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## Religion and Film: Cinema and the Re-creation of the World (2nd edition)

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# Religion and Film: Cinema and the Re-creation of the World (2nd edition)

## **Abstract**

This is a book review of S. Brent Plate's *Religion and Film: Cinema and the Re-creation of the World*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017).

## **Author Notes**

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S. Brent Plate, *Religion and Film: Cinema and the Re-creation of the World*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition. New York: Columbia University Press, 2017.

The 2017 edition of Brent Plate's *Religion and Film: Cinema and the Re-creation of the World* responds to both the technological and intellectual changes which have emerged since the first edition was published in Wallflower Press' "Short Cuts" series in 2008. In the preface to the first edition, Plate noted three "waves" of film-and-religion studies: the first wave began in the late 1960s, mainly rooted in Tillichian approaches to European arthouse cinema; the second wave was a shift in the late 1980s towards religious and cultural studies approaches of Hollywood films via literary-based methodologies; and the third wave moved away from literary models toward truer appreciation of the cinematic medium.<sup>1</sup> In the decade since Plate wrote this preface, there is an observable "fourth wave" emerging (though not yet cresting), one marked by the following distinctions: a dismantling of the dichotomy between "arthouse" and "popular" films alongside an expanding awareness and engagement with both world cinema and Hollywood entertainment as legitimate sites for theological inquiry;<sup>2</sup> a renewal of phenomenological approaches and audience reception, giving greater attention to viewers' affect and emotions, as well as bodily responses;<sup>3</sup> and an emphasis on cinematic aesthetics in theological considerations, noting film styles and techniques particularly in sound, cinematography, and production design.<sup>4</sup> Plate's updated edition of *Religion and Film* fits squarely within this fourth wave of film-and-religion scholarship as it pays attention to the world-making bodily cinematic experience. If cinema acts as "*a material media practice* that is constantly embodied and re-embodied in and through bodies, time, and space" (X), then, Plate suggests, we will need to take its mediated form seriously. While I have admittedly only skimmed the original shorter edition to write this review, this new standalone

version is erudite yet accessible, with a truly inclusive and knowledgeable appreciation of both cinema and religion.

Plate structures his book in three “heuristic sections” which move from the creation of films to the film-viewing experience and conclude with the audience’s experience beyond cinema. Although Plate doesn’t mention the philosopher, this outline neatly corresponds to Paul Ricoeur’s phenomenological hermeneutics and his descriptions of the world *behind, in, and in front of* the text. In Part 1, “Before the Show: Pulling the Curtain on the Wizard,” Plate aims to address film form by “juxtaposing film theory with theories of religion” (15-16), addressing the significance of myth-making, space, and time in both filmic and religious settings. Part 2, “During the Show: Attractions and Distractions” turns from form to viewers’ reception and experiences, what happens “in the movement from screened film to sensuous, perceiving bodies” (17). In the final section, “After the Show: Re-Created Realities,” Plate examines how films have been appropriated within religious rituals and everyday human practices, such as the creation of *Star Wars*-themed weddings, pilgrimages to cinematic production sites (e.g. traveling to New Zealand mainly to view “Middle Earth” from the *Lord of the Rings* films), or the religious dimension of a cult classic like *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*. Overall, the book has a well-crafted and intentional structure, with a logical flow between sections even as many chapters would work as stand-alone essays. In this, the book would serve well in university classroom settings either assigned as a textbook or through choosing key chapters to highlight particular aspects of the film-and-religion relationship.

For Plate, “films create worlds” which “actively reshape elements of the lived world and twist them in new ways” (2). Indeed, Plate’s stated hermeneutic is to view religion and cinema through “the lens of worldmaking” (15), and he contends that “afilmic and diegetic realities in the early twenty-first century cannot be separated” (17). In other words, we live and move in a

cinematic world—it is never just a world on a screen, but a world we inhabit. This world-creating dynamic of cinema and film-viewing sounds quite congruent with notable film-philosophy scholarship, namely Gilles Deleuze’s two books on cinema, *The Movement-Image* and *The Time-Image*.<sup>5</sup> In the latter, Deleuze posits that “the cinema does not just present images, it surrounds them with a world.”<sup>6</sup> Moreover, Deleuze suggests that “cinema had a special relationship with [religious] belief,” that it has a “Catholic quality” which has the power to “restore our belief in the world.”<sup>7</sup> Building heavily on Deleuze, Daniel Yacavone’s *Film Worlds: A Philosophical Aesthetics of Cinema* argues that films create a “singular, holistic, relational, and fundamentally referential reality” which “possesses pronounced sensory, symbolic, and affective dimensions.”<sup>8</sup> Despite these parallels and the prominence of Deleuze in contemporary film theory scholarship, Plate’s book is noticeably absent of references to Deleuze, Yacavone, or other film theorists and film-philosophers who have written extensively on the “worlds” of cinema. Indeed, while the book is a strong contribution to film-and-religion scholarship, the lack of engagement with some key relevant publications in film theory and film-philosophy is worth noting. For instance, in Chapter 4, “Religious Cinematics” (one of the book’s strongest sections), Plate considers bodily responses to the cinematic experience via the phenomenology of Maurice Merleau-Ponty. He suggests that “sense perception is the medium of the body, and the sounds and images of the film medium are engaged by bodily sense receptors, most specifically the ears and eyes [...] The medium of sense perception is the corollary to the medium of film. There is no such thing as cinema without both” (101). That is, we don’t simply *watch* a film with our eyes; we *perceive* a film via our entire human body. This awareness of the bodily dynamic of the cinematic experience is laudable, especially Plate’s exploration of bodily responses to depictions of death in both the horror genre and Stan Brakhage’s avant-garde cinema. Yet while Plate cites film theorists Christian Metz and Carl

Plantinga, Vivian Sobchack's seminal work, *The Address of the Eye* is absent from Plate's interlocutors, although there is a very brief nod to Sobchack's *Carnal Thoughts* (117). This is unfortunate, as Plate is essentially doing here what Sobchack already did twenty-five years earlier in 1992 via her Merleau-Ponty-based exploration of the "film body" and viewers' bodily experiences of cinema. Compare the following quote from Sobchack with Plate's quote from above:

We see and understand a film not merely as a *visible object* (some 'thing' already-seen, already-constituted), but also as a performative and communicative *act of vision* (a now-seeing, a now-constituting activity) that implicates a *viewing subject* (an always-perceptive and always-constitutive enworlded lived-body) engaged in the act of signifying [...] Seeing is an act performed by both the film (which sees a world as visible images) and the viewer (who sees the film's visible images both as a world and the seeing of a world).<sup>9</sup>

Between her consideration of film-worlds, embodiment, and the cinematic medium, film-and-religion scholars would do well to be aware of Sobchack's relevance for understanding the tactile synaesthetic (or cinesthetic) experience.<sup>10</sup> Perhaps the absence of some of these important film publications (Deleuze, Sobchack) is due either to giving attention to one form or methodology instead of another—indeed, Plate often wisely chooses depth over breadth, giving focused consideration to a film rather than offering a generalized or wordy overview—or a restraint in word counts and chapter lengths. Even as I recognize that I am critiquing the work for what is *absent*, not *present*, the book's stated emphasis on "worlds" and "bodily experiences" demands a demonstration of awareness of the wider field, and Plate's arguments would be bolstered by the addition of these theorists.

One major contribution Plate's book offers to the film-and-religion conversation is his lengthy consideration of cinematic ethics in Chapter 5, "The Face, The Close-Up, and Ethics." Building on both neurobiology and Emmanuel Levinas' ethics as a "spiritual optics," Plate

wonderfully weaves together seemingly disparate concepts and films all together in a consideration of the human face and its ethical demands. The section (142-150) on “cinematic ethics” (based on Robert Sinnerbrink’s excellent book of the same name) builds on the “Levinasian turn” in film theory by bringing the religious dimension into the conversation. He suggests, per Levinas, that the face-to-face encounter with the Other via close-ups of an actor’s face does more than simply trigger our emotions. Indeed, the cinematic face of the Other “begins to trigger affinities and perhaps ultimately empathy, and thus supplies a grounding for ethical viewing in the cinema that continues to have effects beyond the screen” (144). Plate observes that many secular film theorists “point toward something like a practice of watching” films in the same vein as St. Ignatius’ spiritual exercises or the Buddhist Eightfold Path, in that these films can genuinely edify us and make us better people (144). Though worded modestly, Plate offers a conclusion which I believe demands our attention:

I do not wish to sound so naively optimistic (though maybe a little so) as to imagine that the world would be a better place if we all watched experimental and “world” films more often, but one way or another there are strong ethical and transformational components involved, particularly as religious cinematics has to do with how our bodies relate to the screen, and to the bodies of others off-screen. (149)

I concur with Plate’s optimism about cinema’s potential for human flourishing and moral guidance. While much of yesteryears’ religious criticism and publications on the ethics of cinema focus on its potentially negative influence—how film is morally depraved or distracts audiences from religious awareness—I wonder (along with Plate) how much better off our present political and cultural climate would be if we were open to cinematic experiences which allowed us to see the world via the Other’s viewpoint. In recent years, filmmakers like Asghar Farhadi, Ava DuVernay, Joshua Oppenheimer, and Luc and Jean-Pierre Dardenne have all created masterful cinematic works which provoke ethical considerations without being didactic or overtly religious.

Yet these films foster empathy, and perhaps even can foster ethical dialogue in an increasingly polarized world. As film critic Roger Ebert famously put it, films are “like a machine that generates empathy”:

If it's a great movie, it lets you understand a little bit more about what it's like to be a different gender, a different race, a different age, a different economic class, a different nationality, a different profession, different hopes, aspirations, dreams and fears. It helps us to identify with the people who are sharing this journey with us. And that, to me, is the most noble thing that good movies can do and it's a reason to encourage them and to support them and to go to them.<sup>11</sup>

Perhaps, following Plate and Ebert, good experiences with good movies may transform us into good people, and could even re-create our world for the better.

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<sup>1</sup> What Plate and other Anglophone scholars tend to miss regarding the history of the academic field of religion-and-film are European film theorists who were already writing on the sacredness and sacramentality of cinema. While Plate and others (e.g. John Lyden) begin the timeline in the late 1960s or early 1970s, French film theorists such as André Bazin, Amédée Ayfre, and Henri Agel were actively publishing about God, religion, and the sacredness of cinema beginning in the 1950s. See, for example, Henri Agel, *Le Cinéma a-t-il une âme?* (Paris: Les Editions du Cerf, 1952) and Henri Agel, *Le Cinéma et le sacré*, (Paris: Les Editions du Cerf, 1953 [2<sup>nd</sup> edition 1961]).

<sup>2</sup> See especially Antonio D. Sison's *World Cinema, Theology and the Human: Humanity in Deep Focus* (New York: Routledge, 2012). See also Sheila J. Nayar, *The Sacred and the Cinema: Reconfiguring the 'Genuinely' Religious Film* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2012), and Matthew P. John, *Film as Cultural Artifact: Religious Criticism of World Cinema* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2017).

<sup>3</sup> See Zachary Settle and Taylor Worley, eds. *Dreams, Doubt, and Dread: The Spiritual in Film* (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2016) and Stefanie Knauss, “The Sensuality of Sense: Reflections on the Bodily Dimension of Filmic and Religious Experience,” in *Reconfigurations: Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Religion in a Post-Secular Society*, eds. Stefanie Knauss and Alexander D. Ornella (Vienna: LIT Verlag, 2007), 197-216.

<sup>4</sup> See Kutter Callaway, *Scoring Transcendence: Contemporary Film Music as Religious Experience* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2012) and Crystal Downing, *Salvation from Cinema: The Medium is the Message* (London: Routledge, 2016).

<sup>5</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986); and *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989).

<sup>6</sup> Deleuze, *Cinema 2*, 68.

<sup>7</sup> Deleuze, *Cinema 2*, 171-172.

<sup>8</sup> Daniel Yacavone, *Film Worlds: A Philosophical Aesthetics of Cinema* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014), xiv.

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<sup>9</sup> Vivian Sobchack, *The Address of the Eye: A Phenomenology of Film Experience* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 56.

<sup>10</sup> Sobchack has also written specifically on transcendence, embodiment, and cinema; see “Embodying Transcendence: On the Literal, the Material, and the Cinematic Sublime,” *Material Religion: The Journal of Objects, Art and Belief* 4:2 (2008), 194–203. For other relevant film theory publications on bodies and cinema, see Laura U. Marks, *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000) and Jennifer M. Barker, *The Tactile Eye: Touch and the Cinematic Experience* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009).

<sup>11</sup> “Video: Roger Ebert on Empathy,” *RogerEbert.com*, 4 April 2018, <https://www.rogerebert.com/empathy/video-roger-ebert-on-empathy>.

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