FROM THEOLOGICAL TO CINEMATIC CRITICISM: EXTRICATING THE STUDY OF RELIGION AND FILM FROM THEOLOGY

RELIGION IN FILM
Edited by John R. May and Michael S. Bird
Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1982

NEW IMAGE OF RELIGIOUS FILM
Edited by John R. May
Kansas City: Sheed & Ward, 1997

SCREENING THE SACRED: RELIGION, MYTH, AND IDEOLOGY IN POPULAR AMERICAN FILM
Edited by Joel W. Martin and Conrad Eugene Ostwalt, Jr.
Pp. x + 193; Paper, $36.00.

SEEING AND BELIEVING: RELIGION AND VALUES IN THE MOVIES
By Margaret Miles
Boston: Beacon Press, 1996
Pp. xvi + 254; Paper, $20.00.

REEL SPIRITUALITY: THEOLOGY AND FILM IN DIALOGUE
By Robert K. Johnston

SCREENING SCRIPTURE: INTERTEXTUAL CONNECTIONS BETWEEN SCRIPTURE AND FILM
Edited by George Aichele and Richard G. Walsh
Pp xvi + 294; 2 illustrations; Paper, $28.00.

HOW HYSTERICAL: IDENTIFICATION AND RESISTANCE IN THE BIBLE AND FILM
By Erin Runions
Pp. xiv + 208; 6 illustrations; Cloth, $75.00; paper, $24.95.

FILM AS RELIGION: MYTHS, MORALS, AND RITUALS
By John C. Lyden
Pp. vii + 287; Cloth, $60.00; paper, $19.00.

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Film is the twentieth and twenty-first centuries' most influential art form. Americans of all religions, races, and classes consume film avidly; metaphors and phrases gleaned from films permeate the popular press as well as everyday speech. The stories we all know and share regardless of socioeconomic background are increasingly not religious narratives, but rather movie plots. In some cases, the communal viewing of a film in a darkened theater and the lively discussion it inspires have become a more vital site of spiritual exploration and reflection than the mainline church service. As the art form which is most pervasive in the lives of contemporary Americans, film is a primary vehicle for both the interpretation and construction of religious meaning.

In conjunction with the increasing scholarly interest in religion and the visual arts, religious studies scholars and theologians have also turned their attention to religion and film. Within the last twenty years, and particularly within the last ten, scholars and theologians have produced books on the subject at an ever-increasing pace. In many ways, however, religion and film is still a highly immature field. Many—perhaps even most—of the books written recently about religion and film are designed for non-academic audiences, and have a heavily confessional bent. Books such as Bryan P. Stone's Faith and Film (2000) and Sara Anson Vaux's Finding Meaning at the Movies (1999) are designed primarily for church study groups, and include materials such as discussion questions that are appropriate for that audience. Although well-crafted for their intended purpose, ultimately these books use the films in the service of Christian theological concerns rather than allowing them to speak on their own terms. Biblical films are also a popular topic in the field, especially Jesus and Christ films. Books such as W. Barnes Tatum's Jesus at the Movies: A Guide to the First Hundred Years (1997) and Christopher Deacy's Screen Christologies: Redemption and the Medium of Film (2001) use a literary critical approach that is heavily informed by Christian theology. Though this work on Jesus and Christ films is often insightful, it does not consider questions about religions other than Christianity in film, nor how non-Christians might understand the religious significance of the medium.

For the purposes of this essay, I will examine works in the field of religion and film that have serious scholarly intent and that venture outside the area of explicitly biblical film. This overview of recent literature will demonstrate that the field of religion and film is still submerged in Christian confessional concerns, an approach that, while it clearly has important contributions to make both to theology and religion and film, has led scholars of religion and film to approach the broader questions of the field too narrowly. In order to reflect the full diversity of religion in
contemporary America, as well as to produce readings of films that do not subordinate the films’ messages to a theological agenda, the field of religion and film needs to draw more heavily on religious traditions other than Christianity and on secular film and culture studies techniques. This development, however, must be accomplished without fully capitulating to the secular norms of a cultural studies approach, a pitfall that several recent works in the field fail to avoid.

Although one might argue that the sheer pervasiveness of Christianity in America (with around 85% of the population claiming a Christian religious identity [Prothero 2003, 6]) justifies the dominance of the tradition in religion and film, I follow scholars such as sociologist Wade Clark Roof and historian of religion Catherine Albanese in asserting that the impact of non-Christian religious traditions on American religious thought and practice has been profound. For example, as Roof argues in Spiritual Marketplace, a new openness to syncretism and a “seeker” mentality can increasingly be found not just among metaphysical believers, but also among evangelicals and mainline Christians. One quarter of Roof’s respondents (many of whom identify as Christians) said they believe in reincarnation (Roof 1999, 83); and eastern religious practices such as meditation and yoga are offered by churches across the nation. These alternative religious beliefs and practices are extremely popular in American religious culture, yet one would hardly guess that from the Christianity-dominated literature on religion and film that has been produced (perhaps with the exception of the popular and scholarly excitement over the recent Matrix films, which employ a mixture of Christian, Gnostic, and Buddhist religious imagery). In general, the field of religion and film is ripe for scholars whose interests include non-Christian religions and whose primary analytical approach is something other than traditional Christian theology.

John R. May and Michael Bird’s collection Religion in Film (1982) represents an early effort to use film criticism techniques as a primary method of approach when studying religion and film. May’s introduction emphasizes “the primacy of the language of cinema for the act of interpretation” (ix), and suggests that though Judeo-Christian traditions dominate the analyses featured in the book, “the reader must keep in mind that the writers have acknowledged Christian roots, and more significantly, that Judaeo-Christianity has been the dominant religious influence in the West where film has more obviously flourished, if not excelled” (xi). Despite this bias, he writes, “Our intention has been to interpret and use the word religion in the broadest sense so that what is taken as simply religious is understood as applying to all religions or to religious experience, generally speaking” (x).

From this promising beginning, in his essay “Visual Story and the Religious Interpretation of Film,” May situates religion and film within the field of religion and literature, which he sees as being born with T.S. Eliot’s seminal essay “Literature and Religion.” However, May rejects Eliot’s claim that theology is the norm for judging greatness in literature. Instead, he follows R.W.B. Lewis’s idea that “the norms for judging a discipline must come from within that discipline; thus, literature cannot be subjected to an alien norm any more than theology and religion can” (25). Lewis uses the word autonomy to describe this approach to literature, and May proposes also to use this standard in the field of religion and film. This insistence that film must be evaluated by cinematic norms alone closely mirrors the preoccupation of religionists to interpret religion on its own terms. If one claims that a film is open to a religious world view, May argues, this must be done in cinematic rather than theological terms. The scholar need not require that a film use religious imagery or theological ideas in order to be considered religious, nor should she if the work of art is being interpreted as art. For May, this aesthetic approach leads to the exploration of religious questions: “An approach to the religious interpretation of film that respects its autonomy as an art form will, by definition, have to explore those dimensions of the formal structure of film that represent the visual analogue of religious or sectarian questions” (31).

Unfortunately, as May begins to get into the specifics of how this “visual analogue to religious questions” might be modeled, he dives headfirst into Christian theology to structure his approach. The primary religious questions he proposes are the nature of God, the problem of evil, and the question of salvation. Further, he overgeneralizes with the statement that Eastern traditions propose “an impersonal universe, the isolated individual, and release from self through exercises of the mind” while Western religions embrace “a personal force, social involvement, and liberating love” (31-32). May also employs John Dominic Crossan’s theology of story to broaden his approach, but again, this model is embedded in the Christian tradition. Crossan contrasts myth (conceptualized as fundamentally world-creating) with parable (world-subverting), and privileges the latter through its association with Jesus. Although May’s idea that films’ religious potential might be explored in terms of myth and story is promising, his choice of a theological model of narrative limits his theory’s scope and undermines his commitment to understanding film on its own terms.

May’s analyses of specific films later in the book are no more satisfying. Rather than delving deeply into single films, he traces themes such as the demonic across dozens of movies, giving many of the films no more than a half-page treatment. Further, his analyses often contain unexplained value judgments that betray the heavy influence of Christian theology in his work. In “The Demonic in American Cinema,” May assumes that his readers will agree that portrayals of evil as an external (rather than internal) force are obviously absurd, and he viciously attacks films such as The Exorcist for their lack of credibility without examining why films depicting externalized evil have been so popular in American culture (84). Though May makes some promising theoretical moves in framing the field of religion and film, in the end he is too immersed in traditional theological questions to produce readings without a confessional bent. Significantly, May was not at a seminary at the time Religion in Film was published, but was a professor of English at a state university. This is further indication that at the beginning of the 1980s, religion and film was firmly grounded in Christian theological questions, even among non-theologians.

May has edited several collections on religion and film since 1982, but his essay in New Image of Religious Film (1997) is particularly of note. I will mention it here rather than chronologically with the rest of the works because almost all the religion and film criticism that it discusses was written before 1978. May reiterates the tripartite Tillichian model he began developing in Religion and Film with more brevity and clarity: heteronomy, he writes, is Eliot’s position, that literature is to be considered “the handmaiden of faith”; theonomy, following Tillich, sees both reli-
igion and literature as grounded in matters of ultimate concern; autonomy, as Lewis described it, insists on judging literature only by its own norms (20). May develops this model further into a five-part model of pre-1978 theological film criticism examining various combinations of moral and aesthetic positions. Religious discrimination, his first category, is associated with heteronomy, and holds that no work can be considered art unless it is also morally and theologically sound. Religious visibility limits theological judgment only to films with explicit religious content, while applying heteronomous norms. His third category, religious dialogue, puts theology and film in conversation, with both having the potential to inform and critique the other. Religious humanism, which he associates with theonomy, understands film (and all art) as inherently having religious content because of its serious interrogation of the human condition. Finally, May identifies religious aesthetics with autonomy, and describes the approach as one that investigates the religious significance of the film medium itself. In developing this model, May gives summaries of works that are exemplars of each approach. The essay serves as an extremely helpful overview of the state of the field before its explosion in the 1990s, and again emphasizes its entanglement with theological issues.

Joel W. Martin and Conrad E. Ostwalt, Jr.'s Screening the Sacred: Religion, Myth, and Ideology in Popular American Film (1995) is one of the first collections to self-consciously separate theological criticism from the secular study of religion and film. In his introduction, Martin portrays the field of religion and film as still very much in its infancy; throughout the 1980s, film critics ignored religion, while religious studies scholars ignored film (3). He believes there is some reason for this, however: there are many aspects of human religiosity that have not and perhaps never will be represented in film, and there are many films with so little religious content that to take a religious studies approach to them would be like "squeezing blood from a turnip" (4). Overall, Martin finds the most fruitful space for religion and film studies to be in the large middle ground between movies that have no significant religious content and those that are explicitly religious.

With this in mind, the book is structured according to a three-part division Martin proposes: theological criticism, mythological criticism, and ideological criticism. All three of these divisions, however, expect that the author is not doing explicitly confessional criticism; a literary or culture studies approach is assumed. As Martin explains, the division describes differing conceptions of religion. Theological critics are those who equate religion with a specific tradition (for example, Christianity and the Bible); mythological critics equate religion broadly with universal archetypes and symbols; and ideological critics focus on religion's political and social effects (?). As Ostwalt emphasizes in his introduction, these divisions are not meant to be definitive. Instead, they are the editors' attempt to demonstrate the diversity of approaches possible within religion and film, which vary depending on how religion and the relationship between it and film are understood.

Although Christian traditions, ideas, and images still dominate Screening the Sacred, the book is one of the few to feature essays using pre- and post-Christian mythology, New Age ideas, and models derived from ritual studies. Particularly notable in the collection is "Evolution of the 'The New Frontier' in Alien and Aliens: Patriarchical Co-optation of the Feminine Archetype" by Janice Hocker Rushing, an omnivorous treatment of cross-cultural goddess myths, colonization, and gender politics that nevertheless sticks close to the films themselves. Rushing achieves a balance between analysis of culture and analysis of the films as texts. Her treatment of the films is strongly woven into the cloth of the essay, and is not used merely as an opportunity for a tangential political diatribe. The result is an essay that takes film, religion, and politics seriously, and does not grossly err in subjugating the interests and norms of one to any of the others. Martin's "Redeeming America: Rocky as Ritual Racial Drama" is also particularly effective in contextualizing Rocky in the racial and economic climate of the late 1970's, powerfully demonstrating how the film ritually encodes themes of racial violence. Martin's essay combines aspects of ritual studies, film criticism, and social history, and serves as an example of the kind of interdisciplinary approach that he praises in his introduction. "Redeeming America" contains striking insights about the cathartic social function of the Rocky films that would have been invisible to a scholar using any of these three approaches alone. Both these essays are also notable for the way they reveal the religious impact of film on the wider culture. Clearly, neither scholar is working in a cultural vacuum.

Published a year later, Margaret Miles's Seeing and Believing: Religion and Values in the Movies (1996) tackles film primarily through its social context. Even more explicitly than the contributors of Screening the Sacred, Miles concentrates on popular films because she believes strongly in their cultural impact. "Film," she writes, "is an accessible medium in which competing issues of public and private life in a pluralistic society are formulated and represented for consideration and interpretation" (xv). Because of its accessibility and pervasiveness, Miles argues that we must investigate in detail the ethical and religious values articulated in film, particularly those movies that we as a culture dismiss as "harmless entertainment." Miles understands film as an important site for both the representation and production of culture, and as such, she takes it very seriously.

The strength of Miles's book is in her effort to place each film in a detailed social and cultural context. For example, in discussing the documentary Paris Is Burning, a film about ball culture in the impoverished world of black and Hispanic gay Harlem, Miles argues that the film exploits its subjects by failing to interrogate white privilege: white audiences are comfortably flattered as they observe the efforts of marginalized ballwalkers to imitate rich, white female heterosexuality. Miles supports her argument powerfully with background information not included in the film—the fact that some of the subjects were dying from AIDS at the time of filming, and that a number had died since; the refusal of the director to share all but a pittance of the film's profits with the interviewees after it was a surprise hit, earning around $4 million (175). Throughout the book, Miles emphasizes how the need to make a film successful at the box office often undermines its potential for liberating ethical or religious messages. To the degree a film is "entertaining," she argues, it cannot be genuinely religious.

Though Seeing and Believing is not explicitly confessional in the sense of using theological language in its analysis, Miles—who was dean of the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley at the time the book was published—has a liberal social agenda that tends to choke off any treatment of film as art. For Miles, film is simply not interesting on its own terms; any merit a film may
have aesthetically is fully subjugated to the issue of whether it expresses an acceptable ethical ideology. Miles is also highly inconsistent in her analysis of the movies themselves. At times, she selectively picks out minor details from a film's plot, arguing that because these details run counter to the film's overarching themes, whatever liberating thrust the film might have had has been destroyed. At other times, she lambasts films for their seemingly conservative plot lines, ignoring details that may complicate or even invalidate a conservative reading.

For example, Miles argues that the explicitly feminist themes of Jesus of Montreal are undermined by a brief moment of female nudity and the portrayal of one of the women as being in a sexually passive relationship. She writes, "Text and subtext conflict—reflecting a historical moment in which gender roles have been called into question and are heavily contested, creating social anxiety, but without resolution" (44). Although a film critic might see this conflict as evidence of the film's artistic integrity—its ambiguity giving the audience insight into the ongoing conflict over gender roles—for Miles it is nothing more than Hollywood conventions preventing a director who is explicitly aiming at making a religious film from succeeding in his goal (45-6). Putting aside the fact that Jesus of Montreal was not a Hollywood film at all, but a low-budget French-Canadian film, for Miles a film can only be "religious" if its message is consistent in every detail with her liberal ethics. The ambivalence, tension, contradiction and inconsistency that most literary and film critics hold as being part and parcel of any work of art hold no value in her system of evaluation.

Miles's treatment of The Last Temptation of Christ reads the film's dualism in the most negative possible light, condemning its association of women and flesh as sexist (36, 38). This understanding of the film ignores Scorsese's careful portrayal of women, family, and earthly pleasures as things beloved of God and Jesus both; for Scorsese's Jesus, the inability to have a family is his greatest sacrifice. Though the film is full of details that enable a feminist reading—in particular, Scorsese is one of the few directors of Jesus films to show women disciples attending the Last Supper—Miles ignores the subtexts in the film that problematize an orthodox, hierarchical dualism of spirit and flesh. Seeing and Believing also abounds in smaller contradictions, such as Miles' condemnation of the "spectacle" of Last Temptation as undermining its message, while The Rapture is criticized for its minimal special effects (45, 105).

Finally, Miles makes a number of errors in plot summaries—for example, incorrectly claiming that Last Temptation's Magdalene dies in childbirth (36), and asserting that The Rapture portrays religious belief as deluded (109) when the film actually depicts the main character's fundamentalist world view as being literally correct. Given that Miles negatively reviews every film she treats except for the slow-paced, commercially unsuccessful Daughters of the Dust, one wonders to what degree she passed judgment on these films before even beginning her analysis.

Overall, Seeing and Believing does well in providing the social context for the films Miles treats, but her readings of the films themselves are often shallow and careless. She seems to see film as purely a vehicle for cultural values, not an artistic end in itself, and as such it is only worthwhile if it pushes liberal values with unerring, propagandistic consistency. Although it would be a stretch to characterize Miles's approach as theological or confessional, her dogmatic adherence to a mid-1990's feminist liberal-ism makes the book more an elaboration of liberal ethics that uses films as points of departure than a meaningful fusion of religious and film studies. Although there may be a place for such ethical criticism in the field of religion and film, it is difficult to respect a work that actually distorts the films it treats in the process of putting them in a religious framework.

Although explicitly Christian in approach, Robert K. Johnston's Reel Spirituality: Theology and Film in Dialogue (2000) is notable because its model of interaction between theology and film could be easily expanded for use outside the Christian tradition. Inspired by John R. May's five approaches to theology and film, Johnston and his associate Robert Banks have developed their own system of theological responses to film. Johnston arranges these approaches on a scale between ethics and aesthetics, as well as charting them historically (41-2). The earliest approach, and the one most strongly weighted to the ethical end of the scale, says Johnston, is avoidance: the choice of religious people to boycott films that are offensive to their religious beliefs and at times to pressure filmmakers to submit themselves to censorship. As films and television became pervasive in American culture, Johnston argues, a second approach emerged as a strong force among religious moviegoers: caution. This approach allows religious people to view films that may conflict with their moral values, but still evaluate them primarily from a theological and ethical standpoint. At the midpoint between the ethical and aesthetic is what Johnston calls dialogue, where films are first understood as self-contained texts with their own meaning, and only then brought into dialogue with theology and ethical values. Further to the aesthetic end of the spectrum is the late-twentieth century approach that Johnston calls appropriation, in which films are examined for religious wisdom and insight without being baptized as "unconsciously Christian." Finally, Johnston calls his last and most heavily aesthetic approach divine encounter. As someone who claims to have had powerful experiences of the divine while watching films, this is Johnston's most personal contribution—an understanding of film as providing opportunities to experience the sacred outside of any specific religious tradition.

Although when Johnston speaks of theology he clearly means Christian theology, this model—particularly the dialogue, appropriation, and divine encounter approaches—is sufficiently broad and general that one can imagine using a non-Christian tradition as a dialogue partner in a similar way. Johnston's choice of the word "spirituality" in the book's title suggests that he is attentive to the divide between institutionalized, organized religion and individualistic, experiential spirituality in America. He is open about his own religious beliefs, but Johnston is anything but dogmatic. Although Reel Spirituality locates its approach to religion and film firmly within theological studies, the ecumenical quality of its model makes it potentially palatable to religious studies scholars who are interested in religious models of film that transcend Christian theological boundaries. While models such as May's inadequately describe the religious implications of film for a Hindu, a New Age practitioner, or even many unorthodox Christians, Johnston's model is very effective in acknowledging the syncretistic tendencies of American religion and makes room for very different beliefs and concerns to be brought into dialogue with film. Perhaps most importantly, it acknowledges film—whether explicitly religious in intent or not—as an active contributor to religious faith, one that communicates religious ideas,
shapes religious attitudes, and may even provide opportunities for spiritual experiences.

George Aichele and Richard Walsh's *Screening Scripture: Intertextual Connections Between Scripture and Film* (2002) is a collection remarkable primarily for its diversity, not just in its choice of films, but in the approaches of the authors. As the title suggests, each essay brings scripture into conversation with a particular film or films, with the goal of demonstrating that there is no "correct" exegesis of any text. Through the variety of material presented, the editors seek to emphasize the situatedness of the critics' readings—the fact that each speaks from a particular place, time, and ideological stance. In addition, many of the essays approach film as presenting biblical themes through a different medium and cultural background. As a whole, the book attempts to demonstrate the continuity between scripture and film as two popular productions, treating both sorts of text with equal seriousness and respect. Its approach is specifically academic and secular; more often than not, the biblical passages treated are viewed with a highly critical eye.

The individual essays treat a multiplicity of film genres, critical tools, and approaches to dialogue. They discuss animation, mid-century biblical films, 1950s monster movies, action films from the 1980s and 1990s, Monty Python, and independent films. They analyze these films with Lacan's psychoanalytic theories, Mulvey's theory of the gaze, Cold War history, the writings of Philip K. Dick, Marcus Borg's work on the historical Jesus, and the personal lives of the critics. They also bring films into conversation with single lines of scripture, whole books of the Bible, and at times the gospels in general or the entire New Testament. The result, predictably, is uneven. Many essays are impressively daring, setting up resonances between film and scripture that are fresh and surprising. Although some then fail to draw memorable insights from these resonances, the disinhibition and enthusiasm of their attempts is a delight to read.

For example, Tina Pippin's "Of Gods and Demons: Blood Sacrifice and Eternal Life in *Dracula* and the Apocalypse of John" brings vampire films into conversation with the book of Revelation. Pippin demonstrates similarities between the bloody images we find in *Dracula* and those we find in Revelation, as well as pointing out the images of vampirism we see being used in American culture (for example, she memorably characterizes the viewpoint of religious conservatives as she writes, "Immigrants, homosexuals, AIDS, Iraq, liberals, West Nile virus, feminists, the poor, union organizers, to name a few, all threaten to drain traditional values and standards of living" [26]). The conclusion of Pippin's essay proposes an alternative reading of Revelation in which the bloody triumph of a vampiric God threatens to drain the life from human society. She further suggests that apocalyptic strains of Christianity in America may be draining the lifeblood from Christian social justice movements. Pippin's fusion of popular film, scripture, and politics makes for a challenging conclusion, one that is unafraid to attack scripture as containing elements that lend themselves more to enslavement than to liberation. Her reading, however, suffers from a certain superficiality: she draws on the entire history of Dracula in film—dozens of hours of footage—in order to gather the symbols she needs to show parallels with a single book of the Bible. Though Pippin's conclusions are provocative, the essay fails to demonstrate that the subgenre of vampire films and the book of Revelation share any kind of deep structural similarity. In particular, her assertion that the vampire is fundamentally an apocalyptic creature falls flat in the face of the many vampire films where the fate of the world is never at risk.

Also included in *Screening Scripture* is Roland Boer's "Non-Sense: *Total Recall*, Paul, and the Possibility of Psychosis," which brings together the Arnold Schwarzenegger film, the writings of Philip K. Dick (on whose short story *Total Recall* is based), and the letters of Paul. Dick was a prolific science fiction writer who is commonly thought to have been paranoid and delusional. His late writings took on a distinctly theological bent as he attempted to articulate his increasingly intense religious visions, centering on VALIS, a computer-like, omniscient entity that Dick identified both with Jesus Christ and the God of the Bible. Boer argues that Dick and Paul operated out of similar mental states, connecting the imagery of Paul's conversion and his sense of self-importance in relation to the ultimate workings of the universe to Dick's visions. He concludes that the centrality of Paul's writings in western civilization has contributed to the structure of what we think of as psychosis: a state of uncertain and broken identity where the universe seems to rotate around the psychotic individual.

Without Paul, psychosis would not exist—at least not in the form and content in which we now understand it. Thus, it is ultimately Paul, mediated through Schreber, the analyses of Freud and Lacan and others, and the writings of Philip K. Dick, who provides the very possibility of a psychotic film like *Total Recall.* (154)

Boer's argument, while provocative, travels far from both film and scripture in making the connections between the two texts (in fact, the discussion of the film itself occupies only a few pages). His analysis further suffers from its historical decontextualization: he leaps over two thousand years of history to assert that Paul's writings are a major source for psychoanalysis, Dick, and *Total Recall.* The result is a tendency to conflate uncritically the writings of Paul with the Christian or western tradition, a move that fails to acknowledge the changing cultural meanings of Paul's writings in history. To demonstrate similarities between two texts created thousands of years apart is not necessarily to demonstrate causal connections.

*Screening Scripture* is exciting in the way its essays aggressively chart a new direction for the field of religion and film. Dogmatic theology has no place in its approach; the Bible is read as an important and influential cultural text, rather than as a source of ethical norms. The writers' dissociation of the Bible from both religious culture and history, however, is problematic. In many of the essays, biblical texts are read partially or fully outside the historical context in which they were written, analyzed as if they were completely contemporaneous with the postmodern films with which they are put in dialogue. For a book that claims to be deeply concerned with the situatedness of textual interpretation, it pays relatively little attention to the historical situatedness of scripture. Although this certainly mirrors the faith perspective of most contemporary Christians—the Bible is understood as clearly speaking to believers in the here and now, and historical context is not a necessary mediator—one wonders what this assumption is doing in a collection that is otherwise aggressively secular and deeply concerned with historical time and place.

In general, *Screening Scripture* is significant for the serious-
ness with which it views the Bible as a profoundly influential cultural actor. However, this seriousness results in the Bible being removed from a religious context: devotion, religious experience, and the concept of the sacred are mostly absent from these treatments. Even as many of the other books reviewed here impose the alien norms of theology on films, Screening Scripture may be said to impose the alien norms of cultural studies on religion. Further, despite the incredibly diverse methodologies that these essays bring to bear on both the Bible and film, the collection is still tightly partnered with the Judeo-Christian tradition. Although several of the essays are responsive to central issues in contemporary politics, they largely fail to address the intense interest in religious experience, syncretism with non-Christian religious traditions, and backlash against that syncretism that animates the religious world of contemporary America.

Similar in approach is Erin Runions's How Hysterical: Identification and Resistance in the Bible and Film (2003). Runions was also a contributor to Screening Scripture, and her essay, "Boys Don't Cry," appears again here in modified form. Her methodology in this collection of six essays is heavy with psychoanalytic, literary, and postmodern theory. It turns primarily on the notion that refusing to identify with cultural norms—in other words, resisting them—is "hysteria," even when the hysterical understands those cultural norms to be destructive and oppressive (8-9). Each essay reads a biblical passage next to a recent film, charting areas of potential resistance and identification both for the characters and the viewer. Runions is an activist as well as an academic, and her essays show a leftist-anarchist political agenda that in general seems to go with the grain of the films she chooses to treat. Her approach, however, suffers from the same flaws as many of the essays in Screening Scripture. Though her reading of films is often insightful, as is her reading of biblical texts, her analyses treat religion purely as an aspect of culture. Both kinds of texts are filtered through secular theorists such as Judith Butler and Homi Bhabha, generally without acknowledgment that there is a difference between texts that were written and are read as holy scripture and those that were created and are consumed as secular art. Runions's writing has a preacherly streak to it, in that her call to revolution has the ring of prophecy; her analysis of Paris Is Burning closes with the words, "I want to fuck with gender. I want to inspire willful alienation from the oppressive ideologies of gender, race, and class. I want this, this is what I want, and I'm going to go for it" (114). Concern with the sacred, or for the unique qualities of religious texts, however, is absent. How Hysterical's focus is ultimately more on the political implications of biblical texts than it is on the religious resonances of postmodern film. Just as theological critics have failed to give autonomy to film in their analyses, Runions and the contributors of Screening Scripture fail to recognize the autonomy of religion.

Runions's argument that films imbibe biblical narratives from western culture is somewhat problematic as well. Her powerful call to resistance and liberation through rejection of oppressive cultural narratives is undermined by her understanding of how these narratives are embedded. Destructive biblical narratives are so omnipresent in our culture, she implies, that even relatively obscure passages like Micah and Ezekiel 16—passages the majority of Christians, let alone the majority of Americans, have never read—are echoed in postmodern film, among other works of art. One wonders, if this is the case, how western culture can ever be expected to liberate itself from these narratives. There is an unpleasant determinism to Runions's assumption that obscure but specifically biblical themes have been and will be reproduced over and over again, despite the enormous changes western culture has undergone. The model suggests that little or no progress has been made between the time of the biblical books' writing and the contemporary era, and that the struggles of the ancient Hebrews are somehow exactly the same as our struggles today. While Runions is certainly not wrong to suggest certain continuities between the two eras, the way in which she glosses over two thousand years of history and culture is troubling.

Alternatively, there is a scholar whose approach to religion and film both deliberately distinguishes itself from theological film studies and takes religion seriously as a cultural phenomenon with unique characteristics and concerns. John C. Lyden's Film as Religion: Myths, Morals, and Rituals (2003) begins by addressing the limitations of the theological and ideological film criticism:

If we impose our own theological or ideological framework on the film we may fail to understand how it conveys its message to its viewers and how it functions religiously or filmically. Whether past approaches have applauded or critiqued particular films, they have often looked only for what they wanted to see, and so found only either what fits with their views or what can provide a convenient straw man to oppose. (34)

Although attracted to the mode of "mythological" criticism described by Martin and Ostwalt, Lyden believes that Martin goes too far in conflating the study of non-Christian religions with the study of "mythology," resulting in a restricted understanding of an approach that ideally could include historical, sociological, and anthropological techniques (33). Lyden's own approach draws on anthropological methods of studying religion, particularly the work of Clifford Geertz, to create a model of religion and film criticism that can understand film as having a cross-cultural religious power.

Lyden portrays film as playing a religious role in contemporary society, whether or not it contains explicitly religious elements. Using an expanded definition of myth to mean "a story that expresses the worldview and values of a community" (4), he suggests that films are sites where modern myths are created and spread. Further, he understands the act of viewing a film in terms of ritual, a performance that shows both the world as it is and a vision of the world as it should be. As such, films express moral values and offer opportunities for audiences to engage with these values through vicarious experiences of liminality, redemptive suffering, and sacrifice. To avoid the situation where theological norms are imposed on films, thus muting their unique religious voices, Lyden proposes a model of interreligious dialogue between religions and films, where the critic seeks to hear and understand films' religious messages before bringing them into dialogue with other religious traditions (126). This model is particularly adept at conceptualizing film as something more than images on a screen. Lyden considers both the individual viewer and the community of viewers as being integral to the experience of a film, and emphasizes the fact that film does not simply broadcast values which are then passively imbibed by the audience.

Although Lyden's book addresses many of the objections I have raised regarding previous work in the field, its model of film as religion does not go far enough in addressing audience reac-
tion to and interaction with films. Lyden advocates the greater use of viewer-response studies in religion and film criticism and rejects the idea that "meaning rests first of all in the film rather than in the spectator" (29), but his model still implicitly portrays the process of meaning-creation as having stopped after the film has been viewed and interpreted. I would suggest that if the "film as religion" model is to be a meaningful one, it needs to be fleshed out with discussions of the cultural afterlife of films. Such an exploration might delve into how these filmic "modern myths" influence the religious beliefs and practices of viewers, the ways in which the world views they represent are reproduced and changed in the productions of fan fiction writers, or the new meanings films take on by becoming the sacred texts of particular countercultural communities. Films such as Star Wars have provided a popular religious vocabulary that has become pervasive in mainstream American culture in the years after their release, and a full examination of film as religion needs to take these religious afterlives into account.

Despite the diversity of approaches to religion and film that have been treated in this essay, the literature still lacks a thorough examination of the variety of ways that the relationship between religion and film can be construed. Almost every work examined here has engaged the seemingly straightforward topic of religion in film, yet even this can be understood in one of two ways. Religion in film can include the translation of sacred texts and scriptures into cinematic form, such as the early twentieth-century Bible epics or the long tradition of Jesus films. Religion in film can also, however, involve the portrayal of religious beliefs, imagery, practices, and adherents. This latter category includes films where religious practitioners are the primary subject matter, as in The Apostle, where religious imagery is used as a backdrop or a plot device, as in The Godfather, or where religious themes are reinterpreted to give the film a mythic quality and added cultural resonance, as in The Matrix.

A second approach to religion and film is to consider film as religion. Lyden's notion of film as having a religious voice is only one way of understanding this relationship. As several of the theological critics examined here suggested, film may be considered as a theological dialogue partner or a source of critique and challenge for traditional theology. Alternately, as Lyden suggests, films without a traditional religious agenda may be examined for potentially alternative spiritual truths, as audiences did with the philosophical American Beauty. Film may also act as religion in its ability to facilitate a variety of spiritual experiences. As Johnston asserts in Reel Spirituality, viewing a personally meaningful movie may trigger a powerful individual religious experience; Johnston experienced his call to ministry while watching the film Becket (29).

Although Lyden understands all film viewing to have a ritualistic component, the performance of a film may also become the occasion for elaborate ritualization. Probably the paradigmatic example of this is the cult following that has grown up around theatrical showings of The Rocky Horror Picture Show. The experience of attending a Rocky Horror showing is not likely to be understood as explicitly religious by the participants; however, the activities of the intensely devoted live cast members—such as dressing in costume, initiating newcomers, acting out scenes, adding scripted dialogue, and performing particular dance steps—represent an elaborate ritual practice that celebrates important cultural values such as sexuality and freedom. For the largely unchurched and countercultural young people who attend, a Rocky Horror performance may provide the community and the opportunity to affirm and perform shared values that more mainstream Americans experience in church.

A final angle of approach is to consider religion and film, with an emphasis on the commonalities between the two. This approach was attempted by John R. May, though with a heavy theological bent. Focusing on the centrality of narrative in religion, this method understands religion and film as storytelling and meaning-making activities, methods through which religious practitioners, artists, and their audiences can celebrate, struggle with, and critique the culture in which they live. In both, human beings tell stories about themselves and the sacred, charting out areas of ultimate concern. Through this approach, scholars can consider storytelling as a sacred activity that is nevertheless detachable from any particular religious tradition. This method avoids some of the potential absurdities of Lyden's method, whose interreligious approach at times threatens to put contemporary films and rich religious traditions thousands of years old on equal terms. While it is important to honor the autonomy of both films and religions, to compare them as if they were equal risks disadvantageing film, which by its nature cannot be as complex as a world religion.

Scholars cannot talk about the dynamic changes American religion has undergone in the twentieth century without considering the secular and religious narratives that Americans experience daily in film, for the two are intimately intertwined. Religion flows into film as content, and flows out again in the form of explicit religious messages, altered attitudes about religion or religious practitioners, theological ideas both traditional and heterodox, and powerful spiritual experiences. In America, our movie theaters have become temples of contested religious meaning, rich sites of spiritual encounter and interpretation. Yet the field of religion and film lacks a repertoire of approaches that are sophisticated and relevant enough to tackle the complexity of the cultural and religious exchange that is going on between film and its viewers. Not only is the study of religion and film still being dominated by theological film criticism, with its limited ability to interpret film outside the frame of reference of a particular religious tradition, but even explicitly secular religion and film criticism clings too tightly to the Bible and the Judeo-Christian tradition, neglecting the non-Christian influences that (according to Roof and Albanese) have had such a powerful effect on religion in America. Although books such as Screening the Sacred, Reel Spirituality, and Film as Religion have taken steps towards formulating approaches that have cross-cultural and interfaith potential, the field is particularly open to ethnographic studies of how films interact with the lived religious experience of their American audiences. Since film is the most pervasive art form in American culture, it is imperative that scholars take seriously the religious role of film, however they understand that role, and delve more deeply into this exciting and dynamic area of religious production and dialogue.

Notes

1. The distinction between Jesus films, which portray the life of Jesus, and Christ films, which depict fictional characters who recall the symbolism of the Christ story, was originally proposed by Peter Malone in Movie Christs and Antichrists (1990) and partially drew on Theodore Ziolkowski's earlier Fictional Transfigurations of Jesus (1972).
2. Stephen Prothero's American Jesus, published four years later, gives a more specific figure: in a recent survey, fully 25% of American Christians claimed to believe in reincarnation (2003, 6).
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