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Blockbuster Purgatory:

The Videocassette and the Downfall of Christian Media

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Introduction

Once a widely-produced staple found in every American home, the videocassette has, for many, since been consigned to the dusty shelves of secondhand stores, attics and garages, and lovingly decaying home media libraries. Despite its former status as the household standard for home entertainment, the videocassette has been unfortunately branded as an outmoded relic of a bygone era: a technological system that is no longer needed or wanted, and beyond its role as a vessel for nostalgia, more often than not granted very little value at all. Due in part to their cheaply made and mass-produced abundance, and in part to the fact that they were discontinued only relatively recently in 2008 (and VCRs only a few years later) the medium is often disregarded in academic circles, lacking the glistening potential for analysis offered by modern internet streaming services or the historic reverence reserved for the old film reels.

However, it would be a crime to ignore the role of the videocassette in American culture, and in media studies as a whole. Though often overlooked, the introduction of videocassette technology had a profound impact on the way that films, episodes, and other audio/visual media were marketed, and often even how they were made. Offering the ability to allow the ordinary citizen to build personal movie libraries, and enjoy them in the privacy of their own home at their convenience, videocassettes provided a cheap, controlled-by-the-consumer means of bringing media into their homes on their own terms. The prevalence of the videocassette in American media through the 20th and 21st century remains a significant chapter in media studies history. Not only for the media it presented, but also for the unique physical nature of the videocassette itself, and how that technology, and the changes in video production it catalyzed, revolutionized the ways that home media was made and marketed forever.

It is here that I will introduce another treacherously overlooked subject in media history: the Christian entertainment industry. Nestled snugly in the thrift shop and bookstore racks where videocassette tapes can be found gathering dust, one can almost always also find Christian media. Despite being seemingly absent from much of modern mainstream entertainment¹, Christian media from the late twentieth century seemed to rise in production, briefly flooding the market. Yet, similarly to videocassettes, general Christian entertainment is often cheaply made and widely produced, covering generic biblical topics and known for its low production value. Besides a handful of companies that have dominated television and home media, it seems that Christian content may have a unique appeal to amateur creators, as an influx of handmade and low-grade movies, short-films, and often-unlaunched television series pilots can be easily found. What's more, they are often rather bizarre, gaining notoriety in popular culture in recent years for their incorporation of unconventional techniques with which to draw in viewers, that may range from rather boring and generic to over-the-top and desperate.

A glance through a Christian media selection may as easily contain recordings of conventional sermons in a simple talking-head format as an array of over-the-top parodies, puppets, animations, and musicals. They often simultaneously condemn popular secular culture and attempt to replicate it, though often lacking the innovation, budget, and creativity of the originals, resulting in unintentionally comic portrayals and transparent plagiarism. Religious themes may be very subtle, only mentioning God at the climax or in a concluding prayer, or they may have clear and consistent religious stances that may even be viewed as extremist, promoting

¹ Despite the prominence of Christian media in the 1950s with groundbreaking epics such as *The Ten Commandments* (1956) and *Ben Hur* (1959), its involvement in mainstream and secular culture has steadily declined over the decades. From the late 1970's onward, the vast majority of Christian media no longer attempted to appeal to non-Christian audiences.

controversial messages with political motivations. Aside from the handful of financial and critical successes among Christian films in the past few decades, the examination of the “lesser” forms that comprise the bulk of Christian media is often skipped over entirely. Often, Christian media on videocassette is cheaply made, hastily constructed, mass produced, and often poorly thought-out. They appear, at a glance, largely meaningless apart from their laughably bizarre nature, and are almost never mentioned in media history at all.

However, close examination of this largely-unexplored history reveals a fascinating relationship between genre and technology. By recognizing Christian videocassette entertainment as both a text and as a physical object, we can explore how the introduction of videocassette technology affected the way the subject was made and marketed. The mutual relationship between production and reception led to dramatic changes in the media, leading to a tendency that altered the path of the genre dramatically, eventually leading to the decline in reputation that made modern Christian media the often-underappreciated and niche category it is now identified by today. Thus, this previously untold history serves as a profound example of how a failure to anticipate the qualities of a new technology can topple an industry and damage its reputation permanently.

Even more significantly, analyzing these trends in conversation with the content of these videos themselves can provide valuable insight into the persuasion strategies that Christian media often relied on in order to gain followers, make money, and reinforce a particular moral code in society. Capitalizing on the unique features of the videocassette tape, Christian media creators were able to speak to viewers on a level more private and personal than ever before. While many production companies were collapsed by their poor anticipation of the production

changes needed to meet the demands that videocassette technology enabled, others were able to rise to the top and profit tremendously, creating a new standard for how religious media could be made and marketed. Thus, observing how these textual changes were utilized in effectively persuading viewers towards a Christian moral code may provide key insight into the battle of warring moralities fighting for social and cultural influence at the time.

Christian Media and the Videocassette

The history of Christian media in America is a tumultuous one. Despite initial resistance from the church, Christian cinema took off in the 1930's utilizing the funding of the Protestant-run Harmon foundation. Its five most prominent categories, biblical, missionary, historical, biographical, and dramatic, were mainly used as expansive sermons (Lindvall & Quicke, 2011). However, several "mainline" churches, or those that are seen as successfully integrated into the mainstream culture of their host societies, wanted to expand the reach of the gospel. Being aware that Christian cinema was in competition with quality-made secular works, church organizations began to offer funding and support (Horsfield, 2015). Auteurs soon began to emerge from the woodwork, and, backed by valuable funding from their respective denominations, the quality and dimension of the Christian cinema rose in prominence and respectability (Lindvall & Quicke, 2011). The pluralistic religious marketplace in America led to churches demanding to expand their range of influence, and mainline churches took to broadcasting their message over the airwaves. When conditions allowed for comprehensive broadcasting, the church naturally found its way to television (Horsfield, 2015).

As television rose in popularity, Christian involvement in television adapted with it, altering the way it was marketed and funded. In the late 1950's and early 60's, increases in the number of television stations and commercial networks increased competitiveness and diversity in the media market. Smaller evangelical groups that didn't have the acclaim of mainline churches were able to find airtime if they were willing to pay, although the mainline churches were naturally the most successful at this. The support of Catholic and Protestant leaders was no longer a requirement, and as such, an already tense relationship between church leaders and television production grew even more strained than before. Despite their now-adamant support of Christian film, mainline Christian leaders dropped their support of television, leading to the rise of Evangelism on cable television and a drastic drop in quality, relevance, and significance (Horsfield, 2015).

The content of Christian television was, at its core, sermonic, yet, as time progressed, lost power, and interest, in operating as a preaching tool. Early on, bible-based Christian shows were able to respond to social issues as they emerged, reacting to changing modern times with traditional morals from the Bible (Wolff, 1990). However, Christian media gradually grew wary of addressing social issues on the air, and its connection to the modern world wavered as Christian leaders decreased support and Evangelicalism took to the airwaves. In theory, broadcast television is accessible to anyone, sharing the word of God to indoctrinated and unindoctrinated viewers alike, "sowing the seeds" of Christianity in nonbelievers. However, Christian TV was mainly viewed by an audience already set-in-their ways: long converted Christians who used the shows as a reinforcement of what they already believed (Abelman, 1987 p. 207). The shows also often elected not to address current issues, sticking instead to general

religious topics. By 1987, studies determined that out of 92% of programs featuring religious sermons or televangelists, only 5% of religious content on television focused on social issues (Abelman & Neuendorf, 1987). While this practice of sticking firmly to religious and moral guidance made the advice provided by the preachers somewhat timeless, religious television cultivated an environment that operated outside the secular world, closing off any explicit connection to contemporary issues. The design of religious television to be consumed at home, moving from public to private viewership strengthened the divide between religious and secular culture, creating both a thematic and physical segregation between general and Christian viewers. Religious television, and the consumption of religious media as a whole, catered to a private audience more than ever before (Wuthnow, 1987).

This transition to the private sector was further facilitated by the arrival of a revolutionary technology: the videocassette tape. Released to the American public in 1977, the introduction of the videocassette brought a new dimension to the home viewing experience. Taking note from the commercially successful VTR technology, or Video Tape Recorder, which was made and marketed for strictly professional use², the videocassette aimed to create a consumer-friendly edition for homes and families (Pollack, 1992). The resulting videocassette and VCR system, which was designed to be compatible with any ordinary television sets already in the potential customer's home, was easy to install, operate, and maintain. They were also affordable, meaning that consumers could not only purchase the system but accumulate personal libraries of tapes to be watched and rewatched as well. Both the tapes and recorders were simply designed with

² VTR technology before the videocassette was well beyond the price range of the average consumer. The Ampex VRX-1000, the first commercially successful VTR, could cost \$50,000 for a single machine, roughly \$471,300 in 2020. A 90 minute roll of tape would cost around \$300, equivalent to just over \$2,800 in 2020.

minimal parts, and could therefore be manufactured at a high volume. The simple design also meant that the systems could be easily maintained or repaired by buyers. This design was also standardized so that tapes could be interchanged between machines³ (Maybury, 1997). All of these factors allowed the videocassette to easily be incorporated into the home, and the VHS videocassette system was released for home viewing to resounding success. Thus, the home video industry was created, having a significant impact on the economics of the television and movie businesses.

Formerly, films were distributed through video rental libraries; religious films were catalogued and stored in religiously centered locations, and home viewing was drastically limited. More popularly, they were rented for group viewing and education (Lindvall & Quicke, 2011). The videocassette was compact, easily transported, and designed for at-home viewing. Straight-to-VHS content could be made cheaply and quickly, and was easier to distribute than a film or television show due to the fact that producers would not have to compete for airtime. They also allowed for the creation of personal collections: most families could affordably accumulate a variety of cassettes to be viewed at their leisure. The customizable nature of selection allowed for the control of what is viewed and when, with the knowledge that anything can be viewed privately (Herbert, 2014). The domination and utilization of the videocassette market instantly became a new opportunity for the Christian community to talk to its subjects in their own homes, thereby making it a potential opportunity to influence its viewers.

³ While this was complicated by the fact that there were several editions of videocassette systems, most significantly Betamax, that were incompatible with each other, VHS soon became the universal standard technology due to its more efficient design featuring longer recording ability and faster fast-forwarding and rewind times.

This technology came at a very fragile time in Christian media history. In the late 1970s, Christian television remained in its tentative relationship with church leaders. Radio televangelists, which were often disapproved of by the church, were on the rise. And, with few financial or critical successes, Christian cinema was in a lukewarm state as many of the early pioneers that created classics in earlier decades had since died. However, as a new generation of Christian filmmakers arrived, they brought about a brief revival in Christian cinema. It was hoped that the new voices and perspectives could bring about a wave of successful films not seen since the 1950s. As described in *Celluloid Sermons*, “When this new generation of Christian filmmakers arrived to offer interesting and challenging films, a modest renaissance flowered, as progressive (and sometimes desperate) distributors were looking for fresh products” (Lindvall & Quicke, 2011). These new filmmakers offered wit, humor, and music, introducing films such as *Super Christian* (1980) and *The Music Box* (1980). While these films were certainly not smash hits, they were colorful and new. They often parodied Hollywood features, infusing popular classics with a Christian message, such as John Schmidt had done with *Super Christian*, an obvious satire on the pop-culture figure Superman and the 1978 film of the same name. These small, but hopeful accomplishments gently pried away from the more conservative restrictions that Christian filmmakers had been bound to in the past, leading to a rising optimism that religious films could once again find success among mainstream audiences. Films such as *The Robe* (1953), *The Ten Commandments* (1956), and *Ben-Hur* (1959) are examples of this, financially successful Christian classics of former decades that are recognized and praised for their cinematic achievements by Christian and secular audiences alike.

Christian films were intended to support local ministries, and Christian videocassette creators hoped that home video libraries could similarly become profitable assets (Kintz & Lesage, 1998). The Christian media industry aimed to become more competitive with mainstream media to attract new believers and raise their market share (Lindvall & Quicke, 2011). Therefore, they attempted to quickly adapt to the new, unique requirements of the home entertainment market; media must be rapidly produced over a series of tapes that could now be accumulated in home video libraries. In order to meet this goal, Christian videocassette tapes were often designed to be segmented sermons that could be spread out over a set of multiple tapes, allowing for the accumulation of video libraries that could be revisited. These tapes, rewatched multiple times, could therefore reinforce the Christian messages that the tapes provided within the home. Distributors planned to make a profit on this primarily through the sale of the videotapes themselves, meaning that reliance on the church was no longer a prerequisite, and creators didn't need to resort to begging the viewer for donations, like Christian television shows were wont to do (Lindvall & Quicke, 2011). Distributors even slashed prices over the summer so that ministries could have entertainment competition seasonally. Pre-existing Christian films were re-released on videotape with the aim of keeping the films in the public eye and, in theory, extending the lifespan of its religious circulation (Kintz & Lesage, 1998). However, though the videocassette tape was meant to become an asset to the Christian media industry, little speculation was made into its potential to become a dangerous liability, a miscalculation that would have a damning effect.

Unfortunately, failure to accurately anticipate the economic impact of the videocassette had a catastrophic effect on the reputation, and economy, of the Christian entertainment industry.

Despite the blossoming Christian film revolution that was on the rise in the late 70's, the sudden popularity of the videocassette brought the revolution to a crashing halt. The transition from pre-existing Christian films onto videocassette did not meet the necessary profit expectations (Kintz & Lesage, 1998). This was likely due to the inexpensive and mass produced design of videocassette technology that expected home movies to be rapidly produced and sold at a low price. In response to the loss of profit they had so depended on, many producers began a rapid production of cheap, replicable, and easily distributed generic Christian content to keep up with the new media standard of the home entertainment industry. They began to rely on their segmented sermons, hoping to capitalize on the "talking-head" format that was easy to quickly record. These were more comparable to televangelist sermons than the influential Christian films of previous generations (Kintz & Lesage, 1998). As the need for creating excellent media declined under the need to create acceptable media rapidly and cheaply to regain lost profits, Christian filmmakers and producers simply turned to other employment. With the loss of this new generation of filmmakers, many of the old Christian video rental libraries collapsed, cutting the nascent renaissance short. In turn, the loss of the video rental libraries led to the collapse of the many small, Christian run film production companies that depended on video rentals to make a profit. (Lindvall & Quicke, 2011).

Additionally, the shift to home video, where viewing took place in a controlled, private environment, altered the way that Christian films were received, even strengthening the divide between Christian and secular culture and isolating potential viewers. Though it was hoped that the rapid production of Christian-themed videocassettes would draw in new members to the flock, contrasting the loss of interest in religion that took place in the 1970's and 80's, these

hopes soon proved to be unsuccessful (Wuthnow, 1987). The tendency to avoid directly addressing social and political issues that often worked well on television didn't translate well into videocassette. In an attempt to give, timeless, classic advice through sermons that could be remarketed and replayed, creators were often required to dance around important sociopolitical events of the time (Kintz & Lesage, 1998). This often resulted in the films coming off as lacking in social awareness (Abelman & Neuendorf, 1987). For the most part, religious media was being consumed by members already deeply embedded in their faith, and even then, most viewed it as a reaffirmation of their beliefs rather than as an educational tool (Abelman, 1987). This strengthened the segregation between Christian and secular media even further. However, the tapes were unable to find success among even Christian audiences, as many protested the idea of Christian involvement in mass media, believing them to be too wordy based on their profit-driven nature (Fore, 2014). This, combined with the decline in religious involvement in the 70's and 80's, meant the market itself was declining.

This unfortunate combination of damning factors exacerbated one another, forcing Christian media to have to struggle to survive. Incorrect anticipations on the part of the production companies led to a loss in profit, which collapsed old Christian video rental libraries, which were already rapidly becoming outdated with the introduction of new technology. This caused many of the Christian film production companies that relied on those rental libraries to distribute their media and make them money to liquidate. As the production companies crumbled, the new filmmakers that were expected to lead the revival of Christian cinema left the industry. Of course, with less money to work with, and without the new generation of filmmakers to lead the way, it was tremendously difficult to meet the demands of the home

entertainment economy, which required tapes to be produced in rapid succession. This meant that the tapes produced had a comparatively low production value, leading critics to stop taking Christian cinema seriously, and often even refusing to review it altogether (Lindvall & Quicke, 2011). An already tense relationship with church leaders declined even more, and Christian cinema producers struggled to find funding, losing even more money. This perfect storm of issues crippled the market to the point where it has since never fully recovered its reputation, among both critics and the church itself, leaving the flood of its rapidly produced and cheaply made videocassette tapes to pave the way for the future of Christian media.

The Videocassette Rush Part 1: The Strange and Unusual

In the haste to produce enough media to compete in the diverse and uncharted territory of the home entertainment economy, a number of Christian-themed videocassette tapes rapidly emerged, many featuring somewhat bizarre and unorthodox themes. Though there is no concrete explanation for why this tendency occurred, it likely had to do with the sudden loss of income and direction, as producers were pressured to make a large quantity of tapes in unexpectedly little time. Considering the financial hit that Christian media had recently taken, there was likely great pressure for the results to be profitable as well, encouraging experimentation in order to find a formula that would prove to be commercially successful. However, this experimentation by creators could not have been totally unrestricted, as it had an obligation to remain true to the Christian morals it was bound to, being careful what it advocated for or against and avoiding certain topics altogether. As a result, during this time, some Christian companies attempted to

incorporate bizarre and unconventional styles and themes into their creations, walking a thin line between profitable secular trends and the holy word it could not deviate far from.

This may also explain the tendency of Christianity to appear covertly in some videocassettes, with religious convictions manifesting in subtle ways rather than being explicitly presented and advertised as Christian. If religious themes could be embedded in the subtext rather than made overtly clear, marketers could appeal to unindoctrinated viewers as well, expanding the reach of their religious message and profit demographics. Thus, in some Christian videocassettes of the time, the connection to Christianity was hidden, incorporating religion unexpectedly into the actions of the characters or background details, such as mentions of God, prayer, or other religious actions. However, this strategy could easily be received as confusing or deceptive.

Further contributing to the phenomena of strangeness was the sudden involvement of previously unpublished creators on videocassette who did not have the budget or production value necessary for television or cinema. Performance is deeply embedded in Christian culture, and much of traditional Christian entertainment is conducted live in individual churches and communities (Harris, 2003). These performances, which are often for children, tend to contain visual techniques that can be performed at a low expense, such as costumes, puppets and ventriloquism. Many Christian performers may also act as missionaries, traveling nomadically with their show or band and performing religious-themed works in various places (Shores, 2008). While these performances may be popular in religious communities, many do not meet the expectations that are required for film and television, as necessary components such as quality writing and pleasing visuals take time and resources to create that were often beyond the

capabilities of many small-scale productions. Such performances largely went unpublished in media. However, many of these acts took advantage of the new design of the home entertainment market that would often accept lower production values and budgets. Creators that were previously unable to launch on television or cinema were able to utilize the straight-to-vhs production system that allowed them to override many former barriers, such as monetary restraints or competition for airtime. Unfortunately, the visual strategies that may have been effective in Christian live performance, such as ventriloquism and outlandish costumes, may come off to videocassette viewers as unpleasant and confusing.

Videocassette production was also desirable to new performers building up a repertoire by a process of working their way through less-discerning forms of media, particularly music clubs, garnering a reputation and identity over time to present to potential producers. Many of the straight-to-VHS acts were made up of Christian performers that make religious music for children, eventually adopting gimmicks, personalities, and characters. Straight-to-consumer music clubs that appeared in the late 80's were a way for Christian performers to take the first steps of their careers. These clubs, like Integrity Music, a religious music club founded in 1987, were often willing to accept and distribute content, helping to build creators' repertoire (Fiero, 2006). Creators, using these distributors to build a brand identity and publish media, would be able to make a better case to other publishers to market and produce their work. Videocassette was a common step in these performer's careers.

Whether prompted by experimentation or religious producers attempting to launch live Christian performance into home video, the Christian videocassette market quickly popularized this tendency of unconventional styles or subject matter. Much of this is composed of children's

entertainment. Children's entertainment was a viable direction for Christian media to take, as children are often less discerning than adults and would likely receive retellings of simple bible stories or lessons explaining biblical principles less critically. Popular live Christian performance techniques, such as puppets and the use of mascot costumes⁴, were cheaper than animation and visually inviting to small children.

They also relied on substitution, parodying or replacing secular popular culture with Christian alternatives. These parodies echoed culturally relevant iconography and media trends while maintaining the freedom to remain morally neutral or even oppositional to these secular phenomena, providing needed ideas and hijacking popularity for potential profit. In the spirit of the aforementioned John Schmidt parodies such as *Super Christian*, this tendency continued on videocassette, likely in the hopes of profiting off of the trend. Popular movies were often spoofed, sometimes simply to emulate the iconography in a Christian-approved manor, and other times to condemn the original sources. In either iteration, these parodies were often forgettable and generally appeared as lacking in originality.

Another notable tendency was the use of puppets and ventriloquism. Puppets and ventriloquism have a longstanding relationship with Christian entertainment, making their involvement in the Christian videocassette all but inevitable. Puppets are particularly adaptable in live performance, as they are cheap and a simple way of making narrative themes more visually inviting, so they have often been used in Christian storytelling. Their wholesome and

⁴The term "mascot costume" here refers to a type of puppet/costume hybrid in which an actor is dressed in a bodysuit to portray a character. This technique is often used as a way to have puppets act alongside human characters as the puppeteer inside is fully disguised and granted more freedom of interactivity. Some of these puppets may also partially be animatronics, with particular features of the face or parts of the body operated mechanically. Examples of this type of puppeteering in children's media include Big Bird of *Sesame Street* or Barney the Purple Dinosaur in *Barney & Friends*.

inoffensive nature leaves little room to find moral fault, and they are therefore acceptable even in the most conservative of circles. Puppets can be found everywhere in Christian children's entertainment, even in radio and purely audial mediums where the puppets cannot be seen. Ironically, puppets are very popular in Christian record albums and cassette tapes. Some will even include "ventriloquist" acts, such as Marcy Tigner's "Little Marcy" (1965-66) series, "Do You Know Jesus" (1969) featuring performers Uncle Les and Aunt Nancy Wheeler, and "Randy", a ventriloquist dummy, and "Amen!" (1974) starring the Christian singer and former actress, Beverly Masegee⁵ and her dummy "Erick". Even famous televangelists Jim and Tammy Faye Bakker had a puppet band with a variety of animals and released multiple albums under the name Jim and Tammy and their Friends.

Likewise, musical and educational puppet shows became a staple of videocassette entertainment. Some of the small, makeshift shows amounted to little more than a screen backdrop and a couple of sock puppets. The more successful, however, such as the *Gerbert* (1988-1991) series had up to three seasons and was broadcast on television by CBN (Christian Broadcasting Network), using videocassette tapes to supplement their income. Puppets and human characters would interact in a style similar to *Sesame Street*, using music and colorful sets to appeal to children and teach lessons. These lessons could range from bible stories to instructions on Christian ethics and morality. This gave writers plenty of room for inspiration, as the bible could be applied to such classic children's morals as "stealing is wrong" or "always tell

⁵ Beverly Masegee was a member of the Charles Masegee Evangelistic Team, and won the National Association of Ventriloquists' 1974 Dialogue Contest for two of the routines she and "Erick" performed. According to the sleeve notes of "Amen!", she adopted her performances with Erick upon marrying the preacher Charles Masegee. She was formerly an actress and Playboy circuit entertainer before marrying the preacher.

the truth”, and in any case of writer's block, the bible was filled with stories that could simply be retold in a child friendly format.

Often, however, the puppets could appear rather creepy, as hasty designs made them appear unapproachable. It can be difficult to be expressive with puppets, and while many reputable producers would attempt to provide more facial and body movement with animatronic technology and mechanical work, Christian producers often didn't have the budget for such ventures. Puppets are often placed in the uncanny valley, a word that describes the way that inanimate objects that are meant to appear lifelike can cause revulsion in the viewer if the design does not appropriately walk the line between like a person that we can empathize with and unlike a person in a way that we may see as aesthetically inviting (Mori, 1970). As Christian filmmakers in a rush often did not have the means or resources to carefully design puppets with research into their effects on the viewer, many of the puppets of this era may be considered a little unnerving. Some, such as the Almighty Loaf, a fan-made title of the character Loafer the Living Bread from the christian direct-to-video series *The Donut Man* (1995), have been accused by viewers as being Satanic, due to the contrast of their involvement in religious themed work but disturbing visual presentation.

As unconventional styles and trends further segregated Christianity from the mainstream, secular audiences were reluctant to take them seriously, A vicious cycle occurred, as funding was dropped in response to videocassette ventures not reaching financial goals, which made it harder for creators to make quality productions, which only led to a further loss of profit. By the mid-1980's, Christian cinema had lost its marketability, with many critics dismissing it

altogether, and had garnered a reputation of being low-quality, cheap, and formulaic, losing investors who saw little hope in the future of the videocassette (Lindvall & Quicke, 2011).

The Videocassette Rush Part 2: James Dobson and the “Talking Head”

However, while many Christian media creators suffered due to faulty financial strategies, other producers were able to more accurately predict the marketable qualities of the videocassette and find financial success and cultural recognition. Among the most successful is the Dobson style, a design of simple, talking-head tapes in a series that addressed significant cultural and familial disputes. Popularized by Dr. James Dobson, this format would have a tremendous influence over the Christian media industry and pave the way for a trend that would mark the way of Christian media’s future.

Dr. James Clayton Dobson, Jr. was a Christian psychologist and writer that became a public figure in the 1970s with parental psychology publications such as the highly controversial *Dare to Discipline* (1970). *Dare to Discipline* quickly gained public attention as it boldly defied then-current methods of child-rearing and instead advocated for corporal punishment based on his understanding of biblical passages. In response to the permissive parenting techniques of Dr. Spock, Dobson instead advised violent authoritarian tactics, and “encouraged parents to spank their children with belts or switches and to leave such items on the child's dresser to remind her of the consequences of challenging authority” (Balmer, 2007). His publications, particularly his monthly bulletin *Focus on the Family* that he marketed to church-goers were popular among conservative Christian communities that were interested in his Christian-based approaches to

social dilemmas. (Roberts, 1995). As his brand expanded, his opinions soon gained traction among evangelical groups in the United States.

Dobson's notoriety as a traditional-minded Christian author brought him to the center of conservative Christian culture in the early 80's. He operated using a unique combination of self-help and religious counsel, utilizing pop psychology as a means of promoting Christian values (Kintz & Lesage, 1998). These elements would eventually be combined into the nonprofit, evangelical, para-church organization, Focus on the Family, which Dobson would use to expand his ministry into various media. He released a daily radio broadcast as well as producing educational films. His background in psychology from USC qualified him to address sensitive and troubling subjects of counselling that pastors and preachers may have had trouble addressing in the past, making him appear a blessing to struggling Christian families in search of practical solutions that corresponded with their faith.

For his videocassette series, Dobson popularized a generic style of "talking-head" instructional films that relied on the language and charisma of the speaker rather than effects or production value. These sermons, segmented over a series of tapes, worked remarkably well in the videocassette economy. The product was rather inexpensive to produce, and with a vast potential of topics for discussion, a large quantity could be made in a short period of time. These films would dominate the Christian market from the late 1970's onward. Due to the easily replicable formula Dobson created, many would capitalize on his formula when videotapes, and videotape libraries, entered the picture, initiating a trend that would become known as the Dobson Effect (Lindvall & Quicke, 2011). The Dobson Effect refers to the sudden popularity of Dobson copycats quickly entering the market, and is not only infamous for aiding in the demise

of Christian film's standing as a reputable, cinematic industry, but also furthered Dobson's popularity by promoting the trend of Dobson style films.

While several media theologians have observed the impact of Dobson's work and its effect on the course of Christian media, few have ventured to call into question the specific strategies used that led to Dobson's success. As a result, despite the prominent impact of Dobson, little is known about exactly *how* Dobson's tapes had such a profound effect on viewers and what was so compelling about them. This may be due in part to the sudden decline of Christian cinema and the abundance of low-grade media examples around this time, leading to some scholars considering the late 1980's the end of the era of Christian media (Lindvall & Quicke, 2011). And consequently, no longer worthy of study.

However, analyzing the specific strategies that Dobson utilized in order to compel viewers to follow his specific interpretation of conservative Christianity may suggest the means to which semi or fully indoctrinated people could be immersed deeper into the conservative Christian mindset, drawing them into Dobson's series and presenting a moral obligation to the viewer to keep coming back. The position of the videocassette tape, having a unique and controlled ability to speak to the viewer in the secrecy of their own home with the knowingness of a person with a very similar value system and world view, has a tremendous power, harnessed by Dobson to encourage the propagation of his message of Christian conservative values in private family life. Dobson's work, speaking to the individual with encouragement of how to order their personal lives, may then encourage the individual to bring their moral tendencies into the public sphere, promoting the Christian message and subsequently, Christian media. The strategies of Dobson, then, may offer a very fruitful, if unexplored, insight into the effectiveness

of Focus on the Family. For this reason, we will be taking a deep examination of the strategies used in a single work, examining both the physical and textual features, rather than a general analysis of a more broad selection of Dobson's videocassettes. Doing so may better reveal his manipulative techniques at their fullest, and shine a light on one of the darker sides of Christian entertainment.

A Winnable War: The Fight Against Pornography

While many of Dobson's works have been virtually catalogued online, the VHS tape itself holds a particular significance in the trajectory of Dobson's impact, so will be referenced in its original form. *A Winnable War: The Fight Against Pornography and How It Can Be Won* is a 1987 educational videocassette produced by Focus on the Family Films. It is chosen because it is a very typical example of a Focus in the Family tape, and for its subject matter, which may be considered representative of the conservative Christian and progressive cultures at odds on the battleground of Christian media. Video pornography was often viewed by conservatives as a progressive-tendenced use of the videocassette⁶, as opposed to Dobson's Christianity-centered usage, and therefore, *A Winnable War* could speak out against it directly.

Before the tape is even removed from the packaging, the tension of an unspoken conflict between Christian values and the hedonistic culture of the secular world becomes apparent on its outside packaging. A first impression of the film is presented on the bind of the packaging, on the shelf where it would sit along like videocassettes from a similar theme or collection. The

⁶Video pornography, which found tremendous success on videotape due to the privacy that viewing tapes at home allowed the viewer, was often attributed to liberal culture by conservative groups. However, this was not necessarily true. Pornography was rejected by many liberal organizations, including feminist groups which were often at the forefront of anti-pornography movements.

language is succinct at only four words: its partial title, *A Winnable War*, which offers no indication of the subject matter of pornography, and the name Dobson, skipping over mention of Focus on the Family Films itself to instead highlight its connection to the prolific Dobson himself. Apart from a small, red border around the title, the design is grimly bare, with only an opaque black background for the white text to glisten against. One could easily guess that the design was intentional in its severity, unappealing to young viewers in its lack of energy and color, and gracing the subject matter with a respectful gravity.

Upon sliding the tape from its place on the shelf to reveal the cover, however, one is confronted with an intense, yet careful display. The title, in the same script and border of the bind is at the top, followed by a more complete introduction “Featuring Dr. James Dobson”, using the doctor’s name in entirety, the way it was most recognizable. Immediately capturing the eyes in a splash of color is the image of a gaudy night scene positioned underneath, a visual cacophony of neon colors and high contrast chroma cluttered within the picture. The image depicts an urban street at night, presumably a red-light district, crowded with neon signs and car headlights shining out of the dark. While some signs appear to be concrete objects, others are semi-transparent and fade off of the buildings into the street and sky. Upon close inspection, one may notice that some signs appear several times over. This artificially created “double-vision” gives the impression of delirium or insobriety, creating a nauseating and distrustful effect that may even be interpreted as foreboding. The depiction of a half-nude woman stands statuesque in the center, brightened by a piercingly white background that catches the eye so one is almost forcibly drawn to it. Within the wearying context, her figure seems as dangerous as it is appealing, creating a conflict of pleasure and discomfort that one may interpret as either an

unwanted reel-in or a shameful appreciation. The cluster of signs and attractions range from explicit to suggestive. The sign “Nude Girls”, unquestionable in its meaning, sits comfortably beside a sign for a business cryptically known as “Big Al’s”.

The choice to depict a public urban red-light district instead of a private setting is significant. While the concept of sexual entertainment is communicated in the allusions to the sexual live shows, the image created has little to do with pornography, the method by which sexual entertainment was often privately consumed and how it is referenced in the title. With the rise of the VHS tape by the late 80’s, and rental stores with adult sections, pornography could easily be depicted as a private affair, enjoyed within the comfort of one’s own home. It is not a stretch to assume that *A Winnable War*, being a videocassette itself, was made with videocassette owners in mind. Yet, by illustrating pornography in a public setting, an important distinction is made by the film: that sexual depravity is a part of the outside world. The cover creates an image of a culture where sexuality may be advertised, promoted, and encouraged. To be a part of the outside world, as opposed to at home with the Christian cassette in your hand, is to be a part of the world created in the image. Disregarding what may be done in secret, the world is the enemy.

There is a particular intimacy in watching a VHS tape in private. In watching television, there is an implied simultaneity with the other families watching around the globe, and from anywhere. Watching a videocassette, whether by oneself or privately as a family, is often an affair done behind closed doors, inadvertently or otherwise. To watch a tape of one's own selection, at whatever time one so chooses, keeps what is watched private, only known by the viewer. The control to pause, fast forward, rewind was revolutionary in the 80’s with the private control of what was witnessed safely in the hands of the viewer. In a way, the same features that

allowed for the sudden surge of pornography in the '80s may be argued to be the same that encouraged Dobson's popularity, and subsequent condemning of it. Videocassettes allowed Dobson to address sensitive matters in the family with a basis in the bible, giving families the opportunity to collect cassettes that applied to their personal predicaments as they occurred. This would lead to families building video libraries of family specific, yet conservative-based, media. These tapes were able to capitalize on the advantages of the private nature of film, allowing the citizen to customize their intake according to their personality, while still surrendering to the hegemonic morals of their sources.

The removal of the tape from the packaging, the insertion into the VCR, the static of the screen, and the suspense of the first few moments of darkness before the film begins, all serve to reinforce the isolation, suspense, and intensity of the experience, pressing immersion. The tape begins, after revealing the Focus in the Family logo, by emphasizing that it is for adult viewers only. The fact that it is about such a potentially shameful topic further implies that this tape was viewed much like my experience with it, by a single adult alone in a room with a direct relationship to the television.

The opening to the film is designed to shock the system and appeal to emotion by welcoming, and quickly shaking the viewer. The film itself begins with a brief shot of a sunrise, or potentially sunset, over a city, as quiet string music plays. It is gentle, welcoming and warm with a color palette in orange and red. The title fades into the scene and lingers for barely long enough to read. Then, suddenly, a montage of clip after clip depicting various signs appears, much like what was represented on the cover of the tape, making vague sexual invitations. The music shifts to a rapid beat with the pounding of a drum and synthesizer music. Despite the

subject of the title referencing pornography specifically, the opening only shows signs indicating live sexual performances, which present themselves as a more direct and real danger than the visuals of a pornographic video might.

At times, it simply cuts to people walking up the street, which seemingly has little to do with the subject at hand. However, an association is made between the city, the people who live in the city, and sexual deviance. This serves to further the idea that sex is considered normal in this society, as uninviting and vulgar as it is painted to be, a theme that Dobson will later press more directly. This is a common theme in Christianity, rejecting being a part of the world and instead striving toward Heaven. Verses like Romans 12:2, Galatians 1:10, 1 Corinthians 15:33, Matthew 16:23, John 15:9, and so on emphasize the importance of building a relationship with God over the community. Subtly, the opening sequence tugs on these recollections that Christians would likely know, pushing the divide between the viewers of the tape and more mainstream presentations for the image of life.

Though it may be easy to dismiss these images of danger, it is important to remember that they can hold the power to have a deeply profound impact on the viewer. Multiple scientific studies have proven that fears regarding the safety of the outside world rise with viewers' exposure to violent media and television (Gerbner, 1986). The effects of dangerous imagery in media may even go so far as to cause lasting cognitive bias, such as Mean World Syndrome, which explains that long term moderate or heavy exposure to violent media content may lead to sufferers to having a warped perception of the world, believing it to be much more violent than it really is (Morgan, 2019). Heavy viewers of these tapes over a period of time may have a lasting impression difficult to shake. Seeing images of a sexual threat presented in such rapid succession

can create a stress in the viewer that may make them subtly start to believe that sexual deviance is all around them, and getting rapidly worse. For someone unfamiliar with the urban sex economy, the idea that sexual deviance is common and accepted by secular society would be frightening. This puts the viewers in a state of stress and willingness to protect themselves. Which, in turn, sets up a groundwork for Dobson to describe how the viewer can protect themselves from the dangers of premarital or otherwise unsanctioned sexuality.

A comforting close up of a smiling man arrives, welcoming the viewer to solutions. He introduces himself as Jerry Kirk, president of the National Coalition Against Pornography. He is an older gentleman, dressed modestly, and he speaks deliberately as he thanks the viewer for joining him, acknowledging how difficult approaching such a topic can be. He is standing in front of the same city we saw in the opening, and the film cuts to a pan shot of it. He introduces Las Angeles as the City of Angels, while in the same breath saying that 80% of the most violent hardcore pornography was produced within just a few miles of it and was being delivered as he spoke to your community. With this specific choice of language, Kirk attributes the surge of pornography not to its distributors, but to the city itself. This implies that the people of the secular world are the problem. The tape, and Christian morals, are the refuge.

Kirk goes on to introduce Dobson and praise his credentials. As a montage of Dobson at work rolls, heroic music rises triumphant. He is credited as the host of Focus in the Family, at that time the largest syndicated radio show in North America. The remaining portion of the film is a simple recording of Dobson's speech, with many persuasive strategies at work.

From the beginning, Dobson incorporates a language that can be accurately described as biblical. He starts his presentation with the statement "we're here to talk about the plague of

pornography that has spread across the land”, comparing porn, through parallel language, to the plagues inflicted on the Egyptians in Genesis before their impending destruction. For the versed audience, this may stir feelings of dread, as they have been put, strategically, in the position of the Egyptians that were eventually killed by the Christian god for their sins. Almost immediately after, when referring to a study on pornography made years ago by former President Johnson, Dobson uses the phrasing “In his wisdom,” a particular phrase often used in the Bible to refer to the omnipotence of God. This, contrastingly, works in Dobson’s favor, putting himself in a position of humility and submission to a higher force, making him the messenger on the higher power’s behalf. According to the Christian perspective, this would speak to the role of humans as subject to the higher power, giving Dobson’s message, as the relayer of that higher power’s message, great importance and value.

Dobson also wastes no time putting a wedge between Christianity and secular culture, citing progressivist and non-Christian data as biased. He begins his speech by discussing a study on pornography that was elected by former President Johnson that proved supportive of pornography, to address members that may be familiar with it and who may see it as a strong oppositional stance to Dobson’s claims. Dobson admits that the study proved pornography was beneficial, stating that the scientists determined it could “help to relieve sexual tension, and has a cathartic effect on society, and can lower rape”. Dobson says these results are totally untrue. Rather than detailing why, however, he simply dismisses the scientists as “liberal” and moves on to the next point. Speaking so carefully and quickly, if one were not paying close attention, one could easily not even notice that he failed to give any form of real counterargument. He appears to have addressed the point, while in reality he has given no explanation at all.

The next segment of his speech uses disgust to elicit a visceral reaction from the audience. After explaining that he was appointed as a commissioner to study pornography by the controversial republican Edwin Meese, Dobson describes some of the most disgusting examples of illegal pornography he has ever seen. He addresses that while softcore, legal pornography is also “evil,” hardcore pornography is even worse. The camera, which before had rarely taken focus off of Dobson, begins to collect close ups of various disgusted listeners. Dobson then begins to talk about New York City “sex shops,” and, much like the cover and the opening, creates a vision of sexual depravity that is physical, present and dangerous to the listener. He explains that you do not see “normal, heterosexual behaviors” taking place within these places of business. Besides the clear homophobia in that comment, Dobson never describes what “normal” sexual behaviors would be, as he also condemns softcore pornography, which would be the most likely example of that. He takes the homophobia a step further, describing that the sex shops contain “volumes of homosexual violence,” before describing extremely graphic illegal pornography, as if to reinforce that homosexuality is as bad as the other things he describes.

He first attempts to target listeners through pain, describing fetish porn of genital mutilation in graphic terms such as “fishhooks through genitalia” that the audience can picture. He moves on to pure disgust, talking about acts that incorporate bodily functions, such as vomiting and urine. As he speaks about these “unbelievably gross” acts, more shots of the audience disgusted, saddened, and concerned are peppered throughout. The viewer at home, who likely feels the same way, may likewise be revolted, seeking comfort and finding it in the faces of similar people that share their disgust. The Christian community, and specifically, followers of

Dobson, are presented as the only sane, decent people in a world where fetish porn is normalized and public, which obviously it is not.

Upping the ante even further, Dobson tells a painful story about a case in which a child was killed. He gets vulnerable, speaking about how he wanted to cry, as the camera cuts to people crying in the audience. After creating a camaraderie with disgust, the connection is now made amongst mournful people. Anyone would be pained to hear of such a story. The shots of people in the audience are now closer, bringing them closer visually and metaphorically, as we are brought to look deep into their tearful eyes. The emotions are powerful.

From here, Dobson switches things up. He proceeds to talk of a speech he heard later on in defense of pornography in general. Though the issue of pornography as a whole and the issue of the child being abducted and murdered with sexual intent are separate issues, Dobson makes an intentional connection between them. And so, the murder of a child and the pornographic industry in general are treated as morally one in the same. This is significant, as he makes a point of defining pornography as “sexually oriented material,” as opposed to obscenity, which is the legal separation of what is or is not protected by the first amendment. However, by now putting pornography on the same level as murdering a child, which anyone would find heinous, and with the audience in a position of emotion and moral disgust, he is in a position to mark all sexually explicit material, including art, entertainment, and media expression, as highly morally condemned. Much of modern progressivist media is thereby not only excluded, but condemned.

“With emotion in my throat,” Dobson continues, addressing the speaker in defense of pornography, “I raised my hand.” Here, Dobson puts himself in a very human position, one of a man struck by righteous indignation, speaking on behalf of the audience, who are shown on the

edge of their seats, listening in horror as he becomes the hero in defense of moral values the story needs. In a loud, confident voice, he retells asking the speaker what about the little boy who was killed. But then, his voice softens, his tone shifts. He speaks softly, using dismissive language such as “well, of course he said...,” as if the speaker's response was predictable. He speaks quickly, retelling that the speaker replied that the case of the little boy was abuse and the pictures taken should never have existed, almost as if this response was irrelevant. “But!” Dobson’s powerful voice once again takes over, as he declares that the speaker believed that pictures such as the little boy’s, once they had been taken, could not be regulated. Swiftly, Dobson moves onto the next point in his speech, this arc of his speech now concluded.

However, this ends the story surprisingly vaguely. He never defines, exactly, what the advocate for pornography was speaking in specific defense or protest of, and more importantly, what “regulation” meant in the context that the speaker was referring to. One might assume that the speaker's agreement that such abuse was immoral, unethical, and should never have happened would be enough to placate Dobson. However, the point that he was most offended by, the idea that pornography could not be regulated once it was created, is curiously never explained.

Strangely, he moves from here to the idea that pornography is degrading to women, referring to BDSM magazines he has seen with women shown in submissive positions. “In the day of women’s rights, I don’t understand why we don’t rise up and demand it stops”. The crowd cheers. His stance as a promoter of women’s rights here is particularly ironic, considering his regressive statements regarding women, particularly that they belong in the home and in submission to their husbands (Dobson, 1994). With this, he appeals to the women of the

audience, which he later mentions make up the majority of the complaints on pornography that he receives. Using words like “rise up” and “demand” empower the crowd, encouraging them to take action and bring their moral choices into communities. He then talks about how porn encourages the idea that women secretly wish to be raped, “and many women believe that”. Referring to this fear that many women have of being taken advantage of gives an extra urgency to the call to action. Moving on to the next point, he offers no comfort, leaving the tension to linger in the air.

He then makes the claim that when pornographic bookstores appear, crime increases. While offering no statistical or scientific evidence, he explains that pornography encourages men to be “stimulated,” causing them to take it out on the community. While one could postulate that he may be referring to the normalization of sexual acts by exposure to pornography, he never clarifies the meaning of stimulation beyond stimulation. A more likely analysis is a more literal interpretation of the word stimulation to mean a physical response, which he indicates pornography creates and he mentions throughout the speech, explaining that pornography creates a “chemical signal” that affects behavior. What the chemical is, how it works, and how it changes behavior and to what are never explained. We are only meant to know that pornography causes criminal behavior, which Dobson maintains takes place within the shops as well. He implies that places that sell or rent pornographic materials are places where sexual acts take place, that they all have glory holes and live sex performances, speaking of such places as “sinful” and rallying disgust by describing the “stench” and “disease”. The crowd is taken with him, as he brings the concept of sexual media into reality, giving the concept of pornography a concrete location and reality to the sexual fantasies it presents.

Bringing this topic of fear to one of familiarity, Dobson starts speaking about pornography in families. To the audience watching at home, this juxtaposition must have been chilling, to imagine their own family members in a sex shop as he described them: a vivid, dangerous and disgusting place where crime and disease are rampant. Dobson explains that pornography is highly addictive, taking that fear a step further as something as simple as a nudie mag could trap their families and bring them into an addictive state of danger and sexual depravity. He explains that people exposed to legal, safe pornography will quickly up the ante into more extreme, illegal pornography. He intermingles the idea of viewing pornography with people performing the acts on one another in real life, “working their way through perversions,” amongst which he lists homosexuality and pedophilia, as if to imply homosexual individuals are perverts one step away from pedophiles. He sums this up with a comparison that has, retrospectively, aged rather badly: “Softcore pornography is to hardcore pornography what marijuana is to heroin”.

After referring to a frightening scripture that states lust will lead to death, Dobson decides to discuss how pornography, which refers to any sexually explicit material, has entered mainstream culture. He asks the parents of the audience if they have teenagers, by this, again, encouraging them to bring the message of his speeches into their own lives. He proceeds to discuss the popular rock music of the day, including Prince, Madonna, and Motley Crüe, condemning them for their sexual music, occasionally reading lyrics aloud that he found suggestive. He references sex in cable television, phone sex, and dial-up porn, which, many parents would argue, teens would have difficultly accessing in secret in the 1980’s due to restrictions in place. However, he informs the audience that “little kids are doing this and their

parents don't know". Of course, he doesn't justify this claim or how he knows this takes place; he speaks quickly and with emotion, moving on passionately asking the audience "Does this make you angry?", to which they loudly applaud. Emotions are the prevalent force at work.

He asks the audience for questions, many of which, like his speech, stray from the subject of pornography and into sexual deviancy. The first question asked if Dobson was concerned that liberal scientists would attempt to erase his studies in support of the suppression of pornography. Dobson replies that there was always a chance that his work would be undone, but the exciting thing was that they were fighting a winnable war, referencing the title and inspiring the audience to applaud. He then explains the unnamed study he used to claim that the Department of Justice no longer protected their citizens against obscenity; the study found that acts of obscenity reported to the government had reduced dramatically in the past several decades, which Dobson used to justify the idea that the government was no longer prosecuting obscene acts. Using this study as evidence, he said that the government was no longer trying and could no longer protect their citizens, without, of course, explaining any of the other factors that could explain why acts of obscenity had reduced, including legal developments allowing more things to become acceptable.

He also spent some time blaming the postal service, claiming that obscene content is often sent through the mail due to the offices not monitoring content close enough. He seems very upset that mailrooms are not allowed to examine the contents of mail, before transitioning into how the police are undevoted as well. He laments that there are not enough police dedicated specifically to porn, and that judges simply turn offenders loose without consequence. He urges people to take action, holding up in one hand what he claims to be 97 letters in support of porn

regulation and asking the audience and members at home to continue writing. For this he receives applause and asks for further questions.

A few “rapid fire” questions come through, which he quickly answers. Someone asks if obscenity was protected by the first amendment, and he answered it was illegal. Another person asks if he could boycott cable television in protest of X-rated shows, to which Dobson encouraged him to “Hammer the FCC”. He looks out to the audience and tells them to send hundreds of thousands of letters to the FCC to promote more acceptable shows on television.

“Preserve the value system that we all care about! We can do it! I told you, it’s a winnable war!” He cries. The encouragement to replace mainstream media with his own Christian-approved media is unmistakable. Dobson is directly telling his audience to fight to dominate mainstream media and take control of the public sphere. For further encouragement that the current system needs to be toppled, he condemns progressive media by referencing the mafia’s involvement in it. “We have the ability, we have the resources, all we lack is the will, We could rid it all in 18 months if we wanted to. The key is you,” he encourages the audience. “Government responds to the people”.

From here, he turns solemn once again, saying that he has to indict the audience, as Christians are some of the worst offenders. He tells a story about a live sex show he saw in New York City, recounting how sad he was to see sex workers as he pitied them and expected them to die soon. Conversely, he asked his police officer friend if he could go arrest them. Perhaps he explained his pity so as to sound like having them arrested would have been a kindness, protecting them from themselves as it were. To his dismay, the officer explained that unless there was a complaint, he couldn’t arrest anyone. It is not explained why Dobson’s complaint was not

valid in that circumstance. He explains that governments respond to pressure, and it's up to them, the people, to change the law. Softcore porn being legal could be changed, and as private citizens, Dobson told his audience that they could bring down porn empires. Due to their work, he announced, "The Playboy Empire is going down like a plane losing altitude!", a statement that sent the audience into a roar despite the fact that Playboy was still alive and well and remains so to this day.

Another question asks about contraceptives being available at some high schools, a concept that has little to do with pornography, but Dobson uses as a launching pad for thoughts on sexual depravity in the younger generations. He argues that Planned Parenthood acts as if it will reduce teen pregnancies, but that "Teen pregnancy rates parallel the amount of money [Planned Parenthood has] been given". He accuses them of invading classrooms, offering the audience's child, and the viewer's child, contraceptives and advice on sexuality. Dobson states this with disgust in his voice, as if this is the most despicable thing they could do. He then goes on to imply that they abduct teen girls and perform abortions on them without parental consent. He throws worries at the audience, that she may bleed out, that she may get an infection, in rapid succession. Without giving them time to think, he accuses the audience that they wouldn't know what happened to their daughter, implying they are losing control. "You've been replaced", he says harshly, preying on the worst fears of every parent, that their child is in pain, potentially an immoral person, and out of their control. He brings up the bill to allow Planned Parenthood on campus, and how it was vetoed with relief. "But were you involved in that fight? Did you write a letter?" He asks the shameful parents. He urges them to get involved in the system, pressing them to involve themselves in politics for the pursuit of their moral cause.

He answers a few more questions, the tensions in the room rising with the speed at which he goes through them. A school board member asks, emotionally, that Christians should involve themselves in schools, telling them not to abandon their children to “people with values that are opposed to ours”. Dobson replies with speedy support, saying Christians need to self-represent and get involved in politics, at the least, letter writing. He advertises a booklet on how to do so. Another person asks about child porn in other countries; Dobson attributes it to the United States, claiming Las Angeles makes it and sends it out to the world.

A woman, terribly emotional, doesn't even ask a question, she simply weeps. She cries that you just can't “do that” to a child, that they won't be the same again, apparently too upset to clarify what “that” could mean. Shockingly, Dobson immediately asks her if she has a reason to know that. The camera cuts back to her as her eyes widen, taken aback, likely at the personal and inappropriate nature of the question in front of a full auditorium of people. The color leaves her face as she falls silent and still. Dobson, with a knowing, but hasty look, says “I'm sorry I asked. Next question” dismissing it altogether.

After the questionnaire is over, Dobson makes a brief, but passionate conclusion that doesn't seem to mention the subject of his speech at all. Reinforcing that family is the foundation, he explains that not caring for the family causes the whole system to collapse. Starting with the individual, shaping one's own conduct and morality can expand into the outside world with enough pressure. Dobson receives a standing ovation, and Jerry Kirk ends the film with a passionate plea to involve themselves in the fight against pornography. In closing, he reminds the viewer to take action, stating that “It's a winnable war! And by God's grace and together, we're gonna win it. Goodnight”. The credits roll.

A winnable war indeed. It takes little analysis to see that Dobson's speech was less about pornography and more about the promotion of a particular viewpoint toward sexuality, and morality, as a whole. A magnificently persuasive speaker, if not a thorough or particularly logical one, Dobson often glazed over supporting his arguments in order to emphasize appealing to fear, disgust, and visceral emotion, which would likely have been enough to push the semi or fully-indoctrinated viewer further into the conservative mindset. Dobson's product is as much the moral viewpoints he represents as the tapes themselves, representing the convictions of the conservative American and acting as a legitimizer of right-wing conservative beliefs. Clearly, there is a mission to push the viewer to fight for social change, starting privately in the home with the use of Dobson's videocassettes. The promotion of conservative Christian values was by extension the promotion of Dobson, as he was one of the leading voices in Christian media throughout the late twentieth century. By utilizing the videocassette tape to speak to his viewers in the privacy of their own abodes, Dobson could strategically market his message to sermonize to Christian viewers on a private, personal level, as if he were a pastor offering counsel to a troubled family in his own congregation. Thus, videocassette technology became a tremendous advantage to Dobson's organization, allowing him to work from the private sector outwards into the public sector with his letter writing campaigns and influence on the votership. This tape alone could have had a profound and lasting impact on the political and moral compasses of its viewers persuading them to embrace the conservative Christian mindset; yet, this selection was only one of the hundreds of tapes released by Focus on the Family.

Conclusion

Today, Christian videocassette tapes are consigned to Christian vintage stores, church collections, and home libraries, collecting dust and avoiding scholarly inspection (Kintz & Lesage, 1998). *A Winnable War* was obtained from a Baptist church in Lynchburg, Virginia in the process of reducing its surplus stock, likely in a transition to modern, more accessible technology. Having been well cared for within the church's media library collection, the tape appears in excellent condition despite bearing the usual stickers, markings and notes of any artifact subject to regular circulation. It arrived fully rewound, well-cleaned, and in its original case and cover. Preserved in an ideal environment for the tape's purpose, it is a fine artifact for examination. Yet, the remarkable content of the little plastic tape could have easily gone unnoticed, as it had been for decades before. This lone example, so rich with meaning and ripe for analysis, was only one of thousands of videocassettes half a step away from the garbage.

Despite the disrespect that the videocassette medium endures today, often pigeonholed as little more than an outdated technology, it once had the power to stun a rising industry and change the economic design of media altogether. Notwithstanding the initial promise of the Christian cinematic industry entering the 70's, the format of the videotape cut a nascent film revolution of a new generation of filmmakers short. Its potential to aid in the revival of Christian cinema instead resulted in hindering the preservation of traditional filmmaking and marketing strategies, causing the need for a hasty attempt at recovery and meeting the new market's demands (Lindvall & Quicke, 2011). Through a combination of financial catastrophe, lowered visual and thematic standards, and the usual creative pressures and restrictions that came with Christian media's pre-existing moral obligations, the Christian genre naturally became increasingly made for a private, pre-indoctrinated audience, losing the opportunity to engage

with mainstream and secular audiences, and becoming only capable of appealing the niche and dwindling church market.

The effectiveness of Dobson's speeches including the Dobson Effect, and the surge of unconventional Christian videocassette content soon led to the two categories becoming the prevalent voices in Christian media. However, whether composed of elderly pastors delivering speeches or sock puppets preaching the gospel to children, the reputation of Christian entertainment was damaged. As the rush of poorly-made straight-to-VHS low budget content surged through the 80's into the early 2000's, the films that once identified the Christian market as respectable among both critics and general audiences had faded into the background of the cheaply and hastily made schlock that would become the new face of Christian media. Likewise, Dobson's success in marketing to pre-indoctrinated viewers, and the Dobson Effect leading to similar success among the many copycats that attempted to incorporate his strategies into their own productions, only strengthened the divide between Christian and mainstream demographics. Christian media companies could now only market to pre-indoctrinated viewers or attempt to minimize or disguise their Christian message. The inability to successfully integrate into secular media markets handicapped their ability to battle for media dominance and recognition. Christian media's reputation never fully recovered, and aside from the few commercial successes that appear a couple of times a decade, it is unusual for Christian media past the 1980's to be taken seriously in academic circles (Lindvall & Quicke, 2011). To this day, it is largely made and marketed to the niche category of pre-indoctrinated viewers, who are often more willing to tolerate imperfect technique for the benefit of having entertainment that coincides with their pre-existing moral values.

Consequently, much of modern Christian media is restricted to selective television channels, radio stations, and websites, only rarely coming out into the mainstream on religious days and holidays. Christian themed television and media are often limited to a handful of large companies that cater to pre-indoctrinated viewers. Still, original content is often put aside for repetitive scheduled stories of the crucifixion and other popular bible stories. Classics from the fifties are played and replayed over half a century later. To this day, Christian media struggles to find commercial or critical success.

Yet, the chapter of Christian media most commonly branded as both its downfall and one of the least deserving of examination was also one of the most extraordinary. The cheaply-made straight-to-VHS videocassette tapes, despite their rejection by critics, were full of fascinatingly bizarre styles and themes. Dobson's talking heads, which were rarely viewed outside of conservative Christians, were rich with manipulative and persuasive strategies that may provide a remarkable insight into the mindset of the religious right in the 80's and 90's, and potentially even today. Gathering dust in the bookshelves and thrift store racks that these tapes often call their home lies an untapped plethora of insight into a shifting culture etched in media. The fallen status of Christian entertainment may serve as a reminder of the consequences when an industry fails to accurately predict the nature of incoming technologies and effectively take their economic formatting into account. But the videocassettes themselves, both as media texts and as artifacts, are a representation of the fascinating, painful, disturbing and incredible things that may lie in even the most unexplored corners in the world of media around us.

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