9-30-2017

Film and Religion: Critical Concepts in Media and Cultural Studies

Joel Mayward

University of St Andrews, jmayward@gmail.com

Film and Religion: Critical Concepts in Media and Cultural Studies

Abstract

This is a book review of S. Brent Plate, ed. *Film and Religion: Critical Concepts in Media and Cultural Studies.* London: Routledge Press, 2017.

Author Notes

Joel Mayward is a pastor, writer, youth worker, and film critic living in Portland, Oregon. He is the author of "Jesus Goes to the Movies: The Youth Ministry Film Guide." Find Joel's writings on film and spirituality at www.cinemayward.com. Follow Joel on Twitter: @joelmayward.

S. Brent Plate, ed. *Film and Religion: Critical Concepts in Media and Cultural Studies.* London: Routledge Press, 2017.

In episode #638 of the popular Chicago-based podcast *Filmspotting*, hosts Adam Kempenar and Josh Larsen listed their "Top 5 Religious Experiences at the Movies."[1] In their consideration of a wide variety of films, the hosts did not list films *about* religion, per se, but rather films which evoked the transcendent and ineffable in the film-viewing experience itself; Kempenar recalls that, for him, "time and space did sort of break down" in these movie-going moments. The lines of film and religion blurred together during these films, which ranged from experimental documentaries to psychological thrillers. Prompted by their list, the most recent religious cinematic experience I can recall was viewing Christopher Nolan's WWII passion project *Dunkirk* in 70mm in a full theater on opening weekend. While Nolan's oeuvre is decidedly a-religious and materialist—he rarely, if ever, invokes religious imagery or dialogue in his films, despite raising deep moral and mortal questions in his narratives—the experience of watching such a forceful, immersive film in a packed theater of passionate cinephiles felt deeply akin to a worship service. Through keen structure of time and space, as well as a focus on the *mise-en-scene* and human bodies in motion, Nolan's *Dunkirk* serves as a filmic metaphor for the four-volume *Film and Religion*, from Routledge's *Critical Concepts in Media and Cultural Studies* series: both film and book(s) are immense, profound, and expensive.

At four volumes, 1218 pages, and a price tag of $1495.00, *Film and Religion* is a prodigious and diverse collection of essays on the intersection of cinema and spirituality, of film and faith. Assembled and edited by S. Brent Plate, the massive volume diverges from a typical academic reader akin to *The Religion and Film Reader* (2007, ed. Plate

and Jolyon Mitchell) or an introductory overview like *The Routledge Companion to Religion and Film* (2009, ed. John Lyden) in its scope and structure. *Film and Religion* is a compilation of previously published materials from a variety of fields and traditions providing an overview of the film-religion conversation, highlighting many perspectives and films previously unexplored. There are no new or original pieces here, apart from Plate's helpful introductory notes; it is more like a well-crafted mix tape made by a music aficionado than an artist's new album. Yet this anthology moves beyond rehashing expected melodies or well-worn tunes; as Plate puts it, "This is not, I should warn readers, a 'greatest hits', but a wide-ranging set of essays that intends to demonstrate how many directions the film–religion relation can go."[2] While most of the essays approach the subject from a theological or religious studies perspective, Plate effectively incorporates scholars and themes from the fields of sociology, film studies, anthropology, and ethics. This diversity is one of the volume's most notable strengths, addressing film and religion from a medley of perspectives, particularly in its rich inclusion of African, Asian, and Middle Eastern cinema.

Plate serves as a keen curator and guide as these manifold filmic witnesses are each in their proper place in a well-structured thematic format. His general introduction to the volumes sets the tone by taking an unexpected (even unorthodox) approach to the film-and-religion conversation through a deep examination of the opening scene of a seemingly non-religious film: the irreverent 2003 comedy from director Terry Zwigoff, *Bad Santa*. Plate unpacks the "religious semiotics" of the film by addressing its world-building through time, space, and objects, namely human bodies and their placement and actions. Observing that the opening shot of *Bad Santa* begins with a snowy night sky,

then moves downward and closes in on the central character portrayed by Billy Bob Thornton as he gets drunk in a bar, Plate draws the following connections: "Snowfall connects the world above and the world below....When it's not snow, it is some other object or filmic device that brings viewers into the space and time of the film, generally starting from on high, and moving downward, connecting across cosmic orders above and below."[3] A simple shot of falling snow invites audiences into a familiar construct of a holiday film even as it sets the film world's cosmic reality by coming down to earth from the heavens before deconstructing the holiday film tropes. As the audience watches a movie—even a raunchy comedy like *Bad Santa*—they are invited to participate in the film world's moral and aesthetic reality, as well as consider the film's impact on their personal real-world practices. Plate concludes, "Film watching, then, becomes a type of participation in a divine cosmos where the structures of everyday life are rearranged for us in delightful, and sometimes challenging, ways."[4] These rearranged structures are best seen in the editing process, what Plate says is "arguably the most important, even though most subtle, dimension of filmmaking."[5] This emphasis on film form and the philosophical underpinnings of the filmic language coincide with Andre Bazin's observations about the power of editing, that "it was montage that gave birth to film as an art, setting it apart from mere animated photography, in short, creating a language."[6] Through this introduction, Plate establishes the reader's expectations for the remainder of the collection—the films addressed may be unexpected, and the religious/spiritual connections will go far beyond overt religious figures or symbols within a film's world.

In the first volume, "Religion in Film," Plate raises a question, "What are the cultural and religious milieus in which audio-visual media are created, and how do those

milieus become sources of symbols, images, stories, and sounds that are used to shape film form?"[7] In short, what are the religious symbols and practices embedded and embodied within films? This is most obvious when a film centers on a particular religious figure, such as the subgenre of Jesus films (e.g. Scorsese's *The Last Temptation of Christ*, Pasolini's *The Gospel According to St. Matthew*) explored in the opening chapter from Adele Reinhartz. Yet religious rituals also can serve as props or allusions, operating as spiritual subtexts within a wide variety of films. For example, Nacim Pak-Shiraz's chapter examines the portrayal of clergy in Iranian cinema, looking at the role of clerics in Reza Mirkarimi's *Under the Moonlight* and Kamal Tabrizi's *The Lizard*. Even subtler are films' formal elements containing religious significance, such as how light and shadow in Japanese films such as *Rashomon* and *Maborosi* reflect a particular Buddhist aesthetic (see Francisca Cho's chapter). Again, Plate's curatorial skills are laudable in that this volume does not simply rehash familiar films regarding the incorporation of religious figures or images in cinema; apart from Gabriel Axel's *Babette's Feast* or Scorsese's filmography, many of the included films may be unfamiliar to Western scholars outside of a Judeo-Christian framework, with films from Asian and Middle Eastern directors such as Hirokazu Kore-eda, Ashutosh Gowariker, and Majid Majidi.

The second volume comes from a different angle, asking how the filmmaking and film-viewing experience may be considered religious, or "Film as Religion." How might filmmaking be a religious practice, creating sacred spaces *behind* the camera for those involved in the process? If creating a work of art can be a spiritually transformative experience, surely the act of directing, editing, lighting, or shooting a film could be examined. Film viewing can also have psychological and cognitive effects on the body of

the audience. Four chapters of the volume are devoted to how particular films, ranging from Brakhage to Bresson, impact viewers beyond mere consumption or interpretation of the film—this section may be of particular interest to those in social sciences or with a desire to understand the psychological reverberations of film-going. The "Film as Religion" volume also features sections from the political and critical realms, looking at the intersection of cinema and imperialism, colonialism, and post-colonialism. These chapters address Filipino cinema's critique of Spanish colonialism, American Indian aesthetics, post-colonial African cinema, the impact of Indian cinema in striving for independence, and Cuban film in a revolutionary milieu. It's significant that Plate has sought examples of cinematic colonialist critiques from nearly every continent, and scholars and students interested in post-colonial studies may find a rich resource in this particular section.

Plate describes the approach of Volume 3, "Film in Religion" as the 180-degree reversal of Volume 1, namely, how do films continue to shape religious practices beyond the immediate screening of the film? In what ways has audio-visual media transformed the very nature of religion itself? Plate states, "Because films have been such a powerful georeligious aesthetic, we look to the ways religious traditions themselves have been influenced, altered, and even usurped by cinema."[8] For example, the first section of the volume offers "a series of articles that investigate the use of film as a missionary and propaganda tool for promoting particular faiths and ideologies."[9] Many within evangelical Christian contexts are familiar with *The Jesus Film*, arguably the "most watched film" in evangelists' reliance upon its form and content to express the gospel of the Christian faith to a variety of cultures. Yet the portrayal of Jesus by a white British

actor may have unintended critical consequences for African nations with a history of British imperialism; these critiques are examined in Adam T. Shreve's chapter on religious films in Zimbabwean contexts. Dwight Friesen examines a similar idea—evangelistic films and representation—from a different perspective in his consideration of *Karunamayudu*, featuring a portrayal of "a South Indian Jesus who, through particular film styles, is made approachable for many villagers used to seeing Hindu devotional films."[10] The "Film in Religion" volume also addresses the sociological ramifications of "cult" films such as *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* and the myth-making in film franchises such as Disney, Bollywood, and the animated films of Hayao Miyazaki. While Volume 2 also addressed film reception within audiences, these particular films have garnered a near-religious following in unexpected or unintended ways—cult followings go beyond mere reception into ritualism, even abandoning traditional religion for the church of the cinema as adherents spend time and money in gathering in small communities to reinforce familiar narratives and morals. These chapters may have been more suited to the "Film *as* Religion" section, but their inclusion is noteworthy, and would be beneficial for sociology of religion scholars to take into account.

The final volume takes a more conventional approach in the film-religion dialogue by looking at biblical and theological connections to film. These chapters look not only at how biblical and theological themes are found in films, but also how films themselves may offer fresh or novel approaches to biblical and theological studies. There is a dialectic, a back-and-forth between film and theology, cinema and scriptures, which these chapters wish to address. Plate acknowledges the volume's narrowed focus in its overtly Christian emphasis. While sociology and aesthetic theories are included, these are

mainly chapters from the academic world of biblical studies and theology. The films will also be familiar to those interested in film-religion discussions, including recent films about biblical characters (*Noah*, *Exodus: Gods and Kings*), as well as familiar directors interested in theological ideas (Lars Von Trier, Ingmar Bergman). Still, familiarity with these themes or approaches should not lead the reader to conclude this volume of less importance or novelty than the previous three, as Plate has continued in drawing new and diverse voices into the conversation which offer fresh (though previously published) insights. Coming back to my *Dunkirk* comparison, many films have been made about WWII, but none quite like Nolan's expansive arthouse approach, which feels at-once conventional and neoteric. Plate's volumes are of a piece with Nolan's film.

Film and Religion will serve as an excellent resource for scholars interested in a compendium of academic journal articles published on the subject, either to include as supplementary reading for a taught course or to expand one's own research on the subject. However, the enormous price tag and length of this four-volume set will likely limit its audience to those whose university library is able to afford such an investment. A brief perusal through sources for each chapter revealed that many are already available to seekers and researchers through the original publications: 10 of the 66 chapters are from the *Journal of Religion & Film* and the *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* alone. Still, those interested in the subject would do well to trust Plate's connoisseurship for this enormous compendium. Just as the editor of a film may have the final say in the completion and caliber of a film, we can thank the editor of such an academic collection for the merits of the final product.

---

[1] "#638: Top 5 Religious Experiences at the Movies," Filmspotting.net, accessed August 24, 2017, https://www.filmspotting.net/top-5-lists-archive/2017/6/7/638-top-5-religious-experiences-at-the-movies.

[2] S. Brent Plate, ed., *Religion in Film*, vol. 1 of *Film and Religion* (Routledge, 2017), 2.

[3] Plate, *Film and Religion* vol. 1, 6.

[4] Ibid.

[5] Plate, *Film and Religion* vol. 1, 10.

[6] Andre Bazin, *What is Cinema? Volume 1* (University of California Press, 1968), 23.

[7] Plate, *Film and Religion* vol. 1, 2.

[8] S. Brent Plate, ed., *Film in Religion*, vol. 3 of *Film and Religion* (Routledge, 2017), 1.

[9] Ibid.

[10] Ibid.