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## **Through the Needle's Eye: Capitalist and Evangelical Considerations in Martin Scorsese's The Wolf of Wall Street**

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Through the Needle's Eye: Capitalist and Evangelical Considerations in Martin Scorsese's *The Wolf of Wall Street*

An Honors College Project Thesis

Presented to

The Department of English

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In Partial Fulfillment

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by

Emma Conatser

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“I want you to deal with your problems by becoming rich!” (Scorsese 01:24:48–01:24:52). This dictum, delivered from the mouth of a very fervent and fiery Jordan Belfort (played by actor Leonardo DiCaprio), proves to be the bedrock upon which Martin Scorsese’s satire is founded. His 2013 film, *The Wolf of Wall Street*, presents a sardonic look at the life of Jordan Belfort, Wall Street convict and self-proclaimed master of persuasion, influence, and success. Though it has since been met with much controversy regarding its faulty handling of excess, the film makes a statement about the nature of rhetoric, positioning Belfort as a prophet to be followed, for better or for worse.

In fact, the rhetoric of Scorsese’s film contains several evangelical identifiers carefully implemented throughout. Viewers consider the ways these evangelical methods are connected to the acquisition of wealth as Belfort transforms from prey to predator before their very eyes. Throughout the film, Scorsese forges an intrinsic connection between Jordan Belfort’s capitalist gains and the evangelical methods by which he accomplishes such feats. The film combines religious signifiers, cultural references, and specific cinematographic choices to achieve this connection.

### **Evangelism and Capitalism**

Defining evangelism is no easy task, as it is the product of a long history whose milestones have occurred at the intersections of many Christian traditions. For the purposes of this paper, the term evangelism most generally refers to the conservative traditions which emerged in the mid-twentieth century and sought a relationship with society at large while simultaneously preserving their own fundamentalist beliefs. A few such beliefs might include a monotheistic approach to the Christian triune, a proclamation of faith expressed via baptism, and the call to share the gospel of Christ with others. While these conservative traditions most often

happened to be Baptist or Presbyterian, there are other sects of American Christianity that participate in and emphasize evangelical efforts as well, such as the Methodist church, Pentecostal church, or the more contemporary non-denominational church.

The relationship between evangelism and capitalism is not a budding affair; the two have long shared a rich history. Oftentimes, the loose or outright misapplication of scripture can lead to ill-founded approaches to the acquisition of wealth. As author William Connolly puts it:

You might confess the Trinity and fold either a punitive or generous disposition into that confession. Similarly, you might harbor doubts about the divinity of Jesus and be inspired by the generous spirituality that Jesus advanced in his ministry. The relation between creed and spirituality contains a variety of possible nuances. (2)

Throughout the history of the church, there have been more than enough cases of embezzlement, bribery, and tax evasion to speak to the connection evangelistic efforts often share with the attainment of capital. If the American Roman Catholic surplus revenue scandal of the early 2000s and Hillsong Church allegations of 2021 aren't enough to speak to this, the continued emphasis on movement-based evangelism has deepened the connection between the two in recent years. While this issue takes its origins alongside the history of the church at large, the American emphasis on upward economic mobility has allowed the problem to come to a sharper point within the scope of the American evangelical church.

Even today this connection remains. The megachurch has been the subject of much contention in this regard; its quick embrace of a consumer-based evangelism has often been linked to its acquisition of capital and material resources. Matthew Wade comments on the way this has played out at the Hillsong Church in Sydney, Australia:

Hillsong's approach is characteristic of this 'seeker-oriented' megachurch, whereby teachings and operations are tailored in order to align the 'product' to the preferences of the consumer market [...] The foremost aim is to induce comfort and awe in the seeker, to be 'world-affirming' rather than overly insular, sombre or damning (Shibley, 1998).

Thus, in time, the seeker will in turn produce the enthusiasm and spectacle required to power the ongoing evangelical cause. (Wade)

The combined effects of a consumer-based mindset along with Connolly's aforementioned dichotomy between creed and spirituality have taken shape in the evangelical church in a number of ways. One common example of an intersection between the two is prosperity theology.

### *Prosperity Gospel*

To discuss the connection between capitalism and the evangelical church without mentioning prosperity theology would be to neglect one of the most significant ways these two ideas have coalesced since the mid-twentieth century. Prosperity theology, or prosperity gospel, refers to the belief that God enters into a transaction with God's followers wherein they receive blessings in exchange for their faith. Mary V. Wrenn writes, "The Prosperity Gospel is a modern, neoliberal variation of Pentecostalism that is premised on the belief that a Biblical covenant between the individual believer and God guarantees that believer blessings of health and wealth, provided she demonstrates adequate faith."

Wrenn's approach to this theology provides a useful framework for understanding how these attitudes have continued to play out over time. Specifically, her assertion that the Pentecostal tradition plays a significant role in the perpetuation of prosperity theology is helpful when determining how the acquisition of material blessings was an integral aspect of early believers' faith within this tradition. Ebenezer Obadare makes a similar observation, connecting

the Pentecostal tradition to the disparate levels of wealth that continue to separate leaders from congregations:

Pentecostal churches seem to have placed an indecorous emphasis on wealth and personal accumulation. The bulk of recent criticism of the fantastic wealth of a growing number of Pentecostal pastors whose congregations remain desperately poor emerges against the backdrop of this realisation. (1)

Like early conceptions about wealth and Christianity, prosperity theology is founded on the misapplication of scripture and fundamentalist Christian beliefs. Oftentimes, these beliefs were founded in more spiritual ideas than specifically religious ones, if they were not extra-religiously sourced entirely. David W. Jones writes, “The prosperity gospel is built upon a quasi-Christian heresy known as the New-Thought movement [...] [which was] marked by religious beliefs not found in Scripture [...] One hears of the ‘Gospel of Relaxation’ of the ‘Don’t Worry Movement’” (27-8). This optimistic attitude regarding faith in the face of hardship was made manifest in the lives and ministries of several church leaders who espoused this theology.

Though prosperity theology is not necessarily evangelical in its fundamental beliefs, it did not take long for early leaders of this gospel to turn to evangelistic efforts in their pursuit of the health and wealth their theology promised. In fact, one of the hallmarks of prosperity gospel within the scope of American mainstream culture is the rise of televangelism.

### **Televangelism**

There are several axes upon which prosperity theology and evangelism intersect, the most prominent of which is televangelism. With the rise of newer and more accessible technology in the mid-twentieth century came new opportunities for ministers to connect with believers. Soon, the lines between congregation members and audience members were blurring with the



introduction of television programs like Oral Roberts's *Oral Roberts and You*, Jim Bakker's *The PTL Club*, and Joel Osteen's *Joel Osteen Show*. Pastors and preachers could carry their revivalist-style messages to an expanded audience in this new age of technology and audience engagement.

### *Prominent Figures of the Televangelist Movement*

This transition from congregation to audience enabled a new approach to rhetoric wherein preachers could engage believers with a brand of charisma that came to be synonymous with televangelistic ministry. This is an important shift to note; scholar David Diekema describes the televangelist tradition as one which placed “the revivalist or minister center stage as the articulator and definer of the situation, [an element which was] transferred to modern-day revivalists who eventually turned to television as a means of proclaiming their message.”

One such charismatic televangelist, Jim Bakker, relied on a framework not unlike the one Diekema outlines. In an article for *TIME Magazine*, Jon Hull writes that Bakker “became one of the first preachers to stumble upon the seductive mix of television, the gospel of prosperity through prayer, and the notion of using the experiences of his own family as a kind of Christian soap opera on the tube” (Hull). Bakker's rhetorical approach, born from his own experience with performative religion and an upbringing in the Pentecostal tradition, proved to be the ticket to success on the televangelist frontier, both social and financial.

Whether by fiery sermons, tearful pleas, or joyous proclamations of victory, Bakker's ministry was defined by its tendency to augment nearly every aspect of the conservative evangelical agenda. Ultimately, Bakker's campaigns for pledges and financial support came to a crashing halt in 1988 when he was convicted of grossly misappropriating funds for years. Though his charisma and on-screen charm may have been compelling, they went hand-in-hand

with his acquisition of capital and eventual downfall. Regardless of his fate, Bakker's rhetorical model provides a clear-cut framework for understanding the strategies of televangelists of the time and the way their ministries were inherently connected to their economic statuses.

Though the emotionally charged charisma Bakker brought to viewers' screens became an intrinsic part of his evangelical rhetoric, pastor Joel Osteen of *The Joel Osteen Show* curated a different kind of televised persona. Osteen, the pastor of Lakewood Church in Houston, TX, the largest congregation in America, has long been associated with prosperity theology. Since 1999, his sermons, televised on *The Joel Osteen Show* have accumulated a viewership of over 43,000 people in more than 100 countries.

As is the case for many televangelical pastors, Osteen is not without connection to consumerism. Peter Munday writes, "Joel Osteen has two product lines through which he sells his theology of money and consumption to the masses: *spoken word*, as seen in his preaching both in person and on tv, and *written word*, as seen in his books" (324). In addition to his televised sermons, Osteen has written a number of books that promote his gospel of health and wealth. While these are important when considering Osteen's evangelical efforts, his spoken strategies are equally compelling. Elements of cadential motifs and codified language make their way into nearly every Osteen sermon, linking him to Diekema's televangelist theory and solidifying his status as an archetypal central actor. Approaching Osteen's verbal rhetoric as a theology of money helps to highlight the connection the preacher often draws between consumption and salvation.

Similarly, *The Wolf of Wall Street*'s Jordan Belfort preaches a theology of salvation via consumption. As he draws his followers in with promises of economic mobility and capital gains, Belfort employs many of the same methods used by late twentieth century evangelists to

garner a successful discipleship. Like these televangelist preachers who precede him, Belfort relies on a charismatic rhetoric, specific gestures, and a connection with audiences constructed via cinematographic choices in order to connect the dots between evangelism and capitalism.

### *Televangelist Rhetoric*

The rhetorical strategies employed by televangelists are articulated in a variety of ways, many of which were residual effects of the American Pentecostal tradition. In his continued examination of televangelist charisma, Diekema offers the several standard elements of a televised sermon. As previously mentioned, the entire program is “centered around a focal actor who acquires a reputation for his ability to articulate common beliefs and concerns, usually having to do with ultimate concerns” (Diekema). It is essential that the “focal actor” or central figure remains the subject of the evangelistic effort. This central figure should call upon “a shared or common past” as they address their audience, which is often expected to be reciprocal, and should incorporate “mutually constructed moments of participation (such as short interruptions between sentences wherein an “amen” or two can be thrown in)” (Diekema). The central actor will then offer a previously established presentation of the realities for those saved and those who are not, calling upon an imminent and ultimate return of God (Diekema). This final distinction is contingent upon constructing a binary between the “sinner” and “saved,” as the ostensible thesis of many such sermons is to compel viewers towards salvation in Christ.

In fact, this binary is most often offered as a transformation accessible to believers if only they will accept it. Pastor Oral Roberts, one of the earliest successful American televangelists, was known to have been embedded in the evangelical Pentecostal tradition where a born-again transformation was preached to the congregation. In his 1959 sermon, “Prince of Peace,” Roberts remarked that “faith is not something that you have to get. It’s something that you, as a born

again child of God, already have” (Roberts). This attitude towards faith changes the way viewers understand transformation. Messages like Roberts’s draw harsher lines in the sand between concepts like salvation and damnation.

These binaries are presented time and again in Belfort’s own rhetoric. Perhaps the easiest way to observe this connection in *The Wolf of Wall Street* is by comparing Belfort’s own transformation and journey to the Christian revivalist movements upon which much of prosperity theology and televangelism are based. In her research of capitalism in cinema, Suzanne Ferriss notes that within the scope of the film, “Scorsese deliberately associated financial malfeasance with the peculiarly American narrative of self-transformation [...] In Scorsese’s film, as in Belfort’s 2007 memoir of the same title, reinvention is manifested through clothing and the display of other highly visible consumer goods” (Ferriss). Belfort is meant to give a face to the financial rebirth accessible to those who would put their faith in capitalism.

This transformation is the fulcrum of viewers’ initial glimpses of Belfort’s character. The film opens with Belfort at the peak of his wealth, throwing cash on the ground amid a crowd of jostling stockbrokers. In classic mockumentary style, the intro freezes on an expressive still of Belfort’s face as he directly addresses the audience via background narration: “My name is Jordan Belfort [...] I’m a former member of the middle class raised by two accountants in a tiny apartment in Bayside, Queens” (Scorsese 00:01:38–00:01:49). Here, Scorsese uses the height of Belfort’s ventures to underscore the humble beginnings to which he owes his origins. From the very start, viewers are left contemplating Belfort’s transformation and rebirth.

Because he is so characterized by his transformation from humble to obscene, and particularly because this transformation hinges on the acquisition of capital, Belfort’s own born-again mentality is fundamentally connected to the beliefs of many early Christian

revivalists. Scorsese very intentionally uses Belfort's rhetorical methods as the vehicle by which he achieves this transformation. Whether from poor to rich, lost to saved, or sober to stoned, Belfort continuously travels from one binary to another as he gains followers and compels crowds. In a matter not so dissimilar from the evangelistic efforts of the mid-twentieth century televangelists, Belfort implores his audiences to buy into his scheme at large using a wide arsenal of rhetorical strategies.

His mentality is not where this connection ends; Belfort continues to perpetuate many of the rhetorical strategies offered by the same mid-century televangelist ministers. One such rhetorical measure Belfort employs as he gains both followers and material wealth is a preestablished standard for language. Just as the televangelists of the mid- and late- twentieth century relied on the rhetoric of "sinners" and "saved," "victory" and "trials," Belfort establishes a vernacular with his followers that prompts response, engagement, and reciprocal interaction. Though it has been the subject of much contention, the film's use of language (particularly explicit language) is part of what defines Belfort's evangelism. In his study of the way Belfort employs explicit language as a rhetorical strategy, Thomas Salek notes, "Scorsese's film and Belfort's blog constitute a cultural attitude of ambivalence where Americans maintain a fascination with the rich and, at times, willingness to look past unethical and illegal acts in hopes of learning how to find their own path to financial prosperity" (2). From this viewpoint, Belfort offers this explicit vernacular as an extension of the inaccessible and intoxicating wealth from which he addresses his audience. In an effort to reach out to the followers he amasses, Belfort relies heavily on this vernacular throughout the film.

In one of his more passionate speeches, Belfort addresses his floor of stockbrokers, calling them his "f—ing warriors who will not hang up the phone until their client either buys or

f—ing dies!“ (a statement met with uproarious applause and thunderous consent) (Scorsese 01:22:44–01:22:56). Although his statements may be laced with offensive or explicit elements, Belfort compels his congregation of stockbrokers to clamor around him as he promises them access to the wealth that has led him to the pulpit before them. Clint Burnham puts it similarly: “A film like *The Wolf of Wall Street* wants to distract us from the human cost of finance capitalism by making us envy the heroes, and making us guffaw at their antics” (24). Viewers cannot help but become just as wrapped up in the nearly libidinal rhetoric Belfort establishes as the stockbrokers who follow him so faithfully.

Another popular Osteen sermon, “The Best is Next,” also makes use of this communal rhetoric. Like Belfort to his floor of stockbrokers, Osteen addresses a congregation that is stirring with the energy of a sermon near its close. He stands center-stage, claiming, “Now I believe and declare: you’re about to come into some best” (Osteen 25:58-27:02). Though the camera remains centered on Osteen, the viewer can hear his audience cheering in assent to his declaration. He continues: “Best opportunity, best relationship, best health, best resources!” (Osteen 27:02-27:09). Again, the audience cheers and offers vocal affirmation in response to Osteen’s address. In establishing this codified call-and-response means of communication, Osteen participates in the same rhetorical strategies that are linked to both Belfort and the televangelical tradition at large.

Although the position of the revivalist within traditional televised services depended on several factors, such as the reach of the network or charismatic approach of the speaker, ultimately, “many remain[ed] pulpit oriented with a single focal actor and retain[ed] a revivalist quality” (Diekema pg). Diekema’s positioning of the minister as an actor is an important distinction to note; often, these preachers offered a more rehearsed form of oratory where

statements regarding salvation and hellfire were fervent, and pleas for pledges were scattered throughout—often followed with the promise of health and wealth in return for such devotion and generosity.

Just as Diekema suggests, Belfort positions himself as a charismatic rhetor by employing a preestablished system as he communicates with his followers. The call-and-response nature of his speeches hints to the revivalist-style sermons of the American church so intrinsically linked to the prosperity theology Belfort's character espouses. Although the codified system of communication he uses to interact with his followers is one of the primary ways he connects with his audience, Belfort employs other elements of traditional evangelical rhetoric, as well.

From a pure spatial standpoint, Belfort's physical positioning in many of these scenes of oratory serves as an example of a way Scorsese continues to connect evangelism and capitalism in the film. As Belfort's firm, Stratton Oakmont, gains in size and material wealth, viewers are presented with a literal elevation of Belfort's character. He goes from occupying the center of a cluster of small-time stockbrokers in a garage outside the city to a stage on the top floor of a Wall Street skyscraper, microphone in hand and employees clambering at his feet.

Scorsese suggests, via visual cues and physical positioning, that Belfort is a leader to be followed as he journeys from being a small-time influencer who sells pens to his fellow con-men to the center of one of Wall Street's biggest corporations. Belfort notes, "The year I turned 26 as the head of my own brokerage firm, I made \$49 million, which really pissed me off because it was three shy of a million a week" (Scorsese 00:01:50–00:01:59). The material wealth Belfort amasses throughout the length of the film is mirrored in the way he is positioned in the various spaces he occupies.

These spatial considerations take their cues from the televangelists of the late twentieth century who remained entirely central, both from an authoritative standpoint as well as a physical one. In an October 1986 episode of *The Jim & Tammy Show*, one of the PTL network's many ventures featuring Jim and Tammy Faye Bakker, the couple walks into a roomful of applause as a camera on a crane captures a sweeping dynamic shot of them. Although the two of them are originally positioned as the subjects, once the introductions have passed, Jim takes to the stage where a spotlight centers around him while he asks for the audience's financial contributions.

Treatments like this one highlight the relevance of the focal actor within televangelical contexts. Perhaps because the whole scheme relies on a figurehead to promote the views of the network or denomination with which it's associated, the central pastor becomes synecdotal for the evangelical efforts at large. Just as Belfort and Stratton Oakmont are offered to viewers as one in the same, so were many early televangelists and their networks.

### *Televangelist Gestures*

In addition to the charismatic structure of their messages, these early televangelists' rhetorical approaches relied on a system of interaction between themselves and their audiences. One central stricture was the belief that evangelism via television was, in itself, God-ordained. Kevin Howley writes that the televangelistic worldview "is, thanks to the 'miracle' of satellite communication, spread around the globe" (23). Howley goes on to critique such an approach to televised ministry, noting that "for whole populations that are struggling to emerge from the yoke of colonialism and communist rule, the miracle of satellite-delivered sermons may be more a curse than a blessing" (26). As Howley points out, this assumption that ministry via satellite is God-ordained almost entirely neglects those for whom access to televised sermons is not



possible. This understanding is intrinsically linked to capitalism and the resulting classism of which the Church also finds itself a perpetuator. Such a standpoint ignores less privileged populations in favor of catering to those with more material wealth, promising salvation to the wealthy while simultaneously excluding those without the same level of economic flexibility.

This is a belief that remains congruent even with contemporary televangelists' agendas. One such minister, Joel Osteen, has long been the subject of scrutiny in this regard. A proponent of the aforementioned prosperity theology, Osteen also uses a Pentecostal approach in his pursuit of more believers and any contributions they may have to offer. His emphasis on the optimism within reach of any believer who should have great enough faith tends to make light of the hardships and trials that many of the world's more oppressed populations regularly experience. Osteen has not been without critique; Todd Brenneman writes:

Many of his most vociferous opponents come from the Neo-Calvinist Reformed tradition within evangelicalism. Finding Osteen's positive prosperity gospel at odds with their own understandings of the Christian message, they oppose Osteen as much as possible [...] What this tension reveals is a cleavage occurring in evangelicalism's direction and destiny. (1174)

Rather than preaching a message of liberation to those who should call upon God to receive it, Osteen's ministry promises health and wealth to those whose faith is strong enough. These messages have understandably been criticized for the way they position those with more financially stable statuses as those with the strongest faith. Even today, Osteen's exclusivist approach to salvation and the acquisition of material wealth remains intertwined with the prosperity theology and pursuit of capital that drove so many evangelists before him.

*The Wolf of Wall Street* also creates a connection between the acquisition of capital and an exclusivist worldview. Throughout the film, Belfort continues to create divides between himself and the members of the classes below him. Though he does not boast a gospel of false inclusivity like some of the televangelists accused of the same classist sentiments, Belfort does ignore those for whom a lifestyle of wealth and extravagance is inaccessible. One such noteworthy moment of neglect is when he directly addresses the viewer, contemplating his lifestyle and wondering, “It was obscene. In the normal world. But who the f— would want to live there?” (Scorsese 00:50:09-00:50:15).

These sentiments emerge in visual ways, as well. In another speech of heightened passion, Belfort remarks:

There is no nobility in poverty. I have been a rich man and I have been a poor man, and I choose rich every f—ing time. Because at least as a rich man, when I have to face my problems, I show up in the back of a limo, wearing a \$2,000 suit and a \$40,000 gold f—ing watch. (Scorsese 01:23:10–01:23:30)

Belfort then tosses his watch into the crowd as a slow-motion shot pans across their vying fingers. Scorsese works to create a clear division between the privilege associated with Belfort on his stage and the lack of financial security associated with the desperate stockbrokers.

Shortly afterwards, Belfort addresses those who would criticize such a mindset, claiming, “If anyone here thinks I’m superficial or materialistic, go get a job at f—ing McDonald’s, ‘cause that’s where you f—ing belong!” (Scorsese 01:23:38–01:23:46). Not only does this quotation necessarily make a distinction between the Stratton Oakmont stockbrokers and members of the middle and lower classes, but it is a classist distinction which relies on both prejudice and an exclusivist framework. Just as early televangelists tended to largely neglect populations with

little financial means as they continued to promote wealth among the upper class, Belfort encourages capitalist endeavors while simultaneously and directly criticizing those who have not been financially successful.

Belfort's connection to the evangelical tradition does not end here, however, as Diekema suggests in his study of televangelist charisma. He points out the way televangelical ministers perform a set of rehearsed gestures in his attempt to achieve a desired presentation. One such gesture is the cadential motif scattered throughout a speech. Though many of these motifs appear throughout the oral rhetoric tradition at large, they remain an intrinsic aspect of evangelical and televangelical sermons. For example, one popular Joel Osteen sermon, "The Power of I Am," includes the following repeated refrain: "I am not lacking, I am not average, I am not inferior. I am equipped, I am empowered, I am anointed, I am wise, I am a masterpiece" (Osteen 22:57–23:08). Throughout the sermon, this "I am" theme makes several reappearances, highlighting Osteen's use of repeated spoken motifs. This same dynamic appears in one of Belfort's infamous employee addresses:

Are you behind on your credit card bills? Good! Pick up the phone and start dialing. Is your landlord ready to evict you? Good! Pick up the phone and start dialing. Does your girlfriend think you're a f—ing worthless loser? Good! Pick up the phone and start dialing. (Scorsese 01:24:31–01:24:48)

Belfort's repeated command to pick up the phone, itself inherently connected to capitalism, is evangelical in its cadential ebb and flow that hints back to sermons like Osteen's. As his followers pursue material wealth, Belfort encourages them to engage in these endeavors with a fervor that rivals that of such televangelists as Osteen and Bakker.

Scorsese carefully traverses the thin line between evangelical rhetorical strategies and the acquisition of capital throughout the film, often positioning Belfort as something of a televangelist who compels his followers to follow the same journey of rebirth and transformation that he has. Although this connection is most often made manifest in the way Belfort speaks to his followers, there are other ways Scorsese accomplishes this link, as well. By establishing an intentional and specific relationship between Belfort and the camera, Scorsese further connects the dots between the film's lewd suggestions of capitalism and the evangelical means by which it is acquired.

### *Cinematographic Choices*

Comparing the cinematography of televangelist programs to that of *The Wolf of Wall Street* would rely on similarities and differences that are ultimately entirely arbitrary. Scorsese's efforts as a filmmaker are incongruent with the producers of late twentieth century televangelist networks, and for this reason, it is faulty to conflate the two. In either case, audiences of both can consider the relationship forged between themselves and the subjects on-screen via the cinematographic choices.

Traditionally, televangelist networks tend to align with Diekema's assertions of the pastor as the central actor. There are variations from program to program; panning shots of the audience's expressions are peppered in between still shots of the preacher at the pulpit in both Osteen's and Bakker's broadcasts.

Throughout *The Wolf of Wall Street*, Scorsese works to cultivate a delicate relationship between Belfort and the camera, and by extension, the viewer. He uses several techniques to achieve this, perhaps the most noteworthy of which is the variety of cameras and lenses he uses. Whereas many contemporary films rely on digital cameras (particularly films that make use of

digital effects and green screens), Scorsese opted for a mix of digital and film, shooting with both throughout the movie. According to shotonwhat.com, cinematographer Rodrigo Prieto relied on film lenses ranging from 24-290mm in size, as well as various ARRI digital cameras and even an iPhone camera, on occasion.

There may be several reasons for these choices. Although a mix of both digital and film cameras is to be expected in a film like *The Wolf of Wall Street*, it is interesting to consider the implications of this decision. The movie, itself, features a wide range of shots and various levels of dynamacy. Whereas the opening features more of a mockumentary-style voiceover with photos and footage from Belfort's past, the film goes on to include scenes with aerial footage, extended slow motion pans, and even CGI effects. Perhaps this breadth of cinematography is indicative of the excess held within the film itself, but whatever the case, there are certainly many ways these choices inform viewers' understanding of Belfort's character.

Both Scorsese and Prieto use visual cues and cinematographic decisions to better flesh out Belfort's transformation. The type of lenses and cameras used to frame each scene give audiences insight into Belfort's own character development, cluing viewers in to Belfort's evangelicism on a more subliminal level. The filmmakers tend to rely on more anamorphic lenses in scenes where Belfort addresses the company so as to give a better understanding of the scope of the crowd. In these scenes, the viewer joins the company of stockbrokers as all watch DiCaprio's performance with equally bated breath. Here, the relationship between the viewer and the on-screen subjects is swapped for a more intimate connection that the viewer shares with Belfort's own employees. In blurring the lines between Belfort's audience and the film's audience, Scorsese and Prieto allow both populations to encounter the compelling words of Belfort's message on equal footing.

Additionally, viewers witness the camera's broadening scope alongside Belfort's increasingly libidinal and excessive lifestyle. Early shots in the film tend to have a single subject. In several tableside conversations Belfort has with his coworkers, the camera switches between the two using reverse shots so as not to cloud the screen with more than one central subject. Later on, however, multiple subjects make their way into the frame for each shot so that audiences have to choose which character they will watch closely. The scope of the camera underscores the excess Belfort amasses. The only time this rule is broken occurs when Belfort gives a company address and is positioned as the focal actor mentioned above.

In so framing Belfort, the filmmakers position him as the very type of central actor of which Diekema writes. He is able to retain many of the factors of the "revivalist quality" Diekema attributes to early televangelists. This, alongside the spoken rhetoric that accompanies these choices, underscores the significance of the evangelical measures Belfort employs in his pursuit of capital gains.

## **Conclusion**

Understanding the connection between evangelism and capitalism can be a daunting task. Between their historical considerations, connections to American values, and tricky implications within contemporary spheres, the two have a delicate relationship. Because much of American evangelism is connected to capitalism in less favorable ways via issues such as prosperity theology and televangelism, a faithful connection to God is often accompanied with the promise of acquired material wealth. Films like Martin Scorsese's *The Wolf of Wall Street* help to connect these dots, however augmented their methods may be. In its display of financial excess, the film works to present the ways capital is often accumulated by evangelical means. Through his use of

religious signifiers, cultural references, and specific cinematographic choices, Scorsese forges an intrinsic connection between the two ideas.

As many critics are quick to point out, the film does little to warn of the dangers of such excessive and explicit greed; the picture closes with a shot of Belfort recently released from prison, performing his “sell me this pen” bit for a crowd that has come to heed his advice (like the real Jordan Belfort, Scorsese’s character ultimately becomes a motivational speaker). The film takes no issue with positioning Belfort as a central actor in his capitalist pursuits, nor with handing him no final penalty for his greed but instead rewarding him with a greater following.

In so intertwining these two ideas, *The Wolf of Wall Street* comments on a connection that has been in the making since early American protestantism. As they approach *The Wolf of Wall Street*, it is important that viewers are wary of this connection and its implications beyond the scope of the film. Just as the born-again Christian is given the command to “make disciples of all nations” (*ESV Bible*, Matt. 28.18), Scorsese’s main character makes disciples of capitalism, relying on the same charisma and rhetoric as the preachers whose work remains the bedrock of the American evangelical tradition.

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