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Representing Religion in Film

Abstract

This is a book review of Tenzan Eaghll and Rebekka King, eds., *Representing Religion in Film* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2022).

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Author Notes

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Eaghll, Tenzan and Rebekka King, *Representing Religion in Film* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2022).

If this ambitious new volume edited by Tenzan Eaghll and Rebekka King were a movie, it might begin with the words “A Russell McCutcheon production.” It is part of a series called “Critiquing Religion: Discourse, Culture, and Power” edited by Craig Martin and many of the contributors are connected to the North American Association for the Study of Religion (NAASR). It also opens with an epigraph from McCutcheon: “When using films in our religion courses, then, we should not be concerned with teaching students to recognize the sacred in its celluloid manifestations but to see in religious systems as well as in our own society’s films the all-too-common mechanisms of social formation.”

The introduction and conclusion to this volume largely reproduce Eaghll’s article “Ideological Blindspot in the Academic Study of Religion and Film,” that appeared in 2019 in *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion*. According to Eaghll, the first time he and King taught religion and film classes they “were shocked by the state of scholarship in the field” (190). In their view, nearly all the available material took an approach that was either theological or “mythological,” which is to say, one that “essentializes” religion or posits religion as some sort of *sui generis* phenomenon that transcends culture. “Mythic approaches” to religion are actually part of a “crypto-theological paradigm” (12). Eaghll identifies not only such figures as Mircea Eliade and Joseph Campbell as “mythic” approaches, but also anthropologist Clifford Geertz and sociologist Peter Berger (6). Furthermore, Eaghll assert that these mythological approaches to

religion are not an oversight but “an active effort to maintain a certain hegemonic view of religion as *sui generis*—implying a unique, distinct, or sacred domain of meaning” (4).

Eaghl refers to both the theological and mythological approaches to the study of religion and film as “film as religion.” They propose an alternative approach that is neither theological nor mythological, but “ideological,” and that takes seriously J.Z. Smith’s observation that “there is no data for religion.” They call this approach “religion as film,” and its goal is to analyze how the category of “religion” is constructed and reified through film. This approach emphasizes “inviting students to consider how cinematic production creates the very content of religion in popular culture” (24). It analyzes not only the text of the film, but also responses from audiences, critics, and scholars. Eaghl feels that ideological approaches to religion and film have not only been ignored, but actively denigrated by contemporary scholarship that seeks “to preserve the sanctity of the category it faithfully privileges” (11). Accordingly, this volume is presented as “the first full-length exploration of the relationship between religion, film, and ideology” (xiii).

After reading the forward and the introduction, some readers might fear that the essays that follow are going to deconstruct films within an inch of their lives, reducing them to “postmodern mush.” But this is not the case. Contributors were asked to write chapters on recent “Hollywood” films. This was done both to distinguish this volume from previous books on religion and film, but also because “it is precisely in the big-budget popular films with a global reach that the dominant ideologies of contemporary culture are often concealed and disseminated” (xiv).

Teemu Taira examines Bill Maher's *Religulous* (2008) to analyze how the atheists construct a sense of identity in contradistinction to "religion," which is equated with irrationality.

James Dennis LoRusso deploys myth-theory to examine the ideology of capitalism in *The Secret of My Success* (1987) and *Joy* (2015). He demonstrates that while Joseph Campbell's theories mystify stories and serve the interests of the film industry, theorists such as Bruce Lincoln and Wendy Doniger are better equipped to interpret the ideological work myth performs.

Leslie Dorrough Smith considers the multi-racial casting in *A Wrinkle in Time* (2018), an adaptation of a 1960s science-fiction novel with elements of Christian mythology. Smith argues that the film's religious theme of the "power of love" functions as a "safety net" that encourages audiences to accept the directors' casting choices.

Malory Nye analyzes *Silence* (2016), Martin Scorsese's adaptation of a 1966 novel by Japanese Catholic Shūsaku Endō. In Nye's estimation, Scorsese failed to consider the larger themes of race and empire at stake in this story about Jesuit missionaries in Japan, and instead emphasizes the internal faith of the white protagonist.

Michael J. Altman dissects Wes Anderson's *The Darjeeling Limited* (2007). As the film's white protagonists tour India in search of spiritual renewal, they are simultaneously portrayed as "terrible people." This ambivalence around Orientalist fantasies and neocolonialist privilege, Altman argues, is the point of the film and an example of "hipster Orientalism."

Ting Guo examines *Cloud Atlas* (2012) and suggests it portrays the Buddhist notion of dependent arising in a way that emphasizes religious affect and the global circulation of religious

ideas, making the film a useful antidote to nihilistic interpretations of Buddhism offered by Slavoj Žižek and other Western philosophers.

Rebecca C. Bartel uses *The Wind Journeys* (2009) as a springboard for analyzing hybridity and the legacy of colonialism in Latin American culture. Bartel concludes that to consider cinematic depictions of “religion” in Latin America is to contemplate “a matrix of power upon which relations, connections, and disruptions can occur across and within contested spaces of transhistorical and transnational movements, in concert with the political and economic structures that generate the lived realities of religious expression” (126).

Matt Sheedy expresses optimism that *The Revenant* (2015) signals an important shift in the depiction of Indigenous Native Americans in Hollywood cinema by consciously upending such tropes as “the white savior,” “the helpless maiden,” and what he calls the “communing with spirits” trope.

Sean McCloud analyses *Hereditary* (2018), in which it is revealed that a seemingly complex gamut of health problems, toxic family dynamics, and tragic death faced by the protagonists are really all caused by a demon-summoning cult. McCloud argues that the conceit of this film mirrors larger discourses in which evil and misfortune are blamed on cults and similar villains because such scapegoating is preferable to facing the true complexity that gives rise to our problems.

Aaron Ricker uses *Hellboy* (2004) as a case study to challenge the way religion scholars have approached “apocalyptic” films. Ricker argues apocalypse narratives generally purport to

reveal timeless and transcendent truths while actually erasing previous iterations of these narratives. Accordingly, scholars should stop accepting or affirming these films' claims of timelessness, but rather interrogate them as "situated ideological rewritings" (163). By doing so, scholars can more effectively see the complexity and real-world ideological implications of these films.

Beth Singler explores another apocalyptic text, James Cameron's *Terminator* franchise (1984-2019). Singler demonstrates how religious tropes like "judgement day" and messiahs are used as "affective resources" in these films, and how the franchise generates its own "religious" worldview in the form of real-world anxieties about artificial intelligence and attitudes toward the franchise's contradictory themes of fate and free will.

Lastly, Richard Newton reviews *Star Wars: The Last Jedi* (2017) directed by Rian Johnson. The original *Star Wars* trilogy (1977-1983) is one of the most studied texts by religion and film scholars, but the sequels upset some fans and the 2017 installment was arguably the most controversial film in the franchise. Hostile responses from fans call for a re-assessment of the purported "mythic" themes in *Star Wars*. Newton argues that *The Last Jedi* demonstrates how myths are dependent upon continued communal engagement: "a myth is useful only if people deem it worthy of telling again and again" (176-177). Furthermore, claims by fans that first George Lucas and then Johnson "ruined" *Star Wars*, demonstrate that "the illusion of coherence" makes myths more compelling.

A final essay by Eaghll addresses how to design courses with an ideological approach to religion and film. Eaghll describes how his students study a film each week and read both a “film as religion” analysis of it and an ideological interpretation. Significantly, this curriculum calls for retaining some of the theological and mythical material even while incorporating ideological approaches. Indeed, it seems it would be hard for students to comprehend what an ideological approach to religion and film is without also studying what it is not. The question then becomes, how *much* of the ideological approach ought faculty to include in religion and film courses.

This book will not be for everyone. After all, many religious studies courses still teach Eliade and Huston Smith, more or less uncritically. The instructors teaching those courses are simply not going to be interested in theoretical interventions made in this volume. Eaghll also acknowledges that some of his opponents may not recognize the kind of ideological analysis he is doing as religious studies (7). Furthermore, some religion and film scholars have advocated moving away from Hollywood in favor of foreign and independent films.

Additionally, some scholars working in religion and film may feel that Eaghll, in his efforts to distinguish their approach from previous books on religion and film, ends up making some straw-person arguments. His analysis does not address such key scholars as William L. Blizek, M. Gail Hamner, and Adele Reinhartz. Also, excluding the consideration of scholarship that focuses on non-Christian and non-American film also excludes work that produces the critical approach he is advocating for, such as many of the essays in Lyden, *The Routledge Companion to Religion and Film* (2009) and Plate, *Representing Religion in World Cinema: Filmmaking, Mythmaking,*

Culture Making (2003); Nacim Pak-Shiraz, *Shi'i Islam in Iranian Cinema: Religion and Spirituality in Film* (2011); Rachel Dwyer, *Filming the Gods: Religion and Indian Cinema* (2006); Sharon A. Suh, *Silver Screen Buddha: Buddhism in Asian and Western Film* (2015); and Nathan Abrams, *The New Jew in Film: Exploring Jewishness and Judaism in Contemporary Cinema* (2012).

Eaghl narrowl contrasts the work of Conrad Ostwalt, John Lyden, and S. Brent Plate—all major figures in religion and film—with that of Russel McCutcheon and Bruce Lincoln. He endorses Lincoln's approach to film as a place where narratives intersect, thereby "creating worlds of meaning through stories" (16). He adds, "If there is anything in their [McCutcheon and Lincoln's] respective analysis that might get called "religion," it is simply sharing stories in a communal setting, which is not a *sui generis* domain of meaning but a general social practice" (17). However, the distinction between these two camps may not be quite so stark. Plate's theory of religion and film seems to resemble Lincoln's "creating worlds of meaning through stories" more than some irreducible *sui generis* essence. Afterall, the subtitle of Plate's book on religion and film is *Cinema and the Re-Creation of the World*. Eaghl also writes that Plate "defines religion as a unique experience of the 'transcendent' and aligns it with an experience of the divine" (18). However, on the page cited from Plate's essay, "Religion/Literature/Film: Toward a Religious Visuality of Film" from the journal *Literature and Theology*, Plate doesn't explicitly say this. He is actually discussing director Paul Schrader's book *Transcendental Style in Film* and notes that "transcendence" is a concept that has interested theologians and religion scholars as well as

directors. Eaghll reads Plate as rejecting ideological critiques of “transcendence,” dismissing them as “postmodernism.” I read Plate as suggesting these critiques have some merit. Plate ends this paragraph: “Some of the questions about religion and film should revolve around issues *not* related to immaterial transcendence.” Eaghll is also selective in his reading of Plate and excludes mention of two of his edited works that include a broad selection of essays that support an ideological critique, the four volume *Film and Religion* (2017) from Routledge’s “Critical Concepts in Media and Cultural Studies” series, and *The Religion and Film Reader* (2007). This volume also did not look at the 2017 edition of *Cinema and the Re-Creation of the World*, which contains another hundred pages, or the 2019 second edition of Lyden’s *Film as Religion*, which includes a totally rewritten second half of the book with added ideological critique.

However, these issues of “what such-and-such religion scholar really meant” should not distract from the strength of the essays in this volume or the value of an ideological approach to religion and film. Anyone interested in this subfield will find useful analysis here of previously under-analyzed films. Those teaching courses on religion and film should also consider the arguments presented in this volume. Even those who disagree with the claim that the primary purpose of such classes is to reveal “mechanisms of social formation” can profit from checking their assumptions about what “religion” is and paying closer attention to how films work to construct this category.