses have been followed, experienced and told before, just in slightly different manners and maybe not so spectacularly – for instance, in terms of ‘traditional’ forms of religion.

### **3. American audio-visual evangelitainment and its ways of disseminating religious themes**

Taking a closer look at attributes typical for both religion and entertainment, we have to admit that they have a lot in common. Louis Bosshart and Lea Hellmueller share the same opinion and explain that “*religion deals, as do entertainment products, with eschatology, fears and hopes, anxiety and wishes, conflict and harmony, good and bad, egoism and altruism. Religion as well as entertainment shows long-lasting or even timeless values; they both create meaningful meaning.*” [9, p. 13-14] Moreover, entertainment also ‘borrows’ many religious motives to show attractive and perfect states of worlds (‘paradises’), of individuals (‘almighty’ supermen and superwomen), and of communities and families living in harmony, after years of troubles, conflicts and defeats. However, the authors mention an important difference between religion and entertainment as well – even though both of them involve icons, parades, processions, shrines, rituals, good characters (saints and heroes) and basic themes of human existence and deal with the same myths and archetypes, entertainment just “*covers the gap between reality and utopia whereas religion covers the gap between reality and transcendence*” [9, p. 13-14]. It is highly questionable whether media entertainment will ever be able to ‘step closer’ to religion in this regard, considering its commercial nature, generally low aesthetical and artistic value, low level of inventiveness and only rarely manifested ability to inspire pro-social changes.

The questions of evangelitainment, i.e. of the ways of merging religion and entertainment remain unanswered. Bruce David Forbes, American Professor in the field of Religious Studies, claims that we need to recognise that religion and popular culture “*relate to each other in at least four different ways*” [11], and each one of them needs to be addressed in order to better understand the connection between religious topics and media-disseminated entertainment. These four ways include:

- 1) religion in popular culture,
- 2) popular culture in religion,
- 3) popular culture as religion,
- 4) religion and popular culture in dialogue [11].

Most of the scholarly materials already published focus on religion in popular culture, discussing the explicit or implicit appearance of religious themes, imagery or languages in media products, e.g. the portrayal of Catholic nuns in movies or the redeemer role played by film and television superheroes

[11]. Considering the partially different terminology (most American scholars use the term 'popular culture' to refer to all forms of industrially produced culture), we have to remark that the same seems to be true for what we call 'media entertainment'. Our point of view explained below therefore corresponds with the first category proposed by Bruce David Forbes; in this case the way of understanding religion and media entertainment would be called 'religion in (audio-visual) media entertainment'. However, it is unclear if such analyses of religiousness combined with media entertainment (i.e. evangelitainment) should take into consideration movies that predominantly represent other than religious messages and just use religion-related metaphors in their titles (e.g. thriller *Devil's Advocate* by Taylor Hackford from 1997 or recently released British social drama *Trespass against Us*, directed by Adam Smith).

As mentioned above, we assume that audio-visual media production originating from the United States (more specifically, American mainstream feature films and episodic television shows) purposefully utilizes religious symbols, motives and topics; those who create media products of these types try to attract the attention of the global media audiences by combining fashionable elements of various traditional religions and fragments of alternative spiritualism as well. They do so in order to appeal to the universal human values, mostly in case of younger generations of media recipients. Mary E. Hess argues that film is very familiar to young audiences and "*communities of faith are slowly and often painfully coming to realise*" that mass-mediated popular culture has become the primary database from which younger generations draw in order to make sense of their religious experiences [12]. However, it would be incorrect to assume that feature films and television shows influence only young people and their views on religion and faith as such – these motives, stories and symbols are, after all, perceived by people of all generations and religious beliefs, all around the world.

The last 40 years of dynamic transformations within the global media production and creative industries as such have influenced use of religious motives in film production tremendously. Richard O'Connell's analysis of theological, cultural and cinematic issues in *The Greatest Story Ever Told* and *The Passion of the Christ* proves that these two influential movies, the former from 1965 and the latter released in 2004, differ in many aspects. According to the author, "*the composed, ascetic, and very godlike portrayal of Jesus in the Greatest Story Ever Told has been morphed into the tortured and very human Jesus of The Passion of the Christ*" [13]. Shay Sayre and Cynthia King also use *The Passion of the Christ* as an example of "*applying the power of visual narrative with religious passion*" in order to produce inspirational and empowering movies. One of the most interesting facts related to this film is that its director Mel Gibson "*departed from the usual film marketing formulation for a heavy promotion by church groups, both within their organisations and to the general public, often giving away free tickets*". Despite controversy associated with its release, this film achieved more pre-release sales than any movie before [14]. Moreover, Mel Gibson's explicitly brutal Biblical story portraying the last

days of Jesus set new standards in relation to telling epic religious stories on the silver screen.

However, offering visually spectacular narratives is not enough, at least not always. In 2014, two highly ambitious global film projects achieved only mild audience response and mixed reviews despite being very expensive and visually extravagant. First of these films, *Noah* (directed by Darren Aronofsky, starring Russell Crowe) retells the story of a simple man chosen by God to build an ark before an apocalyptic flood destroys the world with ambition to find a way of bringing the Bible epics into the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The second movie titled *Exodus: Gods and Kings*, also based on one of the most known stories of the Old Testament, offers a late-modern view on Moses and his monumental journey of escape from Egypt by acclaimed director Ridley Scott and A-list Hollywood actor Christian Bale as Moses. However, the latter movie could not ‘live up’ to its epic and religiously driven source material – as well as another blockbuster of the same kind released in 2016. Despite offering the famous story of an enslaved prince who meets Jesus and finds redemption by watching the Crucifixion, *Ben-Hur* (directed by Timur Bekmambetov), a gratuitous remake of the legendary epic movie from 1959, is predominantly an action film that hides its deep message underneath a large amount of computer-generated imagery.

As it seems the contemporary mainstream film audiences tend to prefer more subtle manifestations of one’s personal belief – Mel Gibson’s latest film from 2016 titled *Hacksaw Ridge* succeeds again, this time in delivering an inspiring true story of Desmond Doss, a combat medic serving in WWII who, being a devout Seventh-day Adventist, refused to hold and fire a rifle and still managed to save a lot of wounded soldiers. The same has worked for various mainstream movies introducing stories with religious motives based on true events, especially those focused on life and career of professional preachers (e.g. *Selma*, a movie chronicle of Martin Luther King’s ground-breaking public campaign on human rights directed by Ava DuVernay in 2014) or ordinary people discovering their faith (e.g. *Machine Gun Preacher*, 2011, directed by Marc Forster, centred around Sam Childers, a former drug dealer and motorcycle enthusiast who changes his lifestyle, starts to believe in God after a personal tragedy and moves to Sudan in order to protect enslaved children).

Many American mainstream feature films and television dramas are specifically aimed at teenagers and young adults. These audio-visual products sometimes offer their young viewers opportunities to watch heroes and heroines who change their lives on basis of religious experiences. Television drama *Joan of Arcadia* (the reference to Joan of Arc is quite obvious here) is one of the most discussed recent attempts to show teenagers and young viewers a story of a young girl able to communicate with God who walks among us as an attractive man. However, Alicia Vermeer remarks that religious people could not identify with Joan’s relationship with God because it was too individualistic. Even though God often used Joan to positively influence those around her, the theme of the show was the individualistic notion of ‘fulfilling your nature’ rather than a communal goal of spreading the Gospel and creating a community of believers.



Despite having a devoted fan base and achieving critical acclaim, *Joan of Arcadia* was cancelled at the end of the second season. The official reason of doing so was its audience structure. Most significant was the demographic – a mean age of 53.9, which was very surprising considering the show's target audience supposedly consisted of teenagers and young adults. The *Ghost Whisperer*, a show in which a young woman is able to communicate with ghosts, replaced *Joan of Arcadia* shortly thereafter as its creators believed that the key motives and storylines would be more interesting for teenagers and young adults [15]. It is necessary to point out that the mentioned fascination with supernatural manifests itself in media culture quite remarkably. Younger generations of the Western audiences tend to seek stories involving ghosts, zombies, vampires, werewolves and other supernatural beings.

According to Zuzana Slušná, the cultural and social formulas presented in such urban fantasy romances correspond to the social and cultural tendencies of the hypermodern. These cultural changes are marked by transformation of organised religions to personal myths, commoditization of rituals and practices, as well as hybridization of beliefs in a period characterised by pluralisation, particularization and individualization. The paranormal and supernatural motives, which are presented by the fictional worlds of urban fantasy as a part of an attainable everydayness, are highly attractive due to their eclecticism and hybridization of ideas and symbols [16].

Such portrayal of combining various supernatural motives with religious themes is also present in highly popular superhero drama *Marvel's Daredevil*, which we analysed in detail a few months ago [17]. As an orphaned young man with Irish ancestry, the story's leading character Matt Murdock (or Daredevil, the nickname is full of symbolism here) received strong Roman Catholic upbringing. Murdock therefore often questions morality of his life decisions and acts of violence through private conversations with Father Lanthom, a Catholic priest. The main hero's regular job is to provide legal services in exchange of money, but he and his colleague often agree to help poor and endangered people free of charge or for minor payments in kind (e.g. a box of fruit). As a result, they neither can afford to pay their assistant nor they are able to purchase adequate office equipment and furniture. They thus portray two young idealistic lawyers who choose helping people over working for corporate clients. Such arrangement of the otherwise prestigious professional role of lawyers is quite rare, at least in case of mainstream television dramas. Norbert Vrabec, Dana Petranová and Martin Solík notice the generally low occurrence of this phenomenon, claiming that "*the media presents to a much lesser extent new forms of professional and career strategies which could inspire young people, especially in the context of popular culture*" [18]. Another example of doing charity work, this time in the context of romantic feature film for teenagers without any supernatural elements, can be seen in case of *A Walk to Remember* (2002, directed by Adam Shankman). The movie tells a story of Landon who is forced to do community service and thus help (as he later finds out, terminally ill) Jamie, the only daughter of a local reverend who teaches him to respect

religion and its ability to comfort people in difficult life situations. The life-changing role of faith also strongly influences the message of much deeper film dramas such as *Heaven Is for Real* (2014, director Randall Wallace), which is based on a true story of a small-town father whose little son claims to have visited Heaven during a near-death experience.

The 21<sup>st</sup> century has brought various openly (and justly) critical or controversial portrayals of the Catholic Church and its representatives as well. Criticising the Church's authorities often refers to misconduct and maltreatment related to the overall social conditions of the past. The topic is typically explored in British, not American cinematography – as in case of *Magdalene Sisters* (2002, directed by Peter Mullan) showing tragic life stories and forced labour of young unmarried mothers who were thrown out by their own families and lived in a 'correctional' Magdalene sisters monastery where they experienced dehumanising abuse. The same problems, this time associated with forced removal of parental rights and illegal adoptions, are also portrayed in *Philomena* (2013, directed by Stephen Frears), a film about an elderly woman looking for her long lost son and a cynical prominent journalist who helps her to search in order to reclaim his once successful career via writing a 'human interest' story. Even though the topic is not typically used by the American mainstream film, the recent movie *Spotlight* (2015, directed by Tom McCarthy) shows a dramatic portrayal of the true story of how a group of investigative journalists in Boston uncovered the tragic cases of child abuse kept secret by the local Church authorities in the 1980s.

Other kinds of American mainstream audio-visual products criticising the Church are utterly fictional. Some of them are based on visual richness and emotional storytelling that merges elements of 'alternative' interpretation of historical facts, seemingly authentic historical religious events, current affairs and fictional aspects (*Angels and Demons*, 2006, directed by Ron Howard and originally written by Dan Brown). This type of movies turns the recipients' attention away from objectively proven facts to speculations and conspiracies and the process results in suspicions towards 'official' social authorities – including religion. However, quality television recently used a different approach in case of *The Young Pope* by HBO. The attractive British actor Jude Law plays the central character, Lenny Belardo, a young and unknown cardinal who becomes Pius XIII, the first American Pope in history. Even though his election seems to be the result of a refined media strategy applied by influential Church authorities, the new Pope Pius XIII defies these predetermined plans and switches between melancholy and ruthlessness as he struggles to find his faith in God again.

#### 4. Conclusions

As Daniel A. Stout notes, “*religion and entertainment are overlapping in new ways. A number of factors account for this, including the market, individualism, technology, and the need for leisure and escape. Today's*

religious entertainment would have surprised believers and nonbelievers 20 years ago.” [19] The relevance of the author’s words is manifested through our analysis which shows that American mainstream audio-visual production in the new millennium is, as it always has been, highly interested in religious topics, motives, symbols, stories, controversies and scandals, but in many new or previously unused contexts. This corresponds with the general approach typical for the hypermodern cultural production and media entertainment as a whole. Some of these products of so-called evangelitainment just utilize the universal meaning of religious metaphors in order to attract the audiences’ attention by using them in their titles (e.g. *Trespass against Us*). The wide spectrum of approaches includes epic Biblical stories combined with spectacular extravaganzas based on computer-generated imagery (*Noah*, *Ben-Hur*), war movies demonstrating both evangelitainment and militainment (*Hacksaw Ridge*), dramas referring to true events that portray lives and struggles of preachers (*Selma*) and ordinary people rediscovering their faith (*Machine Gun Preacher*). Some acclaimed fictional film stories portray leading characters who try to uncover the philosophical essence of human life through their relationship to God (*Tree of Life*, 2011, directed by Terrence Malick) or deal with loss of a beloved life partner who was deeply religious (social drama *Gran Torino*, 2008, directed by Clint Eastwood).

Many forms of audio-visual evangelitainment creatively work with supernatural motives in order to appeal to teenagers and young adults fascinated with paranormal human abilities (*Joan of Arcadia*), angels (television shows such as *Constantine* in 2014 and *Supernatural*, a long-running drama telling a story of two brothers hunting monsters that is known for its rich popcultural intertextuality) or deeply religious superheroes (*Marvel’s Daredevil*). Religious messages are spread across romantic dramas for teenagers (*A Walk to Remember*) and social dramas (*Heaven Is for Real*). However, a few recent mainstream films and television shows originating from the United States criticise the Catholic Church in terms of its serious faults in the past (*Spotlight*) or political involvement and influence (*The Young Pope*). Films merging fiction, elements of true human history and contemporary reality are a part of the general trend of ‘disorienting’ media audiences in the name of entertainment and commercial success (*Angels and Demons*).

The hypermodern society of the West seems to be secular. However, in Alexander Plencker’s words, the end of religions and metanarratives proclaimed by many theorists of the postmodern did not happen. The first decade of the third millennium flooded the cultural market by historical and parahistorical novels, massive mythic sagas, comic book worlds, superheroes with complex characters and obvious humanistic qualities [20]. Bruce David Forbes claims that analysing feature films, as commercial media products, is one of the most efficient ways of illustrating how religion might appear in media – for example, through explicit representations, allegorical parallels and implicit theological themes. As the author notes, “the same variety of manifestations can be found in country music, television comedies, music videos, comic strips, spy stories, science fiction,

romance novels, and much more” [11, p. 11]. The same is true in case of digital media – according to the *Pew Internet Project*, over 82 million Americans and 64% of all Internet users utilize the Internet for faith-related matters [14, p. 298].

Dramatic storytelling inevitably leads towards favouring entertainment, i.e. visually appealing messages that amuse in the first place, but they may also inspire us to think about serious matters. The eye-catching nature, decisiveness and apparent formal (technological) impeccability cause that these media products often aspire – and sometimes not rightfully – to replace the ordinary reality. However, as much the late modern society fascinated by media entertainment likes to be amused, it still shows a great amount of interest in portrayal of problems of society-wide significance – such as religion and spirituality.

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