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Profane Parables: Film and the American Dream

Abstract

This is a book review of *Profane Parables: Film and the American Dream*, by Matthew S. Rindge (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2016).

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Author Notes

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***Profane Parables: Film and the American Dream*, Matthew S. Rindge (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2016)**

Profane Parables is Matthew Rindge's interdisciplinary critique of the American ethos by way of film and theology, particularly the biblical genre of a parable. Rindge looks at three contemporary films—*Fight Club* (Fincher, 1999), *American Beauty* (Mendes, 1999), and *About Schmidt* (Payne, 2002)—through the lens of the parable, or “narratives of *disorientation*, stories of subversion, in which conventional and cherished worldviews are demolished.¹” The target set for demolition is the American Dream, with an exploration of these films' unique capacity for disrupting normative American paradigms. Rindge's depiction of the American Dream parallels the observation of theologian Walter Brueggemann about American culture: “The dominant script of both selves and communities in our society, for both liberals and conservatives, is the script of therapeutic, technological, consumerist militarism that permeates every dimension of our common life.”² This book's distinction lies in its “attention to a *specific* religious function of films” in their parabolic approach.³ Rindge does not assume the filmmakers had the genre of parable in mind or intended to make a “religious” film. Rather, he asserts that these films and their filmmakers strive to do what parables do best, namely deconstruct commonly held religious beliefs and myths using familiar-yet-shocking narratives. Rindge writes with both academic rigor and an approachable tone, which makes the text accessible for audiences in both academic circles and broader spheres, such as those interested in American civil religion, the particular filmmakers Rindge cites, or the biblical genre of parables.

In his opening critique of the American Dream, Rindge identifies the problem: “The dominant religion in America is America itself.”⁴ Rindge relies heavily on Robert Bellah’s “Civil Religion in America” in unpacking his evaluation of America’s status as a religion.⁵ He identifies seven key elements of American religion, such as sacred texts, sacred rituals, sacred days, etc. For instance, the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence are America’s sacred texts, functioning as authoritative and near-inerrant in the eyes of both elected officials and everyday Americans. The American flag serves as the sacred symbol, idolized every time children in elementary schools place their hand on their heart and “pledge allegiance.” “Pledging allegiance to someone other than Adonai or Jesus seems irreconcilable with the Jewish-Christian ban on idolatry.”⁶ Nevertheless, few Americans, including Christians, question or critique such ubiquitous and laudable practices in the American tradition. In the religion of Americanism, where the nation itself is deified, “criticism of America is the most offensive blasphemy.”⁷

In the face of this blasphemy, Rindge nevertheless critiques what he calls “the gospel of success.” Quoting psychologist Erich Fromm, he writes, “Triumph is the sign of salvation, failure an abomination. Fromm observed this impulse in our cultural religion: ‘the meaning of our life is to move, to forge ahead, to arrive as near to the top as possible.’”⁸ This success is often defined in economic terms—financial security and positional power serve as cultural markers revealing that one has “made it.” This pursuit of success is embodied in F. Scott Fitzgerald’s Jay Gatsby, a self-made man on a quest for personal happiness by way of wealth and romance. Rindge shows great regard for *The Great Gatsby*, and the parabolic films he examines follow in the tradition of Fitzgerald’s novel in their exploration and evisceration of this illusion of success. However, Rindge

does not include the film adaptations of *Gatsby* here, such as the 2013 film directed by Baz Luhrmann, especially lavish in its stylization, its formal approach embodying the illusory tone of Fitzgerald's novel.

Beyond the gospel of success, Rindge focuses much of his critique throughout the book on one of the key tenets of the American Dream—its relationship with death:

The corollary of America's love affair with success is a denial of death. The exaltation of success in the American Dream leaves little tolerance for failure, and nothing epitomizes failure more than death. Death is the antithesis of success. In the American Dream, death is anathema. It is that which must not be named.⁹

If life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness are all essential to the American Dream, then death is the ultimate obstacle to this endeavor. Rindge looks at the psychological and sociological history of the American culture's engagement with death, with death's removal from personal and public life as a "tacit dogma" of the American religion.¹⁰ The protagonists in the three films within *Profane Parables* all must face mortality and death as the films illustrate a counter-narrative to the hegemonic paradigm of artificial happiness.

The first filmic parable, *Fight Club*, reveals the bankruptcy of the American Dream in its blistering and evocative tone. Rindge's rich analysis picks up on the religious language and themes within the film, such as terms like "resurrection" and "deliverance" used by the film's narrator and protagonist. Rindge unpacks the parallels between *Fight Club* and the biblical genre of *lament*, specifically noting how *Fight Club* "functions as a lament of divine abandonment and the American Dream."¹¹ By exploring the film through the lens of lament, Rindge gives significant insights both into the filmic themes and the biblical examples, an engaging dialogue between a contemporary cultural

artifact and the biblical text. Rindge also cites other cinematic laments, such as the films of Terrence Malick or a particular episode of the television show *The West Wing*. While Rindge focuses primarily on the parallels, he also notes the contrasts, stating that “Biblical laments seek relief from agony; *Fight Club* finds relief *in* affliction, since such pain relieves and rescues one from a sedated life devoid of feeling and (therefore) meaning.” Through this self-inflicted pain, “*Fight Club* laments America’s absence of lament.”¹²

Though similar in theme to *Fight Club*’s lamentation on the meaningless void of the American Dream, the second film in Rindge’s parables, *American Beauty*, focuses on a man’s journey from death to life through, ironically, his own death. Rindge invites viewers and readers to “look closer” at both the film’s images, as well as cultural assumptions about the nature of beauty and desire. The film utilizes the image of a bright red rose as a contrast between fantasy and reality, the realization or subversion of personal desire. Rindge argues that the film emphasizes the sacred beauty of death, making the subversive claim “that beauty, the sacred, and genuine gratitude correlate not with success or achievement but rather in death, the epitome of failure.”¹³ This claim stems primarily from the film’s themes and Rindge’s examination of screenwriter Alan Ball’s own personal life, and is absent of theological or religious foundations; there is little in this chapter akin to Rindge’s previous connection between *Fight Club* and the genre of lament, or the following chapter comparing *About Schmidt* with the parables in the Gospel of Luke. The parabolic nature of *American Beauty* lies only in its attempted subversion of the American Dream by highlighting the beauty of death, a beauty which may only be in the eye of the beholder as the genuinely positive aspects of human death

remain unexplored in the book. Rindge appears to affirm *American Beauty*'s conclusions about death without addressing the possible counterpoints—a positive assertion of death as essentially salvific without consideration of death's detriments or horrors remains unsatisfactory.

Similar to the chapter on *American Beauty*, Rindge's subsequent analysis of *About Schmidt* highlights the film's critique of common pursuits in the American Dream—wealth, family, friendship, and security. The titular character cannot seem to connect with anyone else; his entire journey is plagued with a sense of meaninglessness and misery. Rindge importantly highlights the casting of Jack Nicholson as Schmidt, for the character deviates from the signature characteristics of Nicholson's flamboyant and rebellious roles—there is no bucking of the system with Schmidt, only placation and cowardice.¹⁴ Rindge connects Schmidt's character with Christ's parable of the rich fool in Luke 12, as well as the book of Ecclesiastes. All of these texts—filmic and biblical—emphasize the temporality of material wealth and the inevitability of death. Both Jesus' parable and *About Schmidt* portray death “as the principle frame for understanding how to live meaningfully.”¹⁵ Beyond the biblical parable, *About Schmidt* also notes the lack of guarantee that human relationships can provide meaning; this is not a film akin to *It's A Wonderful Life* and its message of “No man is a failure who has friends.” Schmidt cannot seem to maintain friendships or familial love, but his spiral into isolation and meaninglessness is broken by his somewhat flippant choice to sponsor a child in Africa. This decision ends up being his salvation, as he finds connection and meaning through the letters he sends and receives from his sponsor child. Rindge makes a remarkable claim, stating that this film “out-parables the biblical parable” in its indictment of the

American Dream and exploration of meaning and values.¹⁶ It parallels an earlier statement about treating films as sacred texts: “Biblical texts are not privileged over films as more significant or authoritative. On the contrary, as the main objects of inquiry, films take primacy and precedence.”¹⁷ Conservative religious readers may feel a sense of discomfort with such statements, an unease Rindge would likely affirm as beneficial for the reader to consider.

Ultimately, Rindge explores the parabolic nature of films as disorienting narratives subverting cultural expectations. He notes that parables are not containers for transmitting morals, but rather means of undermining commonly held ethical paradigms. Jesus’ parables were meant to provoke rather than comfort, disturb instead of console.¹⁸ In his analysis of both film and religious texts, Rindge writes with an accessible and pointed tone. His observations about each film and the parables are detailed and nuanced, yet his descriptions remain concise and focused. If this is a book about film, America, and theology, its emphases follow suit—this is primarily a text about three particular recent films, noting their subversion of the American ethos, while including some religious and theological connections. As such, *Profane Parables* would serve well as a supplementary resource within film and theology courses, particularly those centered on biblical genres and their filmic parallels; its balance between an accessible tone and an academic prowess would be best used in an undergraduate course on such subjects.

Rindge’s brevity and pointed exploration also elicits the strongest criticism of the book—at only five chapters and 114 pages, its length limits the depth of analysis or number of films which could be potentially explored. Rindge mentions that the three chosen films all “appeared during an economic zenith” in recent American history,

around 1999. In the emergence of these films around this time, he claims: “There is a correlation (and possible causal link) between rabid economic success and profound dissatisfaction with the national ethos.”¹⁹ This is a weighty claim, but little is devoted within the book to the economic or historical dynamic within American history at this particular historical moment, and Rindge’s overall argument is neither strengthened nor weakened by its inclusion. By framing his argument as indicative of a historical economic reality, Rindge opens himself up to critique through filmic counterexamples, either subversive filmic parables from other eras (such as *Citizen Kane* or *The Godfather*), or films released around 1999 that embrace and embody the values of the American Dream (such as Michael Bay’s *Armageddon* or Roland Emmerich’s *The Patriot*).

Rindge does mention other subversive films critiquing the American Dream, such as Joel and Ethan Coen’s *No Country for Old Men* and Paul Thomas Anderson’s *There Will be Blood*. Based on a Cormac McCarthy novel and winner of four Academy Awards, *No Country for Old Men* is subversive of two distinctly American film genres: the Western and film noir. The Coens have been called both pranksters and philosophers, and central to their focus is America itself.²⁰ Instead of the traditional “good guys win” approach to Western, *No Country for Old Men* subverts expectations in the death of its central protagonist before the climax of the film, and this without any sense of catharsis or as a witness to his final battle. The villain—a man of heartless violence and grim determination—walks away, though not unscathed. The aging sheriff—a man literally wearing the white hat within the film—retires, unable to withstand the violence before him and uncertain about the moral degradation within the country. In *There Will Be*

Blood, Anderson adopts an Upton Sinclair novel for his own purposes of examining the rise of an oil baron, Daniel Plainview (Daniel Day-Lewis). Rindge notes, “Plainview animates the moral and spiritual depravity that results from pursuing wealth and success at all costs.”²¹ The film follows in the vein of similar rise-and-fall narratives in American cinema while remaining unique in its formal approach and subtlety. Addressing themes of greed, violence, and religion, Anderson’s film could be considered an alt-Western. It was released in the same year as *No Country for Old Men*, and both films serve as masterful critiques of American mythology, particularly in their examinations of death and violence. Ultimately, both of these films affirm Rindge’s argument and could have been included as subsequent chapters. Other twenty-first century films worth considering as parables about the American Dream include *A History of Violence* (2005, David Cronenberg), *Little Miss Sunshine* (2006, Jonathan Dayton and Valerie Faris), *The Wolf of Wall Street* (2013, Martin Scorsese), and *Gone Girl* (2014, David Fincher).

One key example absent from Rindge’s examination of the American Dream is a cinematic critique of militaristic violence. He does point out America’s sacred myth of origins and the value of freedom as the driving motive and justification of violence, stating “U.S. wars, torture, and drone killings are legitimated by framing these activities—and their victims—as necessary in the eternal and divinely decreed quest for freedom.”²² However, none of the three films he examines adequately look at the hegemonic influence of American military power.²³ Numerous films in recent years could be included as cinematic parables subverting the American military machine, such as Kathryn Bigelow’s *The Hurt Locker* (2008) or David O. Russell’s *Three Kings* (1999). This latter film would align well with Rindge’s particular timeframe of films released

near the turn of the millennium, as well as the thematic elements present regarding military power, the acquisition of wealth, and the subversive concept of having American soldiers fighting alongside Iraqis instead of against them.

I am writing this review of *Profane Parables* on the Fourth of July, a sacred day devoted to the celebration and propagation of the American Dream. Life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness are glorified through taking a day off in order to spend significant amounts of money on harmful and disruptive explosives, embodying the values of consumption and patriotism. On this day, I am listening to Sufjan Stevens' song, "Fourth of July" from the album *Carrie & Lowell*. Its melancholic and dream-like chorus is a repeated refrain: *We're all gonna die*. It's a fitting soundtrack to *Profane Parables*, a sobering and subversive book which seeks to pursue a new sort of dream, one which transcends American civil religion for the reign of God as suggested in the parabolic teachings of Jesus.

¹ Matthew S. Rindge, *Profane Parables: Film and the American Dream* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2016), 2.

² Walter Brueggemann, "'Counterscript: Living With the Elusive God,'" *The Christian Century* 122, no. 24, November 29, 2005) 22-28.

³ Rindge, 4.

⁴ Rindge, 5.

⁵ Robert N. Bellah, "Civil Religion in America," in *Beyond Belief: Essays on Religion in a Post-Traditional World*, ed. Robert N. Bellah. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1970).

⁶ Rindge, 9.

⁷ Rindge, 6.

⁸ Rindge, 19.

⁹ Rindge, 21.

¹⁰ Rindge, 22.

¹¹ Rindge, 30.

¹² Rindge, 36.

¹³ Rindge, 64.

¹⁴ Rindge, 78.

¹⁵ Rindge, 86.

¹⁶ Rindge, 93.

¹⁷ Rindge, 4.

¹⁸ Rindge, 96.

¹⁹ Rindge, 113.

²⁰ See, for example, Elijah Siegler, ed., *Coen: Framing Religion in Amoral Order* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2016).

²¹ Rindge, 23.

²² Rindge, 11.

²³ *American Beauty* does have a conservative military character played by Chris Cooper, but the chapter in *Profane Parables* only mentions him in a single paragraph. For an examination of military violence in film, see Walter Wink's chapter on "the myth of redemptive violence" in *The Powers that Be: Theology for a New Millennium* (New York: Doubleday, 1998), 42-56.

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