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Better Stewards

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Better Stewards

BY PAUL KIM

Institutionally, when it comes to media and visual narratives, I think what we're doing is a disaster. There certainly are a few examples to celebrate, but the overall majority of what we produce is material taken from another medium — usually presentation or oratory, and then regurgitated for the screen without taking into consideration the parameters of the actual medium of film and why audiences sit down to watch.

We think we're delivering truth. But if our audience isn't finding what we're delivering to be compelling, then it should be a red flag that it actually isn't the truth. Whatever it is that we're giving them, whatever word you want to use to describe it, isn't the real thing. I think if we honestly, painfully, look within and ask some of these tough questions, we'll come to recognize that. Or, if we simply listen to our audience, they'll let us know in plain terms.

Part of the reason that happens is because we don't take time to really understand who we're trying to talk to. Maybe even the phrase "talk to" is a part of the problem. If we truly understand where they're coming from, if we truly work in relationship with them, then maybe we can create material they actually want, that they'll find engaging in a way they've never seen before. We've never done any research about who those people are and what they watch. We've never studied where they stand on certain topics before and after watching our programming. The things we produce, largely, are things we think matter, and that's making all sorts of assumptions about a public we do not even understand.



Paul Kim

We're performing these activities, we're making very important decisions, we're pouring huge amounts of time and resources into ways that aren't going to deliver what they should. What we've made has very little interest to the public, and additionally, there's little relevance to those of us within. So we've created a situation where not only is what we've created not valued by the public, it doesn't really have value for us. We've created this strange phenomenon that the content we've produced is watched mainly by those within this community, and yet, it wasn't really made for them either. Many who watch do so because it gives this false sense of security that they're doing what they feel is the job of the church — to proselytize.

Additionally, most who have come to be the gatekeepers of the creative arts have no background or training in this area. Many, for whatever reason, find themselves in positions of influence without any true understanding, much less experience. And that's terrifying. It also demonstrates a culture of distrust in our church that goes back a very long way, that those who are visual artists and creators are somehow incapable or inferior to those who have theological training. Those who are in positions of influence have to be

Pieter Damsteeg



Paul Kim (right) assists a student with lighting during a cinematography course in the documentary film program at Andrews University.

Joshua Martin

humble enough to build a talented team of people around them who know what they are doing, then give them the space and affirmation they need to thrive.

Film is a particular medium, and the medium itself has certain parameters which communicate in a particular way. You can't separate the content from the medium, but we often act as if we can. If you're going to speak the language of cinema, you have to understand the language of cinema and its structure; you have to understand that it's largely a narrative medium, and that it is at its best when telling stories. If we don't understand it, then we shouldn't presume to believe we know what we're doing. And if we don't know what we're doing, then, simply put, I think we shouldn't be using it. As we can see by the plethora of poor films out there, creating memorable work is very difficult. Film is not an easy medium with which to work, and it has a steep learning curve.

The sad reality is that most young people who grow up and would claim this as their community have very little interest in working or partnering with this big ball of mess that we've created in media because they know better. Whether they're capable of doing something better themselves, that's another matter, but they know this is not for them. Intuitively, they recognize there's a bigger issue. If that doesn't speak to the heart of the problem, if that doesn't speak some truth, I don't know what does.

There are gifted people I run into who never have entertained the idea of going into something like film or the visual arts because they were never shown the window of opportunity. It feels to them like an alternative universe that they can't, or certainly shouldn't, be a part of. That was my experience, and it was a revelation to discover that there's this community of people out there who are a lot

like me that I can relate to in so many other ways. It erases all these doubts about who I am. How many people out there have never found that and continue to feel lost?

I think today there are more opportunities than there were for me 15 years ago, and I want to be a part of helping people discover that. To me, that's the most exciting thing — to be able to help walk someone down this path, to show them the options, to present perspectives and experiences that they've been looking for their whole lives. I've heard many teachers talk about how satisfying it is to see the light come on when students understand a particular concept. That's never done it for me. For me, the light is when I see them come to a place of self-actualization, of discovering who they truly are and why they think, breathe and feel the way they do, and recognizing who God created them to be. That's maybe the most rewarding thing out there.

I think we have to be more intentional about supporting people who have been gifted to do things we have not been supportive of in the past. I think we need to restructure, rethink and reallocate our time, efforts and resources into being better stewards of what we've been given. I think that will result in better media and visual narratives. I think it will provide better, more creative and effective ways of presenting the truth.

I want to be a part of helping train that next generation who formally, through their studies, has a much better understanding than all those who came before them. That's my hope. It might be a long shot, but I think it's possible.

Paul Kim is associate professor of documentary film at Andrews University. Prior to starting the documentary film program in 2012, Paul was senior producer of Adventist Media Productions and executive director of the SONscreen Film Festival.