

Redrawing Boundaries in “*In-Lawfully Yours*”

Anthony U. Utulu

School of Communication and the Arts, Regent University,
1000 Regent University Drive, Virginia Beach, VA 23464, USA
Email: tonnyjcj@gmail.com; Cell : +1 782 882 1975

doi: <https://doi.org/10.37745/gjahss.2013/vol11n61523>

Published June 11, 2023

Citation: Utulu A.U. (2023) Redrawing Boundaries in “*In-Lawfully Yours*”, *Global Journal of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences*, Vol.11, No.6, pp.15-23

ABSTRACT: *The film is an essential medium filmmakers use to disseminate information to their target audience to (positively) influence them. It has been observed that universities and film schools – Christian and Non-Christian alike have joined the league of film production companies, aside from their primary task of teaching and research. This paper discusses Redrawing Boundaries using Regent University’s production, In-Lawfully Yours, as a case. Its scope is limited to Christian universities as film producers. Hence, Regent University is the primary focus. It reflects how well Christian Universities can use their redemptive films to redraw boundaries away from their primary corporate responsibilities to impact the public. This paper submits that In-Lawfully Yours is a well-produced redemptive film by a private Christian university. It shows the emergence of Christian film schools as part of institutions capable of redrawing boundaries. It recommends that governments, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and other relevant stakeholders give the necessary support such universities need.*

KEYWORDS: Christian universities, film studies, redemptive films, boundaries, film production, information dissemination.

INTRODUCTION

Christian universities can trace their roots to the founding of the university tradition in medieval Paris and Bologna. These early universities were instruments of the church... (William, 2003, p. 16). Some Christians and Christian organizations perceive that Christian institutions are of more advantage to society. The institutions are believed to have helped teach morals over humanism, among other positive ways of living. For example, Reese (1945) says, “In a country like Australia, there have been calls for abolishing public schools because it is perceived that Christianity has been replaced by humanism.” With a view on what influenced the establishment of Christian universities, William (2003, p. iii) notes, “...in a modern pluralistic culture, the Christian university was influenced by early tension between faith and reason, the ideas of the Reformation

and the Enlightenment, and the intellectual leadership that shaped the development of higher education in America.”

The world has continued to witness an increase in establishing more Christian universities. When this paper was being put together, the record showed that a higher education association, the Council for Christian Colleges and Universities (CCCCU), has more than 180 Christian institutions worldwide. The association has campuses across the globe, including more than 150 in the US and Canada and nearly 30 more from an additional 18 countries (CCCCU, unpagged). It is hopeful to see more of these institutions join in redrawing boundaries with their establishment and increase the production of redemptive films that will continue to shape people’s attitudes and actions across the globe positively.

Over the years, the film has become an essential medium filmmakers use to disseminate information in audiovisual formats to their target audience to (positively) make them act in specific ways and agree or disagree about a given position religiously, socio-economically, or politically. With this development, we see another form of sender/receiver relationship within the components of the human communication system with evidence of feedback from redemptive film consumers through ratings, reviews, and comments (Singhal, Cody, Rogers, & Sabido, 2004). The importance of film in carving our socio-cultural, political, and religious realities is a phenomenon that cannot be overlooked. Given this, Sison (cited in Bargár, 2017) says that (film) “... is not merely a story in visual form but, instead, a multi-layered medium (p. 408).” In other words, the film comes in different facets and can influence viewers in various capacities, primarily as filmmakers target controlling viewers’ emotions. Thomas (n.d.) says: “Generally, the film is found to work from perception toward signification, from external facts to interior motivations and consequences, from the givenness (sic) of a world to the meaning of a story... a narrative that in a way influences the consumers’ behavioral pattern.” Every film producer produces to entertain and influence their target audience. Having Christian film universities redraw boundaries with redemptive films becomes a topic that needs public and academic conversation globally, especially with how far it can go to positively change people’s behavioral patterns, as the case may be.

In-Lawfully Yours

Suffice it to say that *In-Lawfully Yours* (2016), a Christian movie produced by Regent University and directed by Robert Kirbyson, beats my expectations. I never thought a Christian university could make such a fantastic, delightful romantic comedy subtly built around biblical teachings. I understand that this thought might be subjective. However, the primary focus of this study is not to sing-praise the movie but to highlight how Regent University has redrawn boundaries away from their traditional primary assignment into creating a redemptive movie that drew people’s attention and made it to Netflix. One could think that all film schools do, is teach students the act or art of filmmaking while the students go all out after graduation to find their bearing in professional filmmaking industries. Regent University’s accomplishment shows that a student may not have to get into the private filmmaking domain before getting involved in film production and

grasping what it takes to produce an excellent redemptive Christian film that can influence a diverse audience and change the world. We can imagine how impactful redemptive movies can be if more such movies are produced to compete with the number of other secular films produced globally.

In-Lawfully Yours is a delightful romantic comedy that shows a just-divorced New Yorker—Jesse, who moves to a small town and falls for a local Pastor, Ben. He happens to be her ex's brother-in-law. Jesse is portrayed as a fun-loving New York City girl. After her husband, Chaz cheated on her and divorced her. Despite these, Jesse still graciously assists a newly widowed Naomi (her mother-in-law) with packing her home. Her action portrays one of Jesus Christ's teachings that states, "Do not repay evil with evil or insult with insult. On the contrary, repay evil with blessing, because to this you were called so that you may inherit a blessing" (1 Peter chapter 3 verse 9, New International Version). We see Jesse leaving Bethel Cove to bring Peace to Ben and the church and hopefully find a place where she truly belongs. The film ends with a good twist, with Pastor Ben and Jesse seen happily married with a baby—a beautiful redemptive end of the story.

Purpose and Rationale

This study hopes to meet the researcher's core objective—to serve as a precursor to the public and academic conversation on what influences Christian Universities' involvement in redemptive film production and how this feat brings them to redrawing boundaries using redemptive film content to shape public opinion. It hopes to provoke more conversations in the media and communication, enabling other researchers to create literature and empirical research materials to expound on the subject. Let the investigation and discussion begin.

Significance

This paper will benefit academics, media, communication, film and television students, and the public. It serves as a precursor to provoke academic thoughts and conversations regarding how Universities are redrawing boundaries with redemptive film production. Through its recommendations, stakeholders will recognize where they can assist predominantly privately owned universities in harnessing their potential in producing redemptive movies that will add moral values to people and society.

Brief Reviews of *In-Lawfully Yours*

Rissi, in her 2018 article posted on *The Silver Petticoat Review (Romance in Entertainment)* website, titled - *In-Lawfully Yours – An Unexpected Romance Sure to Make You Laugh*, posits: You know those films that have a preconceived stigma attached? The kind that suggests a film will be too silly to really enjoy? ... This was my impression of *In-Lawfully Yours*. Fortunately, I looked past it and decided to give this one a chance. In its romantic-comedy genre, *In-Lawfully Yours* falls into the "cute" category. It's charming and manages to be slightly different from the norm. This kind of script gripped my attention and kept me entertained (unpaged).

Production-wise, Rissi (2018), feels that *In-Lawfully Yours* might not be the most polished, nor does it claim any flashy gadgets, but she believes the story's heart is pure gold. After watching the film, Philip (2016), an IMDb user, notes: "Despite a narrative with occasional weaknesses, *In-Lawfully Yours* explores interesting themes of Christianity left untouched by secular and religious filmmakers... So, while the dialogue had moments of brilliance, it also had authentically routine moments without devolving into cliché (unpagged)."

Millerinc (2016) states, "I was pleased by how the movie portrayed Jessie's growing faith without being preachy. She started humorously ignorant of anything in the Bible or church. But there was a nice growth arc for her in that. And it was great to watch a show that could portray conflict without swearing, shooting, or nudity (unpagged)." To an unnamed reviewer, *In-Lawfully Yours* is seen to be "a religious tract masquerading as a romantic comedy. The movie is not horrible and is cute in a way, admirably acted, and adequately directed. And the basic aspects of the story are OK (unpagged)." To Johri (2016), "The movie will definitely not disappoint you. It's a perfect romantic comedy to watch (unpagged)."

On the contrary, another IMDb user states, "The best thing I can say about this film is that I didn't hate it. Several things about this movie were pretty bad (sic). The dialogue seems as though it's trying to be funny, but the jokes just fall flat ... (unpagged)." I think *In-Lawfully Yours* has helped show that Regent University is practically involved and demonstrates Christian universities' capacity to redraw boundaries, as noted earlier. Does it mean that if given the necessary support, Christian universities will produce Christian (redemptive) films that will help shape our socio-political, economic, and religious narratives to improve our world?

The Importance of Film and its Influence

The importance of film could have made film schools consider the film production business as one of the ways they can do more to impact societies through film narratives and its entertainment characteristics positively. According to Martin and Ostwalt Jr. (2018, p. vii), films do much more than simply entertain. "Films, as with other cultural forms, have the potential to reinforce, to challenge, to overturn, or to crystallize religious perspectives, ideological assumptions, and fundamental values." This could be made possible with the help of the ever-growing new information and communication technologies. It shows the extent films can go in being used to shape societal values, beliefs, and norms with the technology's channels such as Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, Cable TV, and Internet film channels like Netflix, Amazon, Pureflix, and others. With the emergence of Christian universities' efforts in expanding their horizon, hence, redrawing boundaries through film productions, such as "In-Lawfully Yours, the world may witness tremendous growth in how our socio-political, economic, and religious narratives will be shaped. Rosenberg (2011, p. xviii) notes,

With the rate at which technological advancement is taking a toll on every field of life, helping to shift human beings' ability to work on and achieve success on tasks, there may be a likelihood that

all post-production jobs may eventually meld into one as editors become their assistants, apprentices, sound designers, mixers... with perhaps a little help.

With this influence, we see how new technologies are consistently helping reduce cumbersomeness in film production. This advancement could be the positive factor that helped universities such as Regent University and Liberty University, among others, delve into and make promising advances in (redemptive) filmmaking.

With the production of *In-Lawfully Yours*, Regent University has shown that film schools can give much more to their students and society at large other than the usual teaching and research responsibilities. Mateer (2018) says that “Universities and film schools are looking for ways to provide richer experiences for students to enhance their employability as well as find ways to make their programs (sic) stand out in a competitive marketplace (Abstract).” In the words of Schultze, a Professor of Film at Liberty University, in Markoe Lauren’s (2018) article published in the *Telegraph-Journal*, he says (sic): “I feel [the reason] why the Lord’s brought me here to Liberty is very specific ... to help students who are interested in having a career in cinema have a place that’s safe for them to practice their faith and learn the craft of film making (unpaged).” According to Hall (2013, p. 112), after reviewing Lindvall & Quicke’s *Celluloid Sermons: The Emergence of the Christian Film Industry, 1930-1986*, he postulates: “...opening up film studies for Christian students moved Christian films... toward adopting Hollywood cinematic techniques and narrative styles that generated more appeal for their audience and created new audiences.” In Mateer’s (2018) opinion, “Economic pressure on commercial feature film production companies, particularly independents, is a factor that is forcing film production companies to consider alternative means of production and new sources of cost-effective project support (Abstract).” This is a good development as film school graduates and undergraduate students will get hands-on skill benefits during practical classes and on the set(s). It could also serve as a way of having film course Professors who are actors overcome ‘acting skills decay,’ which could set in if they keep off acting for a long time. Therefore, it will not be unreasonable to say that Regent University, among other film schools’ efforts at producing (Christian) movies, had consciously or unconsciously showcased professionalism in teaching, research, and commercial film production. This feat is highly commendable.

Redemptive Feature in *In-Lawfully Yours*: A Case of Jesse’s Character

After watching *In-Lawfully Yours*, I appreciated the work done by the writer, producers, director, editor, and other crew members. The reviews that were accessed through IMDb and other social media platforms attested to this thought. It could be said that they performed well in getting the film to cut across and attract a diverse audience’s attention. However, it may be seen to be more directed to Christians, that is, persons who embrace the teachings of Jesus Christ as recorded in the Gospels ... (Trammell, 2012, p. 114). Since Christian belief or philosophy is about moral living and peaceful coexistence, the film showcased acceptance of all, not minding religious affiliations. The film shows ethical ways of life that people outside the church can also imbibe, especially being

forgivers and peacemakers, as portrayed in Jesse's character (see Matthew 5:9). Peace is one of the hallmarks of the Holy Bible teachings, Matthew chapter 5 verse 9 and Romans chapter 14 verse 19, for instance. Showcasing this vital virtue—Peace, which seems to be gradually evading nations, is an aspect of *In-Lawfully Yours* that people, especially leaders, cannot overlook globally. In the movie, Jesse, a peaceful woman who feels she created problems for Pastor Ben because of her relationship with him, decides to give up everything to let Peace reign. However, she finally won the church members' minds by showcasing the virtue of Peace.

One could agree that the film is witty and fun to watch. There were a series of great lessons to learn through all the characters. She also portrays the biblical teachings by discussing with Jesse again—a virtue of overlooking offenses (see Proverbs chapter 17 verse 9). This passage encourages Christians and non-Christians alike not to pay evil with evil but instead do good even to an enemy (see 1 Peter 3 verse 9, Romans 12 verse 17-2), among other Bible passages. An exciting part of Jesse's character was the humorous acts she played in the church scenes. In situations such as divorce that could be perceived as severe in a woman's life, she never showed an aura of stress, downcast, or anxiety. As the scripture says: "Do not be anxious about anything but in every situation, by prayer and petition... (Philippians 4 verse 6a)." This woman was divorced and now meets another man (Pastor Ben); the church tries to shield Ben from her and has the man who divorced her come after her, yet, she remains calm and jokes about almost everything. She also portrays an authentic Christian lifestyle by not being easily angered. This is seen in the scenes when Daphne treats her with disdain in the coffee shop to frustrate her to leave the town, a plan by Chaz. No matter what Daphne does, she never gets upset. Instead, she remains calm.

Another aspect that caught my attention was the scene that showed how some Christians will always try to dogmatically prove they are right and the other person(s) is/are wrong. It was seen in the film how the Bible was misused to defend some decisions made even when such choices hurt others. We noticed that Chaz, an unfaithful husband, who initiated the divorce, now wants Jesse back. To convince her to reaccept him, he quotes Malachi 2 verse 16 "For I hate divorce!" says the LORD, the God of Israel." He tries to use the Bible to cover up his wrong, but he forgets the same portion that says, "... So guard your heart; do not be unfaithful to your wife." All these acts and narratives made *In-Lawfully Yours* a balance and well-directed film recommended to everyone to watch, not minding their religious affiliations.

Generally, the film teaches that even when things seem not to be working for us, God is at the center of it all, and He will work the best out for us – 'turn our tests to testimonies.' Pastor Ben's message to the church on accepting the weak (sinners) rather than pushing them away was a good lesson for all and sundry (see Mark 2 verse 17, Luke 5 verse 31-32, Matthew 9 verse 12).

Production

Talking about every other aspect of the film production – cinematography, lighting, sound, set design, and characters, it will not be out of place to conclude that *In-Lawfully Yours* is an excellent

film to watch. Camera angles, quality shots, mise-en-scene, directing, and others, were well executed. The cinematic style looks good with the manner of the characters. Their reactions were shown on the screen with different shots, such as the use of extreme close-up (XCU), close-up (CU), and wide-angle shots (WAs), among others. These shot compositions help the viewer to relate to the characters and the environments. Also, scenes were effectively fused with sharp cuts, fades, and dissolves. Of note, *In-Lawfully Yours* is on Netflix. These made the movie worth commending. However, the ending part of the film has an abrupt transition from the church scene into ‘three years later,’ with Jesse now having a baby. This makes it look like the producers suddenly realize that the film was getting too long and need to let the viewers see how things finally worked out for Jesse and her new family.

CONCLUSION, RECOMMENDATIONS, AND SUGGESTIONS

In conclusion, it will be reiterated that Regent University’s management act of stepping out of universities’ usual – teaching and research roles to put human and material resources together to produce *In-Lawfully Yours* amounts to a commendable effort of redrawing boundaries between the world of academic and film production business. It would benefit our world if this feat were kept and expounded. Therefore, this paper recommends that government and non-governmental organizations or institutions and relevant stakeholders give Christian universities with film studies every support they might need. The support they will receive will help them continue to produce more redemptive films, such as *In-Lawfully Yours*, that a diverse audience can relate to. It is also expected that films with such narratives can go a long way to change the world – make it a better place. Finally, this paper suggests that arts and social science academic researchers should focus on this ‘virgin’ area of study.

Limitations

One of the core limitations of this paper is that there were no significant academic published works to serve as solid academic backing. The reason was that the direction of this paper is new in the academic publications world on the subject matter. The lack of significant academic support affected the study’s substantial research implications. Notwithstanding its limited resources, this study hopes to attract scholarly attention toward conversations that will generate empirical backing for Christian universities’ emergence as film producers and how they now redraw boundaries through redemptive film production. Further studies can adopt one or more social science research approach for data gathering and analysis other than the non-academic publications, film reviews, and commentaries used in this study.

REFERENCES

- In-Lawfully Yours (2016). User review. Retrieved on March 20, 2019, from https://www.imdb.com/title/tt4286666/reviews?ref_=tt_ov_rt
- Johri, S. (October 02, 2016). Perfect romantic comedy. Retrieved on January 28, 2019, from <https://www.imdb.com/title/reviews>
- Lindvall, T. & Quicke, A. (2011). *Celluloid sermons: The emergence of the Christian film industry, 1930–1986*. In Hall, Z. (2013), (Review), *American Studies*, 52, (3), 112-113. Retrieved on March 8, 2029, from <https://doi.org/10.1353/ams.2013.0061>
- Lindvall, T. & Quicke, A. (2011). *Celluloid sermons: The emergence of the Christian film industry, 1930-1986*. NYU Press, Religion and History 2019. Retrieved on February 5, 2019, from <https://nyupress.org/books/9780814753248/>
- Martin, J. W. & Ostwalt, C. E. Jnr. (2018). (Editors). *Screening the Sacred Religion, Myth, and Ideology in Popular American Film*. Routledge – Taylor and Francis Group.
- Mateer J. (2018). A fistful of dollars or the sting? Considering academic-industry collaborations in the production of feature films. *Media Practice and Education*, 19(2), 139-158. Retrieved on March 25, 2020, from <https://doi.org/10.1080/25741136.2018.1464715>
- Markoe, L. (2018). Did Trump’s Presidency fulfill a divine prophecy? Evangelical mega-school’s contentious film takes a look. *Telegraph-Journal*. Retrieved on March 23, 2019, from <https://search-proquest-com.ezproxy.regent.edu/docview/2048301166?accountid=13479>
- Reese, C. W. (1945), *The meaning of humanism*. Beacon Press.
- Rissi, J. C. (Sept. 5, 2018). “In-Lawfully Yours – An unexpected romance sure to make you laugh.” *The silver petticoat review – Romance in Entertainment*, 2. Retrieve on March 22, 2019, from <https://www.silverpetticoatreview.com/2018/09/05/in-lawfully-yours-romance-review>
- Rosenberg, J. (2011). *The healthy edit: Creative techniques for perfecting your movie*. Focal Press.
- Singhal, A., Cody, M., Rogers, E., & Sabido, M. (2004), (Editors.). *Entertainment-education and social change: History, research, and practice*. Lawrence Erlbaum Associates Inc.
- Sison, A. D. (2017). The sacred foodways of film: Theological servings in eleven food films. In Bargár, P. *Book Review*, 46(4), pp. 408-423. Retrieved on February 14, 2019, from DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1163/1572543X-12341461>
- Stewart, A. (September 18, 2015). The rising influence of faith-based movie fans. *The Washington Post*. Retrieved on February 14, 2019, from https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/the-rising-influence-of-faith-based-movie-fans/2015/09/17/0d6b90c4-5645-11e5-b8c9-944725fcd3b9_story.html?noredirect=on&utm_term=.3d2f7085c676.
- The Holy Bible*. New International Version (NIV), International Bible Society Zondervan, 1984.
- Trammell, Y. J. (2012). Watching movies in the name of the lord: Thoughts on analyzing Christian film criticism. *Journal of Media and Religion*, 11, 113–126.

William, A. (2003). Christian universities in a historical perspective. *Christian Higher Education*, 2(1), 15-33. Retrieved on February 12, 2019, from <https://doi.org/10.1080/15363750302205>