To Commend or To Critique? The Question of Religion and Film Studies

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Recommended Citation
Available at: https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/jrf/vol1/iss2/6

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Abstract
This paper examines two approaches to popular film to come out of religious studies. The first assumes popular culture is as valid as any culture, in which case "religious" analysis of films seeks to identify the iconography and mythology of film as expressive of a viable popular religion. The second method critiques popular film as a form of hegemonic discourse to be unmasked as supportive of classist, racist, and sexist ideologies. This paper accepts the validity of both methods and seeks to balance them by asserting that all films should be seen both as viable expressions of culture and also as ideology. Films are both to the extent that all contain multiple "texts" and multiple meanings, held together in an aporia and not entirely rational fusion. We do not need to decide which meaning is fundamental, as all are present in the film.

This article is available in Journal of Religion & Film: https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/jrf/vol1/iss2/6
The study of film from a religious studies vantage point has produced a broad consensus. Films include religious symbolism, consciously or unconsciously, and films may project a world-view which functions much like a religion in our culture.

Films are a creation and a reflection of the popular culture which produces and sustains them. They support this culture through creating myths, icons, and values which are celebrated and reinforced in a ritualized fashion. A variety of methods are used by religious scholars to study films. There are representative of the range of methods available within film studies generally: semiotics, textual or formalistic studies, psychoanalytic methods, ideological or political critiques, reader-response theories, genre and auteur studies, and so on.

There is a fundamental tension, however, between two basic approaches to the study of film as exemplative of a popular religious tradition. On the one hand, popular culture may be accepted as a culture which is as valid as any other, and which expresses its own values through media such as film. Even though the films are not produced by the people but by a technological industry, they are produced for the people and (in part) out of response to what people believe in and hope for. An analysis of their religious impact will then seek to identify the mythology of popular film with the purpose of establishing how it contributes to the religion of
popular culture, and will often (at least implicitly) celebrate the values expressed by this mythology.

On the other hand, the opposed method views films' presentation of popular culture and its religious aspects with great suspicion. The films are defined as a form of hegemonic discourse which ultimately supports the status quo of classist, racist, and sexist ideologies (to name the most significant). In this case, popular film is to be unmasked as this hegemonic discourse and deconstructed in order to reveal how it influences our society in negative ways. This method has been shaped by liberationist and feminist approaches to culture and religion.

Of course, this typology presents an oversimplification (as all typologies do), as there will be few interpreters of film who rigidly conform to either model. Most will "commend" the values of some films, and "critique" those of others. After all, like everybody else, religion scholars are prone to disagree about what constitutes a "good" or a "bad" movie. But my point here is that one's methodological assumptions may at the outset give one a bias either for or against popular film. As a result, one may either uncritically accept the values of the culture (arguing that they are as valid as any other), or uncritically reject those same values (arguing that nothing good can come out of Hollywood). And I do not think that one can avoid this question by claiming to bracket value judgments while one
examines popular culture, as one's values will still affect how one views the phenomenon, implicitly or otherwise.

There is a parallel here with the study of non-Christian religions by western Christian scholars of religion. It is only recently that western theologians and historians of religion have been able to enter into genuine dialogue with other religions, listening to what they are saying rather than uncritically rejecting their views or uncritically accepting them (usually without really understanding them, in either case). I would argue that the study of popular film by religion scholars is at a similar place, as it is only very recently that they have begun to seriously examine how the whole range of popular films function, religiously and culturally. And yet the question still lurks in the background as to whether this popular filmic religion should be accepted in tolerance or torn down like an idol.

Many have tended towards the latter view; but I will argue it is too easy to condemn without analyzing the texts of popular film, and perhaps there is something to commend in them even as we critique them. I will argue that it is possible to balance the two approaches insofar as the films themselves can be considered both forms of viable religion, and ideology. We do not need to decide which "meaning" is fundamental, as many may exist in the same film in an aporial and not entirely rational fusion.
First let us examine those who "commend" popular film. In this view, one seeks to appreciate the values of popular film as a valid expression of the culture they mirror. As Catherine Albanese has observed in regard to the study of religion and American popular culture in general, no American scholar of popular culture can exist outside of the culture she or he describes, and so there are no "Olympian heights," of superior knowledge or taste, to which one might escape to level value judgments on the culture.¹ There is really no way to "bracket" value-judgments regarding one's own culture, so that the scholar (as participant/observer of it) will probably at least tacitly accept its values - unless he or she consciously rejects them.

In regard to the study of film, religious scholars have accepted some of what films do for the culture, as they have experienced some sense of the power of the movies to convey a distinctive religious vision of the world. Thus Darrol Bryant writes that "the profoundly spiritual significance of film lies not so much in content or subject matter as in our experience of the film itself - an experience of order and harmony that stands in counterpoint to our experience of the everyday world."²

Michael Bird has said that a film can be a "hierophany," a manifestation of the sacred in our midst, drawing on Paul Tillich's view of culture as "open" to the transcendent which it may symbolically reflect.³ Even the earlier studies which were primarily interested in connections with Christianity mirrored this appreciation of the religious power of film. In 1970, Carl Skrade wrote that
"contemporary film-makers force their audiences not only to examine the structures of destruction and peer into the depths of the human predicament, but they also offer filmic forms of symbols of renewal."  

Recent studies of religion and film also evidence this approach. In *New Image of Religious Film*, editor John May notes that in viewing popular films as being worthy of theological consideration, the essays in the book acknowledge but regret the tendency of many theologians to "distrust" popular film. May, in contrast, argues that popular culture should be considered an "ally in the process of evangelization." Further, the predominantly Roman Catholic authors in May's volume see film as expressing the sense of mystery and of the sacred to the modern world in an especially effective way. For example, Joseph Marty here claims that "cinema awakens homo religious" because:

"It brings back to life the sense of mystery by making us love what is not immediately perceivable, what is beyond appearance and evidence. It suggests the invisible ... Thus, cinema binds us again with the poetic and religious expression of humanity ... Everything that is human, every relationship to the world and to nature, treated artistically by the cinema becomes a poem, a tale, a re-reading, a proposal of meaning, a celebration - in short, something that resembles a first religious step."

Another example of a collection of essays which includes some that "commend" the religious aspects of popular films is *Screening the Sacred: Religion, Myth, and Ideology in Popular American Film*, edited by Joel Martin and Conrad Ostwalt. In this volume there are a number of articles which indicate some appreciation for the
"mythologies" of popular film. Thus Avent Childress Beck writes of *Platoon* that the film is: "a mythic reinvention of the war that displaces grand historical statement on the involvement of the United States with an assertion instead of the primacy of an individual's or a small group's religious or psychological experience of the war" so that "in dark theaters, we are treated to the balms of religious myth; in the case of *Platoon*, to the ordered familiarities and emotive comfort of the Christian narrative."\(^7\)

Similarly, in the same volume, Caron Schwartz Ellis writes in regard to Science Fiction films which feature "saviors" from the sky that "our spacemen are important to us. They give us hope in a world in which our vision of the stars is obscured by pollution and the potential for nuclear holocaust."\(^8\) And Andrew Gordon's essay, written in 1978, analyzes the mythological form of *Star Wars* (which George Lucas developed out of Joseph Campbell's work) and so argues that the film is a "myth for our times." He then concludes:

"The fact is that each generation must create its own myths and heroes or regenerate those of the past. We are in a period in which the heroes have been cast down through such national catastrophes as Vietnam and Watergate, when the lines between good and evil grow cloudy, and when sexual identities have been redefined by the women's movement. Meanwhile, we have created a machine world for ourselves, a world that seems drained of spiritual values, a world in which we feel impotent and alien. We desperately need a renewal of faith in ourselves as Americans, as good guys on the world scene, as men and women, as human beings who count, and so we return to the simpler patterns of the past."\(^9\)
It is Gordon's remarks in particular which show the problematic nature of this sort of analysis. In being ready to applaud the fact that the film makes the viewer "feel good," he has concluded it is valuable precisely because it offers an easy dualism between good and evil, so avoiding the ambiguity of world politics and feminism. Americans fall into this sort of dualism easily enough in any case. Should one commend those films which encourage in our "popular culture" a dualistic attitude of "us versus them"? Are such films flawed in seeking to avoid any challenge to our hegemonic structures? It can be asked whether Star Wars really does this (or whether it only does this), but the question here is, are the values Gordon cites really the sort one should uncritically accept as an aspect of popular film?

This question leads to the other type of approach to the values of popular films, and it is probably the more common among scholars of religion. Drawing on liberationist and feminist critiques of hegemonic discourse, religious scholars trained in these approaches have viewed popular American films as a prime example of that which secures and perpetuates ideology in America. As scholars of religion, they have been able to identify the theological or mythological forms used to secure this ideology. This approach has also been able to draw on much in film studies proper, as ideological critique of popular film is a well-established method in that field. Again from Screening the Sacred, Joel Martin's treatment of Rocky engages in this sort of analysis by viewing the film as one which scapegoats blacks
as the cause of America's economic problems. The film appealed to white working-class Americans precisely because it engages in this sort of racism which "aggressively and ideologically reinterprets recent history." Similarly, Janice Hocker Rushing interprets *Aliens* as an anti-feminist film which pits the "Good Mother/goddess" against the "Bad Mother/monster/goddess" and so reaffirms conservative visions of femininity which have bifurcated the feminine consciousness and so stigmatized certain types of women who do not accept their "proper" role in the patriarchy.

Brandon Scott has also critiqued the ideology of popular films in his book *Hollywood Dreams and Biblical Stories*. His method is to establish a dialogue between the Bible and popular film and so he juxtaposes texts from both "canons" in regard to particular themes (e.g., gender, war, apocalyptic, etc.). He shows that the mythology transmitted by popular film works to legitimate (for example) violence and revenge (in the Dirty Harry films), racism (in The Birth of a Nation and Gone with the Wind), and female embeddedness (in Mr. Mom and Fatal Attraction). In this sense, mythology functions as ideology, as it reinforces cultural hegemonies by suppressing conflict through an overarching narrative structure. Here Scott is drawing on the work of Roland Barthes (as expressed in his book, *Mythologies*, which has influenced numerous film theorists). Scott also cites Claude Levi-Strauss' understanding of myth, which lies behind Barthes'
application of the notion to popular culture. In Levi-Strauss' view, cited by Scott, "the purpose of myth is to provide a logical model capable of overcoming contradiction (an impossible achievement if, as it happens, the contradiction is real)." We use myths to hide contradictions in the beliefs of our societies. As film genre analysis sees it, the film western, for example, mediates the contradiction between civilization and savagery in American society. That is, we approve of violence in our need to keep order. But the contradiction is overcome in film when the violence is evacuated from civilization after its occurrence: hence the need for the hero to leave after he saves the family in *Shane, The Searchers*, and innumerable other westerns.

Although myth may be the dominant form in popular film, Scott also recognizes that popular films sometimes challenge and even subvert the myths of society. For example, he analyzes Bronco Billy as a myth-subverting western, and *Private Benjamin* as a film which attacks the myth of female embeddedness - though one might note that it does so by reinforcing myths about the military. John May has also noted that non-mythological films exist, and he draws a parallel between these and the form of parable (drawing on John Dominic Crossan's work), in that such films do not reassure us but challenge us to change our world-view. He cites the work of Kubrick and Altman as examples of this form of parabolic cinema.
Margaret Miles, in her book, *Seeing and Believing: Religion and Values in the Movies*, evidences yet another approach by a scholar of religious studies. She utilizes a cultural studies (rather than a textual-based) approach to assess the values projected by films within the socio-politico-cultural matrix in which the film is produced, distributed, and seen. In doing so she seeks to avoid the automatic rejection of the values of the movies (which so often is the approach of conservative religion) as well as some of the assumptions of some ideological critics. And yet, even though she claims she wishes to avoid "cultural pessimism," her analysis draws considerably on ideological criticism in its rejection of the values of popular film. Out of all the films evaluated in her book, Miles seems able to approve the values only of one: *Daughters of the Dust* (1992). And this one is hardly typical of popular films as it was an independent film made by an African-American woman.

Even films such as *Jesus of Montreal*, *Thelma and Louise*, and *Jungle Fever*, which could all be seen as challenging hegemonic structures, finally end up in Miles' analysis as films which make white males comfortable and do not deliver on the challenges they begin. In her analysis, the cultural context in which such films are produced and received, as well as the content of the film images, disqualify them from being legitimate sources of values. "The many choices made in the production of a film," she writes in conclusion, "often undercut the radical
topic filmmakers intended to present sympathetically," thus indicating the "profound conservativism" of Hollywood films.\textsuperscript{27} The main value of popular films therefore lies merely in their ability to articulate the problems and anxieties of society, not to provide solutions.\textsuperscript{28}

Miles' tendency to reject the values of almost all popular films and to embrace mainly independent films made outside the Hollywood system also mirrors a tendency of ideological criticism. Popular films tend to be lumped together as ideological, largely due to the fact that they are created by a major American capitalist industry which is more interested in profit and producing pleasing fantasies than in making challenging and subversive art films. This judgment can be traced to the analysis of "mass culture" developed by Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, German intellectuals of the Frankfurt School who fled Nazi Germany only to come to Hollywood. Ready to see the seeds of totalitarianism everywhere, they viewed all Hollywood films as commodities of capitalism which injected their ideologies into passive audiences, discouraging thought or questioning of authority. In fact, Adorno and Horkheimer viewed all popular films as having basically the same plot and the same characters, as mass production eliminated any significant artistic individuality of the filmmakers.\textsuperscript{29} The only films which could be viewed as legitimate were avant-garde art films made
outside the Hollywood system, as these did not participate in its decadence but could critique it.

In spite of the fact that the study of film has developed beyond Adorno and Horkheimer's analyses, many film theorists have been unable to shake their view that popular film is by nature ideological and that only avant-garde cinema has value. But Pierre Bourdieu has argued that this denigration of popular film is just another form of elitism, as cultural elites reject the taste of the "masses" in order to defend their own tastes, and hence secure their own cultural hegemony as the supposedly "legitimate" evaluators of culture.

Besides being a not-too-subtle form of classism, this dualism between "popular" and "avant-garde" over-generalized about the content of films. If one is to evaluate popular film fairly, one cannot force a monolithic judgment on it without reference to individual films. Sometimes ideological film analysts are so certain of the content of the films they are discussing that they utilize a priori categories of interpretation which are in principle non-falsifiable and ignore details of the individual films; e.g., in Barbara Creed's psychoanalytic feminist analysis, all movie monsters are symbols of the feminine (because the female is defined as 'monstrous' by our culture), even when the monsters are literally male in the film narrative. This sort of analysis has determined what the film has said before ever
examining the text, and so has identified all popular film with ideology rather than letting popular films speak for themselves.

This is not to say that all ideological film critics over-generalize in this way, nor to suggest that the religion scholars cited here have necessarily done so in every case. Rather, my purpose is to point out the danger present in ideological criticism if it is the primary method of interpretation. Just as Andrew Gordon's mythological analysis of *Star Wars* (see fn. 9, above) demonstrates the dangers of uncritical acceptance of the visions of popular film, so ideological critique may fall into an uncritical rejection of the worldview of popular film. Many interpreters have engaged in forms of both types of methods, and so have balanced them; but what principles should determine when one method is employed, and when the other? What criteria found in the films themselves might assist us in deciding whether to make peace or war on a particular film? Is it all just a matter of "taste" based on idiosyncrasies of our own worldviews, or are there principles that can guide the religious interpreter of film in regard to this question?

I would suggest that another look at the idea of "myth" may help solve this puzzle. Although mythology has been identified with ideology by some (e.g. Roland Barthes), even in following Levi-Strauss's basic definition of myth one need not conflate mythology with the original Marxist sense of ideology (as that which maintains hegemony). Myth holds together contradictions that cannot be mediated
logically, but those contradictions are not always or merely accepted in order to conserve hegemonic structures. The Christian myth of the atonement holds together the aporia of a just-yet-loving God. How can God avoid sanctioning sin, and yet forgive it? The myth of God's Son dying for our sins is designed to overcome this aporia, but it does not do so in an entirely rational way. Though Anselm and others have tried to reduce the myth to a series of logical axioms, the effort has never been fully successful; one cannot logically explain how one person's death can pay for another's sins. There is something irreducible about the myth, the narrative of the story itself, which does not allow itself to be fully "explained" by any doctrine. Hence there has been no "authoritative" doctrine of the atonement in the history of Christian thought, and rival views have stood side by side.\textsuperscript{33} This could be said of all religious myths, and the newer narrative theologies would support this non-rational mythological core of religion as essential to its nature. Indeed, it has been observed that there is something about classical narrative itself which contains a contradiction, as it seeks to resolve a conflict and so "end" - but in reality, there would be no end, as more events would transpire after the story finishes, upsetting the neat conclusion.\textsuperscript{34}

All narrative then asserts a myth of wholeness which does not jar with our experiences in life. However, this does not in itself imply the reinforcement of hegemonic power structures; it only shows that we need the illusion of myth to
make sense of our lives, which do not conform to the neatness of narrative. Myths can then exercise a positive function for societies by giving us a meaningful structure to live by, hopes to aspire to, ideas to believe in. *Star Wars*, for example, is not merely a movie that reinforces ideological dualism. It promotes a cosmic confidence in reality as governed by a higher power in which we can share, in spite of evidence to the contrary. Myths seek to reconcile the disparities and contradictions in our experience not by eliminating them, but by holding them together in a paradoxical and non-rationalizable fusion. And although myths may be inherently conservative of culture, cultures do need conserving and not simply critiquing.

Of course, there are times when popular film critiques itself, at least to some extent (as Scott and others have observed). At this level, the myth exposes some of its own aporial nature, even though this is usually suppressed by the end of the film. Still, in raising questions about itself, the myth grows and develops to incorporate the changing values of society. This also serves to conserve society (which myths do best) but in this case by allowing the myth to stretch with society as it seeks to develop its values. In this way, films of the 50's and 60's began to critique racism, even though the issues were dealt with in a carefully controlled fashion. For example, the harmonious liberal vision of interracial romance expressed in Stanley Kramer's *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* (1967) is a far cry from the critique of the
same in Spike Lee's *Jungle Fever* (1991), as Kramer's vision belittles racial tension through the myth of integration and assimilation. Yet Kramer's vision is also equally far from the overtly racist depiction of predatory black men attacking chaste white women in D. W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation* (1915). The values of films develop as society develops, and they reflect and encourage that development.

Affirming the importance of film as myth, however, should not erase the need to see film as ideology. In reality, films are both. As films already contain contradictory messages within them - as they both support and subvert established structures, or conserve society's values even while they critique them - so also the multiple texts within a film may be seen as conserving and developing society's values in a valid way, as well as illegitimately preserving power structures which ought to be dismantled. I would borrow a concept from my own Lutheran theological background to elucidate this, that of the Christian as "simul justus et peccator." According to this idea, the Christian has been justified by God even as and while a sinner, and so can be a subject and vehicle of God's grace in spite of human imperfection. Similarly, popular films may act as windows to transcendence which express messages seen as valuable by those of us in religious studies, as they open us to new visions or reassert what is valid in old ones - and films may also support class, race, and gender structures which deserve deconstruction. They may do both simultaneously, even within the same film, so that it is not a question of
dichotomizing "good" vs. "bad" films, or "popular" vs. "avant-garde." The same film can convey both sorts of messages, and although some readers will be more sensitive to one than the other, neither can be discounted as present.

This does not mean all films are created equal. We may regard some as more or less valid than others. But we need at least to accept the possibility that any film can convey valid messages even while it contributes to ideology. And the presence of ideological content in a film does not somehow invalidate what the film might be said legitimately to accomplish as mythology of a popular religion which preserves values of society at least some of us might commend. Both the myth and the ideology are present in the film, and neither can be regarded as "the" fundamental meaning.

In evaluating a popular film, then, we should look at the ways in which it may provide not only an ideology, but a mythology which can provide the basis for meaningful life and action--in spite of, or even (like religion?) perhaps because of, its illusionism and idealism.


2 M. Darrol Bryant, "Cinema, Religion, and Popular Culture" in Religion in Film, John R. May and Michael Bird, eds. (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1982), p. 112.

3 Michael Bird, "Film as Hierophany," in Religion in Film, pp. 322.


8 Caron Schwartz Ellis, "With Eyes Uplifted: Space Aliens as Sky Gods" in Screening the Sacred, p. 93.

9 Andrew Gordon, "Star Wars: A Myth for Our Times" in Screening the Sacred, p. 82.

10 Joel W. Martin, "Redeeming America: Rocky as Ritual Racial Drama" in Screening the Sacred, p. 130.


13 Scott, pp. 158-165.

14 Scott, p. 247. Numerous other films receive this indictment, including Working Girl and Baby Boom.


18 Scott, pp. 118-123.

19 Scott, pp. 225-227

20 John R. May, "Visual Story and the Religious Interpretation of Film" in Religion in Film, pp. 32-33.


23 She rejects Laura Mulvey's thesis, for example (proposed in an article which influenced almost all subsequent feminist film analysis, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," Screen 16, 3 (1975), pp. 6-18), that in order to challenge the values of mainstream film, one must "destroy" the pleasure produced by it. Miles finds Mulvey's approach unacceptable as she believes it to be based on the ascetic notion that only what has overcome pleasure has value. Miles, p.10.

24 Miles, p. 22.

25 Miles, pp. 127-134.

26 For Miles' analysis of Jesus, see pp. 40-47; Thelma, pp. 141-149; Jungle, pp. 158-167.

27 Miles, p. 190.

28 Miles, pp. 192-193.


30 Mark Jancovich gives this criticism of recent screen theory (Jancovich, "Screen Theory," in Approaches to Popular Film, p. 126, 144, and passim).

31 Joanne Hollows and Mark Jancovich, "Introduction: Popular Film and Cultural Distinctions," in Approaches to Popular Film, pp. 4-5.

