



4-5-2016

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Recommended Citation

Brintnall, Kent L. (2016) "Hollywood Biblical Epics: Camp Spectacle and Queer Style from the Silent Era to the Modern Day," *Journal of Religion & Film*: Vol. 20 : Iss. 2 , Article 32.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/jrf/vol20/iss2/32>

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Abstract

This is a book review of Richard Lindsay, *Hollywood Biblical Epics: Camp Spectacle and Queer Style from the Silent Era to the Modern Day* (Denver, CO: Praeger, 2015).

Author Notes

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Richard Lindsay, *Hollywood Biblical Epics: Camp Spectacle and Queer Style from the Silent Era to the Modern Day* (Denver, CO: Praeger, 2015), 193pp., b+w illustrations, \$48.00 (hardcover); \$45.60 (Kindle).

With *Hollywood Biblical Epics*, Richard Lindsay offers a very welcome return to the gaudy spectacle treated more than twenty years ago by Bruce Babington and Peter William Evans in *Biblical Epics: Sacred Narratives in the Hollywood Cinema*. Lindsay's focus on the camp dimension of biblical epics and the way camp creates the possibility for queer readings distinguishes his work from that of Babington and Evans and places it in the company of Alexander Doty's *Flaming Classics* and *Making Things Perfectly Queer*, Vito Russo's *The Celluloid Closet* and Harry Benshoff's *Monsters in the Closet*. (I intentionally invoke a litany of gay male works—rather than, say, Patricia White's *Uninvited*—given the fact that queerness devolves into gay-maleness by the end of Lindsay's book.) Lindsay ably demonstrates the virtues of any serious film scholar: he is equally adept at providing close readings of cinematic texts, placing films in their cultural and historical context, offering interpretations informed by production and reception histories, and bolstering his accounts with theoretical works on meaning-making and audience reception. *Hollywood Biblical Epics* will be a useful text in courses on religion and film (especially courses focused on Jesus films), on religion and popular culture, and on American religious history. It would also work well in certain biblical studies courses, in religion and sexuality courses as well as in courses on gay spectatorship and cinema generally.

The most astute and convincing performance in Lindsay's book comes in the final chapter where he considers William Wyler's 1959 *Ben-Hur* in relation to "physique" magazines. These magazines, which featured muscular men in various states of undress, frequently invoking Greco-Roman imaginaries, functioned both as a form of early gay pornography and also provided a site for gay men to interact with each other at a distance and to interrogate artifacts of mainstream

culture for their homoerotic potential. In this chapter, Lindsay offers a well-documented historical account of both Wyler's film and the various physique magazines, analyzing how they traded on remarkably similar iconographies and fantasies, and how the former was often mentioned—and parodied—in the latter. He supplements this historical account with an attentive close reading of the homoerotic dimensions of *Ben-Hur*. Lindsay then adds to this formal and historical analysis a consideration of Laura Mulvey's influential work on the gendered gaze and how *Ben-Hur* offers some viewers a very different range of erotic pleasures. Finally, Lindsay takes a star theory approach to Charlton Heston, which he renames "role retextualization," to explain how the actor's frequent appearances in biblical spectaculars assisted the process of "scripturalizing" various films, including *Ben-Hur*, in which he appeared. Although noting *Ben-Hur*'s homoerotic dimensions, the way that those challenge Mulvey's schematic understanding of Hollywood cinema, and how they followed Heston's actual body across his body of work are hardly novel insights, Lindsay's careful attention to other gay artifacts from the same time period—namely, physique magazines—makes an original, and in this case persuasive, case for how gay male audiences read *Ben-Hur*.

The other two chapters in the second part of *Hollywood Biblical Epics* also treat films from the Cold War era. In one, Lindsay spends most of his time discussing Cecil B. DeMille's *The Ten Commandments* and its relation to anti-communism, with the latter's attendant suspicion of homosexuality. Here, there is a brief discussion of camp, drag and gender excess in the closing pages of the chapter. In this chapter, unlike in his treatment of *Ben-Hur*, Lindsay fails to distinguish carefully between his own readings of the film and what contemporaneous audiences made of the film. Many reviewers that he quotes read these campy spectaculars "straight"—i.e., as serious, meaningful, religious films with spiritual value and insight. Others reject them as salacious,

titillating farce that undermine any religious message. Lindsay never offers any evidence that any audience, besides himself, actualized the queer possibilities of these texts, and yet he often talks about the pleasures, reactions and responses of audiences. Tracing *possible* readings is a valuable and important goal, but more care should be shown regarding what an author's evidence and argument actually accomplishes.

The remaining chapter of this second part focuses on the tradition of "effeminate villains" in biblical spectaculars. Lindsay focuses his attention on Charles Laughton in *Quo Vadis* and Vincent Price and Edward G. Robinson in *The Ten Commandments*. Both of these treatments allow Lindsay to show off his gift for historically sensitive analysis. With respect to Laughton and *Quo Vadis*, Lindsay performs a detailed comparative reading of performance and narrative with the work of a popular, contemporaneous, psychoanalytic author's views on homosexuality. This sophisticated, empirically grounded cultural analysis demonstrates the anxieties and interpretative predilections audiences might have brought to the film. Similarly, Lindsay combines his well-developed skills of formal and historical analysis to show how Price and Robinson are portrayed as sexually deviant Communist figures in this era of the Lavender Scare. Although many commentators have noted the ways that *The Ten Commandments* participated in and furthered Cold War anti-communist rhetorics, I'm not aware of any analysis that links the film to the era's closely related homosexual panic.

In the introduction, Lindsay states that he wants to highlight the camp dimensions of biblical spectaculars to open up the possibility of queer readings. While the pleasures available to gay men are obvious in a film like *Ben-Hur*, Lindsay is not as persuasive about what might be rescued, redeemed or reinterpreted in the chapters where queerness is so closely associated with danger, sedition, decadence and villainy. Lindsay asserts several times that these over-the-top,

campy performances contain a kind of “fabulousness” with which spectators could identify. In his close readings, however, he never explains what these actors do or say that would justify this kind of identification. Certainly, there are campy portrayals of villains that are comprised of such cutting wit, such tantalizing allure, such delicious transgression, or such powerful subversion that audiences might find inspiration or energy, but it is unclear that *these* characters generate such reactions. Lindsay provides neither sufficient close readings nor empirical evidence of audience reactions to justify including these characters in this particular kind of camp canon.

In the first part of the book, where he offers a comparative reading of Cecil B. DeMille’s *King of Kings* and Mel Gibson’s *The Passion of the Christ*, Lindsay is much more explicit about how camp works to offer pleasures that run against the grain of the films. Again, working with textual analysis, social context, as well as production and reception history, Lindsay provides a rich, complex understanding of both of these films (even if most of what he has to say about their context, their production, and their reception will be familiar to anyone who has studied the literature on either film). With respect to DeMille’s portrait of Jesus, and its camp excesses, Lindsay understandably focuses on the prologue’s portrayal of Mary Magdalene. Lindsay quite correctly points out that this is an unexpected opening to a Jesus film (even in 2015 my students are puzzled and stunned by this opening) and he argues that the transgressive pleasures on offer accompany Mary Magdalene through the remainder of the film into the Resurrection scene at the film’s conclusion, even though she is tamed by Jesus’ miraculous healing power. While I wonder whether Mary Magdalene really does have enough screen time to make her a central character in the film, and while I also wonder whether the ratio between transgression and domestication allows an audience to retain the counter-normative pleasures that Lindsay identifies, he offers an original and intriguing reading of the dynamics of DeMille’s *King of Kings*. Turning his attention to

Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ*, a film I would have characterized as deadly earnest and decidedly un-campy prior to reading *Hollywood Biblical Epics*, Lindsay focuses on the film's features that associate it with the horror genre. These features, Lindsay argues, prevent the reader from getting lost in the film's "realism," and open up the possibility of queer—or resistant—readings. Such readings, according to Lindsay, are assisted by the monstrosity of Jesus' body, as it becomes a mangled, tortured, devastated figure. Similar to my reservations about his interpretation of *King of Kings*, I wondered if Lindsay had made enough of how *The Passion* strives to depict Jesus as the victim of the monstrosity of others, and how his own gruesome condition in no way provides the kind of queer pleasures typically found in the horror film monster, but this approach does open up a new perspective on *The Passion of the Christ*.

Finally, the first chapter of Lindsay's *Hollywood Biblical Epics*. I intentionally worked backwards in my review because, in some ways, the material of the first chapter is among Lindsay's most original and provocative. Here, he discusses the ways in which biblical epics—and even non- or near-biblical epics—become scripturalized. Using *King of Kings* and *The Passion of the Christ* as his case studies, he argues that a biblical film becomes "scripturalized" based on "(1) the claim of the director's special inspiration for making the film, (2) the endorsement of religious authorities, (3) the claim of the film's spiritual transcendence, and (4) traditions of devotion that arise out of viewing of the film" (4). He then adds—and, to me, this seems his most generative contribution—that once a film is "scripturalized" it functions as a simulacrum of Scripture, thus concealing or displacing it. This certainly happens with Jesus films, but, as Lindsay documents, it even happens with films like *Ben-Hur*, which have no connection to the biblical text. In my experience teaching a course on Jesus films, I can attest to the way in which such films create memories about the contents of biblical texts and powerfully shape the

interpretation of such texts. And, Lindsay's contribution might even help us understand the enormous controversy around a film like *The Last Temptation of Christ*. The strong reaction relates to a film's ability to displace the biblical narrative. It isn't that *Last Temptation* "mocks" or "contradicts" the Bible; it's that it has the power to *supplant* the Bible. This contribution of Lindsay's *Hollywood Biblical Epics* will be enormously helpful for readers engaging his work in relation to broader conversations about religion and film, about religious film, about cinematic adaptations of sacred texts, and about religion and popular culture generally. In some places, Lindsay suggests that the campiness of texts—and the queer readings such camp features enable—can potentially undermine or short-circuit a film's "scripturalization." In this way, Lindsay seems to be saying that a film's religious intentions and its queer possibilities work in opposition. But in other places, especially when he articulates queer readings of these films and identifies them as the source of liberative possibilities (albeit on a very narrow model grounded in the form of liberal, humanist, recognition politics), Lindsay implicitly suggests that a film's campiness is what provides the energy for scripturalization—camp as vehicle to transcendence—even if the film becomes "sacred text" for a community vastly different than the one the filmmakers imagined addressing.

In his Afterword, Lindsay sketches a number of ways his provocative, clearly written, well-conceived, historically and formally and theoretically sophisticated study could be extended and expanded in the future. For this reader, thinking about the allure of camp and its connections to the transcendent power ascribed to "scripture" is one of the most important—if untrodden—paths cleared by Richard Lindsay's deeply enjoyable and immensely rewarding *Hollywood Biblical Epics*.