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Animated Parables: A Pedagogy of Seven Deadly Sins and a Few Virtues

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Abstract

This is a book review of Terry Lindvall, *Animated Parables: A Pedagogy of Seven Deadly Sins and a Few Virtues* (Lexington Books/Fortress Academic, 2023).

Author Notes

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Lindvall, Terry, *Animated Parables: A Pedagogy of Seven Deadly Sins and a Few Virtues* (Lexington Books/Fortress Academic, 2023).

If you look up the definition of the word "parable" in the Oxford English Dictionary, you will find the following:

> An allegorical or metaphorical saying or narrative; an allegory, a fable, an apologue; a comparison, a similitude. Also: a proverb, a maxim; an enigmatic or mystical saying…a (usually realistic) story or narrative told to convey a moral or spiritual lesson or insight…an example or illustration, an exemplary case; a model, a lesson…a scornful speech, a taunt. Also: an object of scorn.[1]

That a single word is so large as to contain multitudes of genres may leave the reader puzzled. This puzzlement is actually intrinsic to a parable's form and function, for a parable is not meant to provide easy answers or simple solutions, but, as biblical scholar C.H. Dodd stated in his seminal definition, to "[arrest] the hearer by its vividness or strangeness, and [leave] the mind in sufficient doubt about [the parable's] precise application to tease it into active thought."[2] Terry Lindvall's *Animated Parables: A Pedagogy of Seven Deadly Sins and a Few Virtues* is in alignment with this definition in that it may arrest the reader's attention through Lindvall's vivid descriptions of a plethora of animated films, while nevertheless also leaving doubt in the reader's mind as to how the book's conclusions might be applied, or whether many of the included films are even "parables" at all.

The main strengths of *Animated Parables* are its structure and the myriad animated short films under consideration. As the subtitle implies, the book applies the "seven deadly sins" of Christian tradition as a heuristic device for categorizing the diversity of films Lindvall covers. Following two introductory chapters on parables as fables (Chapter 1) and the emergence of visual parables in paintings (Chapter 2), the remainder of the book unpacks filmic examples associated with each of the seven sins—pride, envy, wrath, sloth, avarice, gluttony, and lust, respectively—

before concluding with a chapter on evidence of the theological virtues of faith, hope, and love in animated films. Within each "vicious" chapter, Lindvall uses antecedent artistic works examining the seven vices—namely Pieter Bruegel the Elder's woodcuts, Hieronymus Bosch's illustrations, Edmund Spenser's *The Faerie Queene*, and Dante Alighieri's *Divine Comedy*—as common references and a hermeneutical lens. That is, Lindvall "reads" the films with Bruegel, Bosch, et al. clearly in view.

Lindvall demonstrates encyclopedic knowledge of animated films; the "Filmography" section in the book's Bibliography contains dozens of films from a wide variety of eras and artists. His descriptions and analyses of these films are vivid, witty, and insightful. A distinct asset of the book is Lindvall's inclusion of dozens of screenshots of the animated films under consideration, thus allowing the reader a literal glimpse into the aesthetics being analyzed. One of the difficulties in writing about film is the translation of a person's experience of a visual medium into a literary mode. Lindvall overcomes this obstacle through his rich descriptions accompanied by the illustrations. This, however, does lead to an unexpected drawback: when a film under analysis *doesn't* include a screenshot, the reader can feel the loss, and I often found myself having to search out and view the animated films (as well as the Bosch and Bruegel illustrations) in order to make better sense of Lindvall's film criticism. This remains a common challenge in the religion and film field—how do we write about a film when the reader may not have seen it first?—and Lindvall provides one possible avenue forward by including so many screenshots.

For Lindvall, the animated parable's rhetorical power is what makes it significant, yet the book's presentation of the genre's unique formal dimensions undercut this power. To paraphrase Roger Ebert, we must attend not only to *what* the parable is about, but *how* the parable is about it—the form and the function of parables are intertwined. In Chapter 1, Lindvall conflates the

genres of "parable" and "fable" when he states that "traditional parables and classic fables blend into each other" (p. 15). For Lindvall, "both parables and fables function as invented short stories containing moral or spiritual lessons" (p. 16). He does observe a distinction, that "parables mostly contain human characters only, while fables depict talking animals or natural elements," and he notes that the animated films he considers "differ from the parable in some fundamental ways" due to their more fantastical elements, such as cartoon talking animals or exaggerated and expressive aesthetics. Nevertheless, he continues to apply the label of "parable" to decidedly non-parabolic films (and sometimes non-cinematic works of art) without clarifying as to how or why the generic descriptor applies. If parable, fable, allegory, and analogy are all fundamentally synonymous, as Lindvall suggests,[3] why do such generic distinctions even exist? As I've argued elsewhere,[4] such formal conflation overlooks the unique dynamic structure and function of the parable—misunderstanding the form alters the parable's meaning, as the distinctions really do matter when making interpretations of these stories.

Later, in Chapter 2, Lindvall states that films "in the garb of a parable" will follow four rules: "They will be brief. They will be compelling (exciting), inviting a fresh angle. They will hint at some spiritual truth indirectly, breaking through defenses and skepticism. Finally, working subversively, these stories will make a difference, undermining dull attitudes, disorienting, and provoking (reorienting) fresh meanings … It is not their content, but their effect that matters most" (p. 61). This fourfold definition grows to six traits in the Conclusion when Lindvall notes the shared qualities between animated parables and the spoken parables of Christ in the Gospels: (1) mutual brevity, (2) interruption of expectations with surprise, (3) use of recognizable or familiar tropes, (4) beginning with a familiar opening scenario, (5) containing latent truth that requires active thought which is teased out through indirect communication, and (6) the frequent use of

comedy: "If one can see the joke of the log in one's eye, one can see the truth of the tale" (pp. 237–238). Lindvall also claims that feature-length films cannot be considered "parables" because they lack the key parabolic trait of *brevity*: "As features, they are not concise" (p. 61). While Lindvall does briefly acknowledge a few authors who *have* considered feature films as parables,[5] he doesn't engage with this scholarship beyond a few footnotes. Furthermore, he completely overlooks relatively recent academic articles, chapters, and books exploring the subject of film-as-parable, thus missing their insights and counterpoints.[6]

Even as the smorgasbord of referenced films is a unique feature of *Animated Parables*, it also presents significant obstacles, ones which the book does not overcome. The organization of animated parables in each chapter seems arbitrary and haphazard. Beyond the larger framing device of each chapter's vice, the films are not organized chronologically, geographically, generically, or thematically, making it very difficult to follow the logical train of thought. For instance, in the chapter on "sloth" (Chapter 7, pp. 135–137), Lindvall moves from Ruth Hayes' flip book *Sloth* (1988), to a paragraph quoting from Thomas Aquinas and C.S. Lewis about sloth, to Dorothy Sayers on sloth, to Dante's *Comedy*, to comic writer Wendy Wasserstein's book *Sloth* (2005), to a Disney animated film *The Three Little Pigs* (1933). Only one of these half-dozen referenced or analyzed works is an actual "animated film," and the only common denominator is the larger theme of "sloth." The train of thought leading from Hayes' flip book to *The Three Little Pigs* jumps the proverbial tracks. As another example, in a section from the chapter on "gluttony" (Chapter 9, pp. 170–173), the flow is as follows: a horrific animated film *Who's Hungry* (2009) about children kidnapped by a cannibalistic ice cream man as an example of gluttony; comments on St. Francis of Assisi's asceticism in contrast to St. Thomas Aquinas's "bulky" body; comments on the "chunky" characters in *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* (a live-action feature film) and

The Little Mermaid (another feature length film); a brief examination of another animated feature length film, *Cloudy with a Chance of Meatballs* (2009); quotes from G.K. Chesterton on Aquinas, what Lindvall calls "one fat man discoursing on another," bordering on body shaming; a description of the short animated film *Lady Fishbourne's Complete Guide to Better Table Manners* (1976) which includes questionable comments equating bulimia (an eating disorder) with gluttony (a sin)[7]; and, finally, an analysis of a Donald Duck cartoon, *Donald's Cousin Gus* (1939).

In the above examples, the line of reasoning is jarring and disorienting, but not in the manner of a parable—the evocative disequilibrating dimensions of a parable are intentional, and ought to lead to enlightenment and enrichment instead of simply confusion. Many of the above included cultural artifacts are neither parables (per Lindvall's own criteria) nor animated films. It is also often unclear as to whether and how each parable is depicting the associated "vice" in a distinctly religious or theological manner: what makes each animated film a *theological* parable if overt religious elements are not present? And if religious elements are present and overt, and the animated film's message is direct and didactic about certain virtues and vices, then is the film truly a *parable*? Is it not instead an allegory or fable: a short story with a clear, singular message meant to "teach" the audience a lesson about religious ethics and character formation? Allegory and fable *directly* aim to illustrate or represent, while the parable *indirectly* strives to subvert and transform. Perhaps, then, the chosen organizing structure of the "seven deadly sins" to categorize animated parables overlooks how true cinematic parables would challenge or break such conventional categories placed upon them. Biblical scholar John Dominic Crossan put it well: "A parable which has to be explained is, like a joke in similar circumstances, a parable which has been ruined *as parable*."[8] Indeed, a "didactic parable" (p. 91) is an oxymoron.

What's more, even as Lindvall advocates for the rhetorical and transformative power of parables—"they work to awaken us to see our habits in the morning light and to seek a more abundant life in practical daily matters" (p. 238)—the interpretations are entirely Lindvall's. There is little presented evidence that these animated films actually do what Lindvall is suggesting (i.e., tease audiences into active thought and put into practice the communicated lessons on vice and virtue); the impact is assumed rather than demonstrated. The "pedagogy" in the book's subtitle is not given sufficient attention—I expected a section demonstrating how Lindvall has used these animated films in the classroom and their resonance with students, or quantitative or qualitative research on the audience reception of these animated films in their respective historical and social contexts. If animated parables can *teach* us how to live virtuously, is there any concrete practical evidence of such transformation?

If the above assessment feels too critical or negative of Lindvall's work, please forgive me—the reader may be surprised to hear that, despite my disagreements with Lindvall's definitions of the genre of parable and its application to cinema, I ultimately found the book to be stimulating and delightful. *Animated Parables* introduced me to a number of excellent animated films I had never heard of (let alone seen), many of which I will be now including in the classroom when teaching Christian theology. Moreover, Lindvall's breadth of knowledge cannot be overstated—his humble self-deprecating humor on display throughout the book does not diminish what is obviously a rich understanding and appreciation of global animated cinema. Indeed, Lindvall shows such humility when he states the following in his conclusion: "Interpretations, and even descriptions, of these animated parables are indubitably subjective and I could be obliviously facile, superficial, askew, or downright wrong in my assessments.… I confess that I may have missed the boat altogether. On the other hand, I enjoyed it thoroughly" (p. 238). I will echo

Lindvall's sentiments: on the one hand, from my own subjective interpretation, I do think that many of Lindvall's assessments of what makes for an "animated parable" are "askew" or "downright wrong." On the other hand, I enjoyed the book thoroughly.

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[1] "parable, n." OED Online. June 2017. Oxford University Press. http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/137268?isAdvanced=false&result=1&rskey=Ghczy5&

[2] C.H. Dodd, *The Parables of the Kingdom*, (London: Nisbet & Co., 1935), 16.

[3] Lindvall is not alone in this conflation of genres—Klyne Snodgrass, in his massive study of biblical parables, *Stories with Intent*, also argues that parables belong to the genre of fable, that not only can parables be allegorical, but that any attempt to distinguish between the two forms is unnecessary. See *Stories with Intent: A Comprehensive Guide to the Parables of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2008). Lindvall cites Snodgrass in his own conflation of parable and fable (p. 15).

[4] Joel Mayward, "The Fantastic of the Everyday: Re-Forming Definitions of Cinematic Parables with Paul Ricoeur," *Horizons* 47, no. 2 (2020): 283–314.

[5] Roger Kahle and Robert Lee, *Popcorn and Parable: A New Look at the Movies* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1971) and Matthew S. Rindge, *Profane Parables: Film and the American Dream* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2016).

[6] See Christopher Deacy, "Integration and Rebirth through Confrontation: *Fight Club* and *American Beauty* as Contemporary Religious Parables," *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 17, no. 1 (January 2002): 61–73; Charlene P. E. Burns, "Mystic River: A Parable of Christianity's Dark Side," *Journal of Religion & Film*. 8:2 (2004): Article 4; Alyda Faber, "Film, Parable, Reciprocity: Frederick Wiseman's 'Reality Fictions' and Social Change." *Journal for Religion, Film and Media* 2, no. 2 (November 2016): 69–98; Robert K Johnston, "Film as Parable: What Might This Mean?," *The Covenant Quarterly* 72, no. 3–4 (August 2014): 19–32; Richard G. Walsh, "Now That was a Nice Hanging: The Hateful Eight as Parable?," *Journal of Religion & Film* 21, no. 2 (2017), Article 17; "Parables on the World of the Clergy" in Nacim Pak-Shiraz, *Shi'i Islam in Iranian Cinema: Religion and Spirituality in Film* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2017), 75–85; and Minjung Noh, "Parasite as Parable: Bong Joon-Ho's Cinematic Capitalism," *Cross Currents* 70, no. 3 (2020): 248–262; and Joel Mayward, *The Dardenne Brothers' Cinematic Parables: Integrating Theology, Philosophy, and Film*, (London: Routledge, 2022).

[7] In the bulimia/gluttony comment, Lindvall is quoting Will Willimon.

[8] John Dominic Crossan, *The Dark Interval: Towards a Theology of Story* (Sonoma: Polebridge Press, 1988), 83.